Liner Notes: 1965

Song of the Year: “Wooly Bully” by Sam the Sham and The Pharaohs

Number of U. S. soldiers in Vietnam at year’s end: 184,300

Number of men drafted into service: 230,991

*Billboard* Chart Sweep for 1965

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozaLvpgT9H4>

Bob Dylan asked us “how does it feel?” while The Rolling Stones complained that they couldn’t get any “Satisfaction.” Petulah Clark told us to go “Downtown,” as The Beatles begged for “Help!” And an obscure recording artist named Barry McGuire cautioned us that “we were on the eve of destruction.” Just what was going on in the United States in 1965?

Good question. A lot of everything actually — in fits and starts and ups and downs. Maybe even a little too much cacophony, which could explain why the soundtrack of the year was so discombobulating and how a song like “Woolly Bully” by the novelty band Sam the Sham and The Pharaohs was the year’s top song without ever being ranked No. 1 (though it has the distinction of being the first American record to sell a million copies during the British Invasion).

The eclectic soundscape notwithstanding, President Johnson’s “Great Society” was off to a rough start — turbulent civil rights marches in Selma, Ala.; massive anti-war protests in Berkeley, Calif. and Washington, D. C.; the emergence of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Watts riots in Los Angeles. As the Byrds would later opine, things needed to “Turn, Turn, Turn,” but in what direction was anybody’s guess.

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, U. S. Marines landed at Da Nang in March, and were welcomed as liberators. By November, they and their Army counterparts were in for the fight of their lives in the Ia Drang Valley, as the North Vietnamese Army demonstrated just how formidable a fighting force they would be. General Frederick Karch, commander of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade that landed at Da Nang on March 8, commented upon leaving

Vietnam later in 1965: “I thought that once they [the enemy] ran up against our first team they wouldn’t stand and fight, but they did. I made a miscalculation.”

Nevertheless, the only echoes of Vietnam on the 1965 radio waves were patriotic, pro-war ditties like “Hello Vietnam” “Keep the Flag Flying” and “What We’re Fighting For.” Which makes it even more curious that a song like McGuire’s “Eve of Destruction” would receive the airplay — and censorship — that it did. With only one allusion to Vietnam (“the eastern world, it is explodin’”), but with plenty more to say about the Cold War, civil rights, nuclear arms and American hypocrisy, the song became the tipping point of the so-called Generation Gap.

And it was that generation, many of whom were listening to Barry McGuire, who would be asked to bear the burden of the fighting and dying in Vietnam.

*You’re old enough to kill, but not for votin’*

*You don’t believe in war, but what’s that gun you’re totin’?*

How could we not be on the “Eve of Destruction?” Even if *A Charlie Brown Christmas* premiered that December on national TV.

* [*Doug Bradley*](http://origin.kcts9.org/vietnam-war-timeline/about.html)