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# 1968: The Purpose and Effects of Television and Music

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## 1968: The Purpose and Effects of Television and Music

### **Abstract**

While the decade of the 1960s as a whole was a time of change and upheaval for the United States, the year 1968 represents one of the greatest single periods of unrest in the history of the nation. Building on the post-war boom of the 1950s, the Sixties can be seen as the decade when America first became steeped and saturated in media. With the emergence of the transistor radio, the average American was “plugged in,” both in and outside of the home. When we position the historical events of 1968 against the media of television and music, we see that music, due largely to its immediacy, offers a more accurate depiction of the times, while television, with few notable exceptions, serves more as a distraction.

### **Cover Page Footnote**

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While the decade of the 1960s as a whole was a time of change and upheaval for the United States, the year 1968 represents one of the greatest single periods of unrest in the history of the nation. Firmly entrenched and embattled in the unwinnable morass of the Vietnam War, America was embittered domestically, as well; the rite – and right – of teenaged rebellion took on a more sinister feel when the younger generation, in response to seeing their numbers decimated by a draft they had no say in, became politically charged and active on college campuses across the country. In retrospect, reviewing the events of 1968 shows a clear delineation and the onset of an “Us” and “Them” mentality in the United States; a specific moment in time when ideologies fractured and a clear and vast gap between – and within – generations occurred.

In spite of this unrest, according to The People History’s article, “The Year 1968,” the nation prospered economically: the average cost of a new home was less than \$15,000 and the average yearly wage was roughly half of that figure. In this climate, the typical American had not only the means to access entertainment, but the leisure time to enjoy it. Building on the post-war boom of the 1950s, the Sixties can be seen as the decade when America first became steeped and saturated in media. Technological advances, as well as relaxed tariffs on imported goods, allowed for unprecedented consumerism: television was no longer the novelty or luxury item it had been at its inception, and what the transistor radio lacked in sound quality, it more than made up for with its affordable portability.

Thus, the average American was “plugged in,” both at in and outside of the home. However, when we look at popular television and music of 1968, curious trends emerge. In this American past, the line between “information” and “entertainment” was more finite and distinct than what we see in media today. While gruesome and horrifying images of the Vietnam War

played out nightly on television sets across the country, more often than not, television viewers were afforded an imaginary escape to a scripted and implied normalcy. By and large, however, the television media seem oddly out of touch with the general timbre of the country. By comparison, music fares better as a bellwether of the cultural pulse of the country; the pop music charts show a cross-cultural appeal that is sadly lacking in the television media. Consequently, when we position the historical events of 1968 against the media of television and music, we see that music, due largely to its immediacy, offers a more accurate depiction of the times, while television, with few notable exceptions, served more as a distraction.

One of the greatest atrocities of the war in Vietnam, the Tet Offensive, happened in January of 1968. As Edwin Moise, Professor of History at Clemson University, explains in “The Tet Offensive and Its Aftermath,” in 1967, the United States had underestimated the strength and size of Communist forces in Vietnam. Tet, the traditional Vietnamese celebration of the New Year had historically seen a cease-fire and truce, affording each faction the opportunity to celebrate the holiday. However, in spite of the agreed-upon truce, the North Vietnamese Army launched a surprise attack on nearly every South Vietnamese stronghold, as well as the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. While this attack was, militarily, a failure (Communist forces failed to gain any significant ground and American forces proved victorious,) from a public relations standpoint, the Tet Offensive was a success: it proved that American claims of a “weak, communist enemy” were false and, further, the cost of defending against the attacks had proven costly to America both in terms of money and soldiers’ lives. More importantly, as Moise notes:

The Tet Offensive made the brutality of the war very visible to Americans. The US Air Force had been bombing South Vietnamese villages for years; during Tet,

the Air Force was bombing South Vietnamese cities. The ARVN had been killing prisoners for years; during Tet the American television viewing public actually got to watch a prisoner, with his hands bound behind his back, being shot through the head by a South Vietnamese general.

While images from members of the American press corps attached to military outfits in-country were routinely shown on the evening news, those images specific to Tet seemed to have a polarizing effect on the American populace, making an unpopular war even more reviled.

Interestingly, when we look at the evening television line-up specific to 1968, a clear pattern emerges. In the time slots following the evening news, the network television programming blocks were comprised mainly of the shows which, on one level or another, remind viewers of days gone by. The most popular programming in the primetime hours consisted of *Gunsmoke*, *Daniel Boone*, and *The Jackie Gleason Show* (Brooks 341). The appeal of each of these shows is apparent, particularly when we note that both *Gunsmoke* and *Daniel Boone* focus on frontier justice, and hearkened viewers back to a golden age of American westward expansion. These shows, with their predictable plot lines in which heroes face insurmountable odds yet invariably emerge victorious, when juxtaposed against the images of the war in Southeast Asia, would surely offer comfort. Comedian Jackie Gleason, who rose to popularity on fifties television staple, *The Honeymooners*, had remained on air in one show or another almost consistently since 1950, and his presence reminded viewers of a time lost to them. While these programs were the most popular in their time slots, a cursory glance at the rest of the programming grid shows that, across the spectrum of the television dial, the choice of programming in a pre-cable world was limited in most markets to the three networks: CBS,

ABC, and NBC. Each night's offering was seemingly designed to provide respite and divert the nation's attention from the conflict in Southeast Asia.

While the war in Vietnam was contentious among the majority of Americans, the issue of the draft proved polarizing, particularly for the country's youth. While an educational deferment could delay a young man's entrance into the armed forces, as Bruce J. Schulman notes in *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics*, this led to both a grand irony and a split within a generation: those protesting the loudest were the least likely to see their "numbers called" (272). In spite of a thriving economy, the cost of a college education proved prohibitively high for most families. An analysis of television, despite its presence in the majority of American homes, proves ineffective in discerning this schism. Thus, a generation was split down its center by education and economics (272), yet the popular music of the time also tells a different story.

Of course, Vietnam was not the only divisive issue of 1968. Racial tensions over Jim Crow laws and segregation came to something of a head with the tragic assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968. This event sparked widespread violence and rioting across the nation and urban areas erupted in flames. The death of the civil rights leader, shot on a balcony in Memphis, Tennessee, by James Earl Ray, was seen as both a tragedy and call to action by African Americans and many whites, as well. A scant seven days after King's assassination and at the height of the rioting, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which provided for equal opportunity in housing, regardless of age, race, or creed. While many saw this as a victory for fairness, whites in Chicago and Milwaukee disagreed with the Act's passage, and attacks on nonviolent protesters occurred, further drawing lines between races, and adding to the volatility of times.

In light of the issues and the events of 1968, we see strain between both the older generation and splits based on economics and race within a generation, as well. Music, as reflected on the pop charts of 1968, shows an odd unity however. On the date of King's assassination, four of the top ten most popular songs were performed by African American artists or groups ("Hot 100: April 4, 1968"). Crossovers from the R&B charts were regular occurrences throughout the decade due, in part, to the popularity of Berry Gordy's manufactured "Motown Sound." As Nelson George opines in *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, Gordy's production methods "borrowed heavily from Gospel, Doo-Wop and Soul subjected to the mass-production process... [Gordy had learned on]... an automotive assembly line" (94). Gordy's system of catchy, infectious hooks and his branded-marketing of performers proved popular with whites as well as blacks. Motown artists enjoyed celebrity equal to that of their white counterparts – everywhere but in the Jim Crow South. Nonetheless, music of 1968 proved colorblind.

Music, then, more so than television, provides a unifying experience throughout the year of 1968. While African Americans are represented in the television media, the race is woefully singular in starring roles; the exception being Diahann Carroll as Julia Baker in *Julia*. The title character is a woman of color employed as a nurse, working to support herself after her husband is killed in Vietnam ("Julia"). This sort of representation was a rare occurrence on the television landscape, where ethnic actors were mostly relegated to bit parts as bad guys or comic relief. Mentions of Vietnam, too, are scarce; while *Gomer Pyle, USMC* was a popular show for CBS, the plots were broad and farcical; shying away from any true portrayal of the horrors of war. Given the images shown on the nightly news, however, this is unsurprising and furthers the contention that the television media was intended to distract viewers, rather than reinforce any

anti-war agenda of the time. Televised media, too, seemed to be the sole providence of both the older generation and the very young and programming reflects this; fantasy abounds with *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* airing, as well as westerns, benign sitcoms, and detective series. While these genres proved popular, and certainly shored up the contention that television was intended to anesthetize the masses from the upheaval of the times, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, a Top 30 and the number one show of 1968, respectively, belie this idea. These shows seem to be specifically tasked with bringing counter-culture ideas to the forefront and directly into the average American home.

Both *Laugh-In* and *Comedy Hour* employed a show format of short comedy sketches interspersed with musical entertainment. This format was not an invention of the time, of course, but was a staple of Vaudeville shows and, further back, minstrelsy. In 1968, these shows competed with other variety programs using this same set-up, including the previously mentioned *Jackie Gleason Show*, as well as eponymous shows from Glen Campbell, Red Skelton and Carol Burnett (Brooks 211). However, what makes *Laugh-In* and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* noteworthy and served to contribute to their popularity, was their ability to present the subversive, counter-culture ideas espoused by “long hairs and hippies” in a way that was both humorous and slightly sexy. In this way, then, these programs made the counter-culture palatable to the suburbs and, therefore: less threatening.

The scantily-clad, cage dancers of *Laugh-In* showed the burgeoning sexuality women were embracing, but in such a way as to not offend. Of the two, *Laugh-In* carefully couched its youth-culture orientation in ways that pleased the American public as well as the network's Standards and Practices department, while *The Smothers Brothers* pressed to offend. The hipper, more rebellious nature of the show made it the clear winner with the 15-35 male demographic,

while older and younger viewers skewed toward *Bonanza* running on NBC in the competing time slot. This youth-centric bent mired *Comedy Hour* in controversy, as well as the antics and outspokenness of some of the show's musical guests. While the show lasted until the 1970-71 season, it was in 1968 that CBS network censors demanded the right to review episodes prior to airing them. According to Alex McNeil in *Television: The Comprehensive Guide to Programming from 1948 to the Present*, there was no "one, single incident that led to this [request,] but it rather [more likely] that a combination of antics" caused the network to become concerned (212). Notably, during the previous season, the English rock band, The Who, had smashed and blown up their instruments on the set (which led to permanent hearing loss for lead guitarist, Pete Townsend,) among other controversies that led CBS to believe the show – and its talent – should be reined in.

For all their subversive glory, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and *Laugh-In* were the exceptions in television schedules of 1968, rather than the rule. In retrospect, television and music each show us a different side of the times. It is important to bear in mind that up until very recently, however, television bore the constraint of being "home-based". Historically, it has been a media in which the consumer, for the most part, remains passive. This is not to say that television of any era fails to stir passions, but music, as media, enjoyed portability in 1968 that TV lacked. Additionally, music with its shorter production time is gifted with the luxury of immediacy; the "turn-around" time for a radio single is less than the time required, certainly for scripted series. Consequently, when we position the historical events of 1968 against the media television and music, we see that music, due largely to its immediacy, offers a more accurate depiction of the times, while television, with few notable exceptions, serves more as a distraction.

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