Liner Notes: 1968

Song of the Year: “Hey Jude” by The Beatles

Number of U. S. soldiers in Vietnam at year’s end: 536,100 \* (highest total)

Number of men drafted into service: 296,406

*Billboard* Chart Sweep for 1968

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

“*The whole world is watching. The whole world is watching,”* chanted thousands of demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 1968. Indeed the whole world was watching and seething, from Warsaw and Prague to Paris and Mexico City — not to mention multiple cities across the nation. The year 1968 was, in a word, combustible.

As always, the music of that time was interwoven into the fabric of global mayhem and upheaval. Not necessarily in songs like “Judy in Disguise” by John Fred and His Playboys and “Honey” by Bobby Goldsboro, both of which would spend a week or two at the top of the *Billboard* charts, but in the rough, angry, psychedelic sounds of “The Pusher” by Steppenwolf, “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida” by Iron Butterfly, and the ear-piercing guitar of Jimi Hendrix on “All Along the Watchtower.” The soundscape was loud and strident; it seemed as if the nation was on the verge of a collective nervous breakdown.

Fanning the flames, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (April) and Senator Bobby Kennedy (June) brought America to its knees. All of this and more fueled riots in cities from coast to coast, culminating in those tense, brutal standoffs between anti-war demonstrators and Chicago’s Mayor Daley and his police force in late August. “*There must be some kind of way out of here*,” Hendrix wailed in his famous cover version of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower.” “*There’s too much confusion/I can’t get no relief*.”

There wasn’t any relief in Vietnam either. The optimism of President Johnson and General Westmoreland evaporated suddenly in late January, when the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong (VC) launched the Tet Offensive, overrunning more than 100 towns and cities, including 36 of 44 South Vietnamese provincial capitals and five of six autonomous cities, and almost capturing the southern capital of Saigon itself. It was the largest military operation conducted by either side up to that point in the war and impelled CBS-TV news anchor Walter Cronkite to publicly call into question our strategy in Vietnam. Upon hearing this news, President Johnson reportedly grumbled, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.”

The Beatles’ “Hey Jude” camped out nearly three months at the top of the charts in 1968. Soldiers heard it in Vietnam. It was the most successful Beatles’ single ever, and by the end of the year had sold more than five million copies. But it was anybody’s guess as to how anyone could “take a sad song and make it better.”

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