Liner Notes: 1966

Song of the Year: “The Ballad of the Green Berets” by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler

Number of U. S. soldiers in Vietnam at year’s end: 385,300

Number of men drafted into service: 382,100

[Chart Sweep: Billboard Hot 100 for 1966](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sPSlb9oS9Y)

The music of 1966 counterpoints the fluctuating adjustments America was trying to make to a rapidly changing landscape both at home and in Vietnam. From Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Sound of Silence” atop the charts in January 1966, to the unprecedented No. 1 run of [Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler’s patriotic anthem “The Ballad of the Green Berets”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5WJJVSE_BE) to the best of the Beatles, Stones and Motown, the popular songs of 1966 tried to show that “*we could work it out*” even while a generation of young Americans were boarding the “*last train to Clarksville.”*

The number of U. S. troops in Vietnam doubled from 1965 to 1966, so with no easy victory in sight, teach-ins, protests and draft card burnings became more frequent. To quote Buffalo Springfield, “*something’s happening here,*” but you might not know that from listening to the songs on the radio. Maybe that explains how songs like “Winchester Cathedral” and “Born Free” can sit at the top of the charts alongside “Paint It Black” and “Paperback Writer.”

Nevertheless, the music being played on stations across the nation were the same songs the soldiers were listening to in Vietnam. And when one of their own, SSgt. Barry Sadler, opined about bravery and sacrifice in “The Ballad of the Green Berets,” it grabbed the country’s imagination like nothing else. More than any other song, “Green Berets” exemplified the mission of this generation of the sons of world War II fathers. This was *their* time and *their* call — to stop Communism in Southeast Asia — perhaps by paying the ultimate sacrifice — and to keep the world safe for democracy.

Thousands of young men marched off to war with Sadler’s song on their lips, only to discover, like U. S. Army Captain Jim Kurtz of Madison, WI, that “I thought I wanted to be a hero and that Vietnam was the place to be heroic because that’s what the song said … but I don’t feel so good about all that now because of what I saw and what I know … And “The Ballad of the Green Berets” is a bunch of nonsense, especially the part at the end … it’s nonsense.”

The nonsense would continue, even while “Hanky Panky,” “Good Lovin’” and” Summer in the City” blared from America’s radios. By year’s end, a makeshift group called The Monkees had won the nation’s heart and were singing the lines *“and I don’t know if I’m ever coming home*” in their hit song “The Last Train to Clarksville,” unaware of the song’s connection to Vietnam.

The train had indeed left the station; Walt Disney died and The Doors recorded their first album. Things would never be the same.

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