Liner Notes: 1971

Song of the Year: “Joy to the World” by Three Dog Night

Number of U. S. soldiers in Vietnam at year’s end: 156,800

Number of men drafted into service: 94,092

*Billboard* Chart Sweep for 1971

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqvW3bk_bq8>

When the sun came up on January 1, 1971, I knew a couple things. One, that if my luck held out and the Vietnam War didn’t spin out of control that I’d be going home on November 11. And two, music would be essential to preserving my sanity in Vietnam.

I wasn’t alone in my estimation of the importance of music. In order to maintain our morale, the military made music plentiful and accessible in Vietnam. Armed Forces Radio (AFVN) broadcast 24 hours a day and could be heard “from the Delta to the DMZ.” According to Meredith Lair in *Armed With Abundance*, GIs purchased more than half a million radios between 1969 and 1970 and bought 78,000 reel-to-reel tape decks and 220,000 cassette recorders during the first 11 months of 1971.

By the time of my arrival, there were an average of 3,200 performers in 250 groups from 26 countries playing the Vietnam circuit at any given time. These bands covered everything from James Brown and Janis Joplin to Nancy Sinatra and Johnny Cash. So why listen to Three Dog Night (“Joy to the World”) or The Osmonds (“One Bad Apple”) or Tony Orlando and Dawn

(“Knock Three Times”) when you could hear something really good live?

More than any other year in my recollection, 1971 is epitomized by my very own Vietnam soundtrack. Carole King (“It’s Too Late”) and Cat Stevens (“Wild World”), Janis Joplin (“Me and Bobby McGee”) and Rod Stewart (“Maggie May”). I listened to those songs with my fellow GIs as we invaded Laos in February; turned out the lights on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and found Lt. Calley guilty of the My Lai Massacre in March; mourned the death of The Doors’ Jim Morrison in July; and watched Attica Prison erupt for five days in September. All the while, I was counting down the days until I would leave Vietnam.

Three things happened that made that year particularly poignant for me. The first was the publication of the Pentagon Papers by *The* *New York Times* in June. We’d all sensed this somehow — that our very own government had been lying to us, deceiving us about the war in Vietnam — but to hold a document in your hands that confirmed that … well, it took your breath away. Never again would the American people unequivocally believe what its government told them.

Second, when things got a little hot and hairy during the South Vietnamese so-called “elections” that summer, we changed the lines of the Paul McCartney song popular then, “Uncle Albert/Admiral Halsey,” to “*We’re so sorry, Ellsworth Bunker* [the U. S. Ambassador to South Vietnam]/*but we haven't done a bloody thing all day.*” We laughed about that.

Third, and most disquieting, and something that still haunts me to this day, was the [death of my friend and Army colleague Steve Warner](https://www.gettysburg.edu/special_collections/exhibits/warner/intro.dot). Steve volunteered to cover the invasion of Laos for our office and was killed in an ambush on Valentine’s Day, 1971. I listened to “What’s Going On” by Marvin Gaye when I heard the news and still listen to it, knowing now that it was inspired by Marvin’s brother Frankie’s year in Vietnam and wondering what kind of life Steve Warner would have had but for Vietnam.

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