*Twentieth-Century Music* 16/1, 165–168 © Cambridge University Press, 2019
doi: 10.1017/S147857221900015X

# 1968: Mythology Matters

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We are now reaching the last flurry of half-century commemorations of the 1960s. What is striking in these backwards glances – most recently, fifty years since 1967's Summer of Love, and fifty years since '1968' – is the truncation of events, the conflation of ideas, the simplification of meaning. Years and eras are impossible to encapsulate in sound bites or longer narratives of public memorialization, so music often serves as a convenient shorthand; yet popular songs of 1967 and 1968 only occasionally spoke to contemporary events, and more often skated over the surface of deep cultural rifts and political upheaval.[1] What we now retain is a sort of shared mythology – 1967 was peaceful, 1968 was violent – that complicates our ability to see the past in the present. As I aim to show here, the 1960s continue to resonate today in ways that force us to confront history, for as William Faulkner wrote, 'the past is never dead. It's not even past.'

The Summer of Love is our first point of contact. The mid-1960s hippie community of San Francisco was a kind of anti-capitalist utopia, bubbling along peacefully on the outer edge of the city. But tensions within the community between the peaceful and the political, and between the community and City Hall, were amplified by the increasing media presence in the Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood, and by the progressively hysterical stories in local and national news about rampant drug use, promiscuity, and infectious disease. The ways in which the hippie community met resistance from the mainstream culture was often inspiring – establishing the volunteer-driven Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic for the treatment of everything from gonorrhea and tetanus to bad trips and overdoses; forming the Council for a Summer of Love for the security and support of the many young people expected to descend on the Haight in the summer of 1967.[2] But the ways in which the city fathers fought against the hippie efforts – denying funding to the Free Clinic, refusing to heed the hippie warnings of a summer invasion – were predictable and destructive.[3] It was sadly not surprising therefore that plans for a fiftieth anniversary free concert celebration of the Summer of Love organized by first-generation hippies were rejected by the city, and an official commemoration has yet to take place in San Francisco.

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1 The Billboard charts substantiate this point: 1967 might have seen the release of Jefferson Airplane's hippie classic 'White Rabbit', but The Association's 'Windy' was the Number 4 single of the year; Paul Mauriat's sentimental 'Love Is Blue' was the Number 2 single of 1968, but James Brown's 'Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud' is an enduring Black Power anthem. See billboard.com/archive/charts.

2 These were the 'good hippies', according to the local newspaper. See Mike Mahoney, 'Nice Happenings: Good Hippies' Summer Plans', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 April 1967, 3.

3 This is a theme I explore at length in *San Francisco and the Long 60s* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).



https://doi.org/10.1017/S147857221900015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The free rock concert was a central feature of the Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s: a natural extension of the social environment in and around Haight Street, a party that extended beyond one communal household and into the park. The idea of 'free' permeated the neighborhood, driven most forecefully by the Diggers, the radical anarchist/guerrilla theatre group whose Free Food, Free Stores, and Free City News street sheets brought a revolutionary ideology to the largely apolitical hippie community. The tensions between political and apolitical hippie factions are easy to gloss over in the wider sweep of twentieth-century history, but they were a palpable undercurrent at the time. Hippie in-fighting, the out-migration of the original hippie community, and the mainstream appropriation of hippie music were perhaps inevitable, though fifty years later they seem to counter the overriding hippie myth of peace, love, and dope. The fact that yoga, meditation, organic food, and herbal tea are fairly mainstream features of our contemporary life, though we do not call ourselves 'hippies', is perhaps a symptom of cultural amnesia; the fact that in the UK there are now more food banks than ever before, providing a Digger community service that the government will not fund, is a sure indication that nothing much has changed.

The Diggers migrated out of the city and into other political arenas in 1968, but remnants of their ideology could still be discerned in local community politics, notably across the Bay.[4] The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in Oakland in 1966 for the promotion of 'revolutionary intercommunalism'.[5] Armed against police brutality and institutionalised racism, their guns funded by sales of Mao's Little Red Book, the Black Panthers were feared and misunderstood in equal measure. Some of the community programmes they ran – free breakfasts for children, free clothing, free food – were not wildly different to what the Diggers were doing for the hippies in Golden Gate Park at exactly the same time. But there was an important distinction between the hippies and the Panthers: the hippies were not a racially diverse crowd, and though they too were despised by city officials, at least the hippies were unarmed.

Public awareness of the Black Panthers, their iconography if not their ideology, reached fever pitch by 1969, when FBI director J. Edgar Hoover branded them 'the greatest threat to the internal security of the country'. The worry in white America was that the Panthers' free breakfast programme was really indoctrinating young black children in some kind of racially driven *coup d'état*. Perhaps the fear of the Black Panthers was simply part of the political landscape of the late 1960s; perhaps the sight of radicalized hippies at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago was reason enough to shut down any and all underground insurgencies, black or white;[6] but whatever the case, it does not take much

4 A comprehensive Digger chronology is available at diggers.org. For a colourful first-hand account, see Peter Coyote, *Sleeping Where I Fall: A Chronicle* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1998).

5 For more on the history of the Black Panther Party, see Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1970), Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, eds., *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), and Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

6 For a full and indelible account, see Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (London: Penguin, 1969).

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effort to see history repeating. That institutional response to black politics is echoed today in the continued backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement, in the empowerment of white supremacists at every level of society, and in the zealous misinterpretation of the silent kneeling protests during the singing of the US national anthem at sporting events.

But if the pervading narrative of radical politics in 1968 was underrepresented in the popular music of the time,[7] that revolutionary spirit is re-asserting itself in today's popular music. Beyonce's performance of 'Formation' at the 2016 Superbowl half-time show is a case in point. Her appearance was meant to promote her new single during what was essentially an interlude in Coldplay's set, but it sparked a national conversation about the representation of black identity in mainstream culture and about the role of politics in popular culture. The style and choreography were undoubtedly shocking to some members of the viewing public: marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Black Panther Party, Beyonce returned signifiers of anti-imperialist activism – afros, berets, black leather hotpants and combat boots – to primetime American television. And the fact that the conversation about music and politics was ignited in the final months of Barack Obama's presidency is important to recall, given what has happened in American politics since that moment.

It is difficult to ignore the rise in activism since the 2016 US presidential election, and the parallels between this period of protest and those of the 1960s. The half-century that has passed since the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr has borne witness to both progress and regression. And while the commemorations of the historical moments of the 1960s have been undoubtedly useful, they often decontextualize those moments from their critical impulse for cultural or social change. For that reason, a dialogue between the radical past and the often hopeless present needs urgent nurturing. It is difficult, in the present climate, to speak blithely of the need for kindness, civility, and love – to believe in the myth of the 1960s – but the simplicity of that hippie message still resonates. The radical act of caring for others in one's own community, whether helping hippies on a bad trip or feeding hungry children in poor neighbourhoods, was threatening because it was effective: from the Haight Free Clinic's 'health care is a right, not a privilege' to the Black Panthers' 'all power to the people', the slogans propounding the 'free' philosophy were rooted in a political ideology entirely at odds with American capitalism, then and now.

The popular music that soundtracked the civil rights and anti-war movements – what Serge Denisoff classified as either 'rhetorical' or 'magnetic' protest songs – has not necessarily been revived in today's demonstrations,[8] but that is not to suggest that the spirit of those movements has died. The funeral for Aretha Franklin clearly proved this point:[9] her casket was delivered by the hearse that delivered Rosa Parks's casket; Reverend Jesse Jackson delivered one of the event's many tributes; and Stevie Wonder told the crowd that 'what needs to happen today, not only in this nation but throughout the world, is that we need to make love great

7 I cover this in greater depth in '"This Is My Country": American Popular Music and Political Engagement in 1968', in *Music and Protest in 1968*, ed. Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

8 See R. Serge Denisoff, 'The Evolution of the American Protest Song,' in *The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture*, ed. R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972).

9 Franklin's funeral was held at the Greater Grace Temple in Detroit on 31 August 2018.

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again'. Commemorating a life, celebrating a towering musical talent, through the prism of a difficult cultural history: this is how popular music can remind us that the past is never dead. And the spirit of that same past is alive in the politically charged texts about this moment, from *Black Panther*, to Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize for *DAMN*,[10] to Childish Gambino's compelling 'This Is America'.[11] Today's protest music continues to serve a critical function: giving voice to the many, in songs shot through with pain and anger, which confront the systematic oppression, racism, and violence that lie at the bitter root of American society.

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10 The superhero, Black Panther, first appeared in the Marvel universe in 1966, the same year that the Black Panthers first emerged in Oakland. A recent walk (August 2018) in downtown Oakland through the public art exhibit 'Welcome to Oakanda' is proof that the two are closely linked in the public consciousness: the artwork, designed by former Panther Tarika Lewis, incorporates Panther iconography with familiar Oakland branding and references to the Marvel character's costume. See *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2018) and its soundtrack, *Black Panther: The Album* (Polydor, 2018). Kendrick Lamar, *DAMN*. (Polydor, 2017).

11 Childish Gambino, 'This Is America', words and music by Donald Glover and Ludwig Göransson (RCA, 2018). Video directed by Hiro Murai, choreographed by Sherrie Silver.

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