

## 5.6 Protest music

The 1960s was a time of political and social upheaval. The country went to war in Vietnam. Battles sprung up at home against Australia's participation in the war and in the name of civil rights, and in support of Indigenous land rights and women's liberation. Around the world, many people took to the streets in protest, while others were inspired to create music that expressed their concerns. This music became known as 'protest music'.

### Australia enters the Vietnam War

In 1964, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced that the government would begin selective **conscription** of 20-year-old Australian men. While all young men of eligible age were required to register, only those whose birth dates were selected by lottery would be required for National Service. The following year, Menzies announced that Australia would send troops to assist the South Vietnamese government in combating the threat posed by the communists. The new conscripts could now be sent to Vietnam.

**Source 1** The main contrasting views of the Australian public were reflected in Parliament by the leaders of the government and the Opposition. This is a quote from Prime Minister Robert Menzies, 29 April 1965.

The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South-East Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

**Source 2** This is a quote from Arthur Calwell, leader of the Opposition, 4 May 1965, who took a different stance on the war.

Our men will be fighting the largely indigenous Viet Cong in their own home territory. They will be fighting in the midst of a largely indifferent, if not resentful, and frightened population. They will be fighting at the request of, and in support of, and, presumably, under the direction of an unstable, inefficient, partially corrupt military regime which lacks even the semblance of being, or becoming, democratically based.

### The power of song

While many people who disagreed with Australia's presence in Vietnam took to the streets in protest, others — inspired by members of America's Folk Revival movement — put pen to paper to create protest music. Written by Johnny Young and sung by Ronnie Burns in

1969, 'Smiley' was inspired by the experiences of Normie Rowe, an Australian pop singer who was highly disturbed by the experience of fighting in Vietnam. The lyrics tell a story: *'Smiley / You're off to the Asian War / And we won't see you smile no more'*. The Vietnam War and the horrors experienced by its young soldiers would continue to inspire musicians for decades. In 1983, Australian folk group Redgum released 'I was only nineteen', in which they wrote, *'Frankie kicked a mine the day that mankind kicked the moon. God help me, he was going home in June'*.

Another major issue to preoccupy protest singers of the 1960s was **civil rights**. During this era, the protest against Vietnam and for civil rights went hand-in-hand. Many Australians supported Indigenous Australians' right to own their traditional lands (also known as 'land rights').

### The hippie movement

The hippie subculture emerged out of the **beat generation** of the 1950s in America, Australia, England and elsewhere. Rather than protesting as stridently as those who had come before them, hippies aimed to challenge the conventional values of regular, mainstream society by embracing a less materialistic, more communal lifestyle, and promoting a peaceful, compassionate and sustainable way of life. It could be said that they were attempting to create a **utopia**.

America's hippies and other like-minded people came together at Woodstock, a three-day, free music festival

**Source 3** On 28 August 1963, Bob Dylan, widely recognised as the pioneer of the folk rock music style, and singer-activist Joan Baez, played in front of an estimated 250 000 people who had gathered in America's capital in support of economic and civil rights for African Americans.



**Source 4** The Aquarius Festival held in Nimbin in 1973, was designed to celebrate freedom of mind, body and spirit.



held outside Bethel, New York, in August 1969. Thirty-two musical acts performed for half a million people who danced in the rain and mud. The festival would come to be synonymous with the values of peace, love and communal living. Many of the values that underpinned Woodstock were also represented by Australia's **Aquarius Festival**, held in Nimbin in 1973, and attended by between 5000 and 10 000 young people from around the country. This festival was advertised with the slogan, 'From our hearts, with our hands, for the Earth, all the world together'.

### Protest music for a new era

The Vietnam War finally ended in 1975. By then, 520 Australians had been killed in action, while more than 2000 had been wounded. In the following decades, other Australian artists would continue to use music as a form of protest in defence of issues including Indigenous land rights and the environment.

**Source 5** The Last Kinection, known for their powerful lyrics and Indigenous essence, won Most Outstanding Achievement in Hip Hop and R&B at the Deadly awards in 2009 and 2010.



In the late 1970s a new form of protest music emerged within the mainly black inner-city communities of America's largest cities. Hip hop artists used biting and often explicit lyrics to criticise the society around them. In Australia, the genre has been embraced by Indigenous artists, such as The Last Kinection, who use their music to explore issues of racism, social exclusion and the search for identity.

### Activities



Student workbook  
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#### EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 1 What is meant by the term 'selective conscription'?
- 2 Which 'battles' were Australians engaged in, overseas and at home, during the 1960s?
- 3 What did hippies believe in?

#### ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

- 4 **Sources 1 and 2** reflect very different views of the Vietnam War and whether or not Australia should participate. In your own words, explain the views of Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies and Opposition Leader Arthur Calwell. Which argument do you find most convincing? Why?
- 5 Compare the artists depicted in **Sources 3 and 5**. What similarities and differences can you see between these protest singers? What do these similarities and differences suggest about the times in which they were performing?

#### PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

- 6 Locate and listen carefully to one protest song from the 1960s or 1970s, such as Bob Dylan's 'The times they are a-changing', 'Blowing in the wind' and 'Masters of war'; Pete Seeger's 'We shall overcome'; or Donovan's 'Universal soldier'.
  - a Read or listen to the lyrics.
  - b Explain what issues of the 1960s or 1970s the song is about.
  - c What attitude to the issues is adopted in the song?
  - d Identify at least two lines of the song that support the songwriter's argument.
  - e How much influence do you think this song would have had in its time?
  - f In what ways could a song be a more effective form of protest than a speech or a leaflet?

**Aquarius** relating to the Age of Aquarius — a period of transition, according to astrologers

**beat generation** a subculture, first associated with American writers and poets, that rejected conventional work, possessions, clothing and lifestyle, and promoted radical ideas

**civil rights** the rights belonging to an individual by virtue of citizenship

**conscription** compulsory enlistment, especially in the armed forces; also called the draft

**utopia** an ideal, perfect place, especially in its social, political and moral aspects