**Who’ll Stop the Rain?**

*Long as I remember the rain been comin' down.   
Clouds of myst’ry pourin’ confusion on the ground.   
Good men through the ages tryin' to find the sun;   
And I wonder, still I wonder, who'll stop the rain*.

— John Fogerty, Creedence Clearwater Revival

Vietnam. The word comes camouflaged in music. Rock and roll, soul, pop and country. Jimi Hendrix, Johnny Cash, Aretha Franklin, and CCR. *I fell into a burning ring of fire. Take another little piece of my heart. Nowhere to run, baby, nowhere to hide.* “I Feel-like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag” and “Fortunate Son” — and the song more than one Vietnam veteran has called “our national anthem” — “We Gotta Get Out of This Place” by the Animals.

For those who watched the war unfold on the evening news, the music of Vietnam blurred with the sounds rising from the streets of America during a time of momentous challenge and change. For those born after the last helicopters sank beneath the waves of the South China Sea in 1975, movies, documentaries and TV shows have repeatedly used music as a sonic background for depicting Vietnam as a tug of war between pro-war hawks and pro-peace doves.

But for the men and women who served in Southeast Asia, music was what inexorably linked them to their generation. They sang along to The Beatles, Nancy Sinatra, Marty Robbins and The Temptations *before* they went to war, and they listened to them *after* they came back home. Music was more than just background noise for Vietnam veterans. It was their lifeline, a link to their existence “back in the world,” connecting them with the things that enabled them to “keep on keeping on.” From the peaks of the Central Highlands and the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta to the “air-conditioned jungles” of Da Nang and Long Binh, Vietnam soldiers used music to build community, stay connected to the home front and hold on to the humanity the war was inexorably stripping away.

And once they’d returned home, music became essential to their healing.

Historians have increasingly recognized music as a lens for understanding movements, attitudes and opinions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the iconic music of the 1960s and early 1970s. The power of that extraordinary, generation-defining music, combined with the memories associated with it by Vietnam veterans, provides a truer, deeper story of what Vietnam meant, and continues to mean.

With the crucial exception of combat situations, music was just about everywhere in Vietnam, reaching soldiers via albums, cassettes and tapes of radio shows sent from home; on the Armed Forces Vietnam Network (AFVN); and on the legendary underground broadcasts of Radio First Termer. Soldiers played it in their hooches on top-of-the-line tape decks they purchased cheap at the PX or via mail order from Japan and over headphones in helicopters and planes. Sometimes the music was live: soldiers strumming out Bob Dylan and Curtis Mayfield songs at base camps; Filipino bands pounding out “Proud Mary” and “Soul Man” at Enlisted Men’s Clubs and Saigon bars; touring acts from Bob Hope and Ann-Margret to Nancy Sinatra and James Brown granting momentary calm during the military storm. AFVN blanketed Vietnam with songs from stateside Top 40 stations. Soldiers in remote areas maneuvered their transistor radios in hopes of catching the week’s countdown of stateside hits, while radio helped helicopter crews fill the empty hours crisscrossing the airways above the endless forests and rice paddies.

The songs the troops listened to were the same ones their friends were listening to back home — radio being the Vietnam generation’s Internet — but the music took on different, and often deeper, meanings in Vietnam. For example, Nancy Sinatra’s “These Boots Are Made for Walkin’” became an anthem to the “grunts” who humped endless miles on patrol in the jungles thanks to their all-important “boots,” adding layers of meaning to the story of a young woman turning the tables on her cheating boyfriend. No one listening to the Jimi Hendrix Experience’s “Purple Haze” in a college dorm room was likely to associate the LSD-suggestive title with the color of the smoke grenades used to guide helicopters into Vietnam landing zones. “Ring of Fire,” “Nowhere to Run,” “Riders on the Storm” — all of them shifted shape in relation to the war.

Those songs and stories form the chorus at the center of *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War*, *a* book I co-wrote with Craig Werner, a cultural historian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a former member of the Nominating Committee of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The book tells the story of the Vietnam War through the music-based memories of those who were there. These conversations, and published sources, underscore a significant, yet often overlooked fact — that there is no such thing as the typical Vietnam experience. Every Vietnam soldier/veteran has his/her own individual story, and that story is dependent on what Craig and I refer to as the **“Three Ws”: W**hen you were in Vietnam; **W**here you were stationed; and **W**hat you did (i.e., your military job in Vietnam).

Point being, there is no one Vietnam story; rather, there are almost three million of them, one for every service member who was there.

Still, collectively, the songs come together in a shared story of what music meant, and means, to the young men and women who shouldered their country’s burden during a period of dizzying change. Most of them belonged to a generation that, probably more than any other, was defined by its music: Elvis, The Beatles and Dylan; Aretha, James Brown and The Supremes; Jimi Hendrix, Creedence and Johnny Cash.

Like other members of their generation, those who served in Vietnam shaped the music they loved to fit their own needs, a process that continued after they returned to the United States. As Michael Kramer observes in *The Republic of Rock*,the music of the 1960s and early 1970s gave the younger generation “a sonic framework for thinking, feeling, discussing and dancing out the vexing problems of democratic togetherness and individual liberation.” While music in Vietnam didn’t deliver a preordained set of meanings to the troops, the songs afforded a set of overlapping fields for making, sharing, and, at times, rejecting meaning. Songs and styles signified something particular to one group and something very different to another; the tensions were especially clear in relation to country music and soul — at times the catalyst for battles over the jukebox in Vietnam — but they show up again and again.

Following graduation from college, I was drafted into the U. S. Army in March 1970 and served as an information specialist (i.e. journalist) at the [Army Hometown News Center](http://jhns.dma.mil/) in Kansas City, Mo., and  [U. S. Army Republic of Vietnam headquarters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Army_Vietnam) near Saigon. There I spent 365 days writing for an Army newspaper and magazine in an air-conditioned, corporate-esque office. For guys like me who served in the rear in Vietnam, music was essential, and it was everywhere. It was how I survived my year in Vietnam.

I eventually realized I was not alone, and that music was at the heart of what my fellow Vietnam veterans experienced and remember. I’d argue that music is indispensable to understanding and appreciating the Vietnam soldier/veteran experience and how it serves as the crucible for community, connections, comradery, love, loss, despair, understanding, and, most importantly, healing.

For the more than three million other men and women who served in Vietnam, music provided release from the uncertainty, isolation and sometimes stark terror that surrounded them. But the sounds offered more than just simple escape. Music was a lifeline connecting soldiers to their homes, families and parts of themselves they felt slipping away. It was the glue that bound the communities they formed in their hooches, base camps and lonely outposts from the Mekong Delta to the DMZ. Both in-country and “back in the world,” as the troops called the United States, music helped them make sense of situations in which, as Bob Dylan put it in a song that meant something far more disturbing and haunting in Vietnam than it did back in the USA, they felt like “*they were on their own with no direction home.”*

For those fortunate enough to return home from Vietnam, music echoed through the secret places where they stored memories and stories they didn’t share with their wives, husbands or children for decades. Music was the key to survival and a path to healing, the center of a meaningful human story that’s too often lost in the haze of politics and myth that surrounds Vietnam.

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