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## Backdrop to a Musical Revolution: Urban Uprisings, Black Power and the Vietnam War Shatter The Politics of Respectability in Popular Music

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# Backdrop to a Musical Revolution: Urban Uprisings, the Black Power Movement and the Vietnam War Shatter The Politics of Respectability

We are now on the cusp of another revolutionary period in American Popular Music, a time when deeply emotional, compulsively danceable and openly erotic music, referred to by its major practitioners as "soul," starts to invade the American musical mainstream, a time when folk music is electrified and promotes an anti-authoritarian message, a time when some of the most prominent rock artists of the time begin to promote drug experimentation and sexual freedom.

The years we will be covering will be those between the spring of 1965 and the spring of 1967, years that include, on the political side, the Watts Riot and the Rise of the Black Power movement, the massive deployment of American ground troops in Vietnam and the end of draft deferments for college students, the eruption of the first large protests movement against the war in Vietnam, and the emergence of a youth counterculture in New York, San Francisco and college towns throughout the nation where drug use and sexual experimentation are widely practiced.

These political changes, occurring with startling rapidity, dramatically change the world view of American and global youth, inspiring musicians, and those marketing popular music, to dramatically change what they were offering. In some cases, like that of Bob Dylan and the Beatles, established artists totally changed their musical persona, in other cases, artists who loyal niche audiences, like Wilson Pickett and Otis Redding, were catapulted into the musical mainstream, and in many other cases new groups like the Doors and the Jefferson Airplane crashed the rock and roll party with messages that would have previously been suppressed

Before getting to the music, I want to briefly review some of the dramatic political events which reshaped popular music and changed rock and roll to the core

## Urban Uprisings and the Black Power movement

Beginning in the summer of 1964 and reaching frightening proportion in the Watts Riot in Los Angeles the summer of 1965, uprisings took place in Black communities throughout the country, often provoked by police violence against individual Black men and women, which took the form of street battles with police and in looting and firebombing of neighborhood business districts. These uprisings, which would continue through 1967 and 1968 affected scores of cities and would lead to tens of thousands of arrests, hundreds of people killed, and result in scenes of devastation in two cities- Newark and Detroit- which have still not been fully repaired. For the most part, this explosion of Black revolutionary protest took place outside the South, in places which already had the freedoms enshrined in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965

While i will not pretend to provide a facile explanation of these uprisings, consider this perspective

Between the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and the 1965 Selma Voting Rights protests, there were almost daily scenes on television of well dressed, peaceful black protesters being attacked, beaten, arrested and at times killed- both by police and white vigilantes- trying to get rights which should have been already theirs under the Constitution. The leaders of these protests asked the rest of the Black community to stay back and let the black people employing nonviolent direct action provoke white violence until the country was willing to change. For the most part, Black people controlled their understandable rage at scenes of white violence shown almost nightly on television- articulated with incredible eloquence by Malcolm X- until the two great civil rights bills were passed. But after the southern civil rights movement achieved its key goals, the time of holding back was over. The Uprisings were one manifestation. So was the Black Power movement, launched by a young civil rights leader named Stokely Carmichael who, in the Spring of 1966, said was time for Black people to control the destiny of their own political movements, and demanded that white people leave civil rights organizations so that Black people could shape their own destiny. Although the slogan "Black Power" was rejected by Dr King and most mainstream civil rights leaders, it was embraced by a growing number of young Black people who interpreted it not only to mean a rejection of white leadership in the civil rights struggle, but a rejection of white standards of beauty and of white middle class ideals generally.

These two phenomena, Urban Uprisings and the Rise of the Black Power movement, would, with remarkable quickness, undermine the Politics of Respectability's hold on those shaping and marketing Black contributions to popular music

### The Vietnam War and the Rise of the Counterculture

When the Johnson Administration decided to send American ground troops to Vietnam in the Summer of 1965 to prevent all of Vietnam from being unified under Communist leadership, it was time that American youth had been called on to fight a ground war since the rise of Rock and Roll in the mid 50's. That the war took place in a country that most Americans never heard of, that it was never declared, that it pitted our troops against an armed population that saw the US as just the latest manifestation of colonial occupiers- following in the footsteps of France and Japan-created immense skepticism from the outset. But when the war escalated to the point where over 450,000 American soldiers were deployed there- by the spring of 1967- when college deferments from the draft ended, and when more than 10,000 American soldiers had been killed, and tens of thousands wounded, with no end to the war in sight, large sections of American youth exploded into protest

By the spring of 1967, every young man in the nation had to face the decision- am i willing to fight and die in the War and Vietnam, or do i go to jail or go to Canada rather than face that eventuality

No one, in the years of the early 60's, ever thought they would face a situation like this. And the war changed everything. Look at gender issues. Women were told that marriage was the ticket to middle class respectability. But what security could you have in marriage when the whole cohort of men in your world faced the prospect of death. And with the birth control pill widely available, what sense did it make to postpone sexual pleasure? For what

But in the larger sense, with "cities aflame in the summertime" and a war threatening to claim the flower of American male youth, the country that had once seemed safe and secure suddenly seemed to be terrifying and unstable. In massive numbers, young people turned to drugs to ease their anxiety and began questioning every form of authority in a society that was falling apart- from parents, to teachers, to religious leaders, to politicians.

And the music changed with it!