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Folk Music in America

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Let us begin by considering the political and social background in which the Folk Music Revival took place in America. First of all, the political background in which this movement took place saw the birth of the American New Left. Although it has been several times opposed to the American Old Left, while the Old Left centralized its protest on the demonstrations of “unemployed and poor people” attacking the social system, the New Left centralized its main activities on “anti-bureaucratic, spontaneous and anti-authoritarian” individuals meant to dismantle hierarchical values in society and politics (Neustadter 40). Such as, one of the most important goals of the New Left was the idea of rising social consciousness through theatres, anti-war demonstrations, expositions of the absurdity of the system and “discursive rather than persuasive” music (Neustadter 49). Therefore, it is as if the need to declare something aloud has brought human beings to analyse their positions through social activism aimed to put them face to face with the outside world.



Additionally, it appears as if Music covered an important role during the American 1960s especially because it could not be fully separated from those political aspects. Specifically, the impetuosity of the American 1960s was majorly by young popular musicians who generated from youth movements meant to arise the political problems of their own society (Eyerman 453). War, in certain, was at the centre of such protests. Undeniably, it is possible to affirm that the greatest part of the social movements held during the 1960s was above all “massive phenomena against the military system” in American life (Eyerman 454). For example, the 1964 Free Speech Movement, which originated among young students at the University of California at Berkeley, could be considered as an important anecdote. Actually, a group of young students decided for the first time to use music in order to protest against the American system and in order to create a kind of “collective memory” among young protesters (Eyerman 458).

It is possible to affirm that Music became both as a mean to be united in protest and a mean to communicate during the 1960s. However, the impact of the Civil Rights Movement and a long series of black “sit-ins and bus boycotts” aimed to dismantle racial discrimination should be



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considered as an integral part of the 1960s American Folk Movement (Gonczy 19). Hence, the American Folk Music Revival of the 1960s began to take place in such a background. Indeed, *We Shall Overcome* has also become "a cornerstone for the Folk Music Revival" (Jager 90) during the American 1960s. Nevertheless, something about its roots needs a deeper analysis. As a result, united individuals either devoted to civil rights and freedom or devoted to the magical power of music, began to peacefully protest against racism, war and injustice.

Having explored the political and social background in which the 1960s Folk Music Revival took place in America, let us move on to discuss its main characteristics. Firstly, according to some scholars, the beginning of the Folk Music Revival should be conducted to the performance of a song by The Kingston Trio entitled *Tom Dooley*. This song chanting the "impending execution" of a man who had killed his beloved, would have developed in the audiences "an ear for the topical songs". The expression "topical songs", then, referred to some songs which told a story or expressed personal emotions in some lyrics (Gonczy 15). As a consequence, a series of young folksingers followed The Kingston Trio. Among them, there were especially Joan Baez, "rising from the coffee house crowd" and young Bob Dylan (Gonczy 20). It appears as if these two young musicians and activists have raised the anti-war human consciousness of the 1960s by using their voices and music. Indeed, they not only sang, rather but also became radicalized among the New Left (Gonczy 23). Joan Baez seems to exemplify the issue above. Indeed, in remembering her 1960s with the already electric Bob Dylan she has affirmed: "When the war began, I, along with thousands of others, would go battle against it. We would lose Bob to other things, but before the first official bullet was fired, he had filled our arsenals with song: "Hard Rain", "Masters of War", "The Times They Are A-Changin", "With God on Our Side" and finally "Blowing in the Wind", the best-known anthem of social conscience throughout the world" (Baez 92). For instance, Joan Baez seems to have always believed in the importance of social movements. According to her, then, a movement "describes the people and the groups which are continuing to organize" against nuclear, wars, torture and especially armaments (Baez 333). Music, moreover, has meant to her



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above all unity. As a result, her expression: "Every word of the *songs* was once again alive and vital, and nothing mattered except for that moment of song and union" (Baez 339) appears to clarify the issue above. Moreover, when Paul Zollo interviewed Joan Baez in 1987, and he asked her whether, during her youth, folk music meant to her something more special rather than any other kind of music, she simply told him:

I had a lot of sadness in there, and I would sing these ballads until five in the morning, making myself more miserable, I suppose, but it comforted me. It absolutely spoke to my heart. Beauty and Death (Zollo 173).

Especially ballads, then, should be considered as the main agents of the whole American 1960s and 1970s Folk Music era. Thus, Music can be considered as one of the most important aspects of the 1960s in America, especially for young individuals.

As a direct consequence of this, Folk Music began to be taken to "union meeting, coffee houses, night clubs, concerts both large and small and rent parties" as a way to tune several important and powerful messages (Roy 91). In addition, it is also possible to say that Folk Music aimed to create a new audience able to face the new problems of the 1960s in America. The centre, then, of the Folk Music Movement was established at Greenwich Village where the famous *Young's Folklore Centre* was held and young folksingers met in order to discuss the dynamics of the new folk scene (Eyerman 528). Nonetheless, another important phenomenon of the 1960s Folk Music Revival was also the *Woodstock Music and Art Fair*. Woodstock, then, can be considered as the counter-cultural space in which thousands and thousands of young students, protesters, activists and folksingers became united to tune in their protests through the power of music. In particular, the Woodstock Music Festival held in 1969 could be seen as an iconic moment for an angry young generation to exploit its most intimate feelings (Michael 238).

Finally, the famous *Newport Folk Festival* cannot be separated from the 1960s American scene. For instance, Joan Baez has offered an account of the very first edition of the Newport Folk Festival in



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her second memoir. As if the reader had the impression of being splashed on to a burst of colours, chaos and harmony, Joan Baez has depicted this event in a very original way. As a consequence, she has stated:

There were tents full of folksingers, banjo pickers, fiddle players [...] The kids who flocked to the festival were trim and had short hair [...] there were black blues singers with broken-down guitars and white kids trying to sound like them (Baez 60).

Hence, it is possible to consider Music as an integral part of the 1960s especially because young generations began to see it as a kind of suffocating throat by which they could have changed everything they had been hiding in their hearts. Michael Castellini has argued about the idea that several black hymns and spirituals have been revisited during the Civil Rights Movement. In particular, he refers to the so-called 'sorrow songs' which were also sung by black slaves and unhappy creatures who found in black spiritual songs a way to exploit their own sufferings (Castellini 4).



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Another important aspect, then, can also be the way in which the spirit of the American 1960s has influenced both art and literature. For instance, I have already noted how the New Left began to address theatres as means of propaganda. In addition, either art became prominent in the idea of communicating some important messages. I would, for example, the name "the striking photographs of college students placing flowers in the guns of police officers", the 1968 graffiti of May, the visual flyers, the political cartoons held during this era and so on (Everhart 270). Moreover, in literature especially Poetry seems to have been influenced by the new spirit of the American 1960s. For instance, I have decided to focus my analysis on the poetical and also political voice of Allen Ginsberg who, for the first time, announced in his poems: "Yes, I am willing to march out against the war" (Watten 144). In particular, Ginsberg became interested in finding an alternative to the rationality of the Western World through his meditative moods.



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Indeed, he went abroad and found in nature and isolation his becoming a radical outsider, a model for his young generation. "Self-Consciousness", then, became his most prominent characteristic (Watten 157). Hence, it is possible to affirm that Poetry became also mean to express the fervour of a fresh and new poetical voice aimed to oppose to the ordinary countenance around. In addition, it is also important to make some reflections on Music and Literature. For example, during the 1960s Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk-Music* became a real icon. Indeed, it appears to be composed of six CDs documentary in which especially the songs of working-class Americans of the past have been collected (Rosenberg 327). The main idea, then, was to collect some songs from oral traditions and write them into "books as folksongs" able to revisit the essence of past people (Rosenberg 329). As a consequence of this, indeed, during the American 1960s, the myth of the common men appeared to be reinforced as if it wanted to symbolize that the *folk* era belonged to the people and that they were part of a single over-arching "over-soul" (Dunlap 552). Thus, it is possible to end this sub-chapter by saying that not only music, nevertheless, also literature and art have been influenced by the new American way of the 1960s. In particular, I have quoted these examples in order to become aware of how human beings have behaved as real folk agents in their long struggles against war, racism, oppression and violence during the 1960s.

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