

“Do you remember those days?” The Fifties and Sixties according to Billy Joel

In January 1990, forty thousand special audiocassettes were dispatched to public schools across America. Intended as study aids for history classes, they featured a ten-minute lecture from pop star Billy Joel. He informed students that, “history is a living thing...If we don’t learn from the mistakes of history, we’re doomed to repeat them.” This was but a preamble to the main event: a recording of Joel’s 1989 hit “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” It was hoped that “Fire,” a quasi-rap through events of the singer’s lifetime, 1949-89, could make history interesting for school children. Joel himself informed the *New York Times* that he wrote the song in part as a response to a conversation with a younger man who believed the 1950s and 1960s – the years of Joel’s youth – were uneventful and carefree. Altruistic act or shrewd publicity move: either way, the singer managed to reach across generations to both his usual hardcore of thirty-and-fortysomething fans and to younger people discovering his music at school.

The promotion of Joel’s personal life and its intersection with large historical events may have found a surprising educational legitimacy with “Fire,” but this was certainly not his first examination of the recent American past. Throughout the 1980s he offered lyrical and visual representations of the 1950s and 60s. Nowhere was this more clearly manifested than when he appeared on what by the 1980s was a flourishing form of cultural expression – the music video. In these diverse visual texts, Joel became time-traveller, participant, witness and commentator on events such as the Vietnam War in “Goodnight Saigon” and “Allentown” (both 1982), 1950s and 60s politics and popular culture in “Tell Her About It,” “The Longest Time” (1983), and “We Didn’t Start the Fire” (1989), and the Cold War in “Leningrad” (1989).

This article therefore examines Joel, and the promotional texts with which he was surrounded, as cultural arbiters in what several historians identify as a large-scale public debate taking place throughout the 1980s. The debate focused upon the meaning and legacy of the 1950s and 1960s, or Fifties and Sixties, for contemporary America. Politically conservative and liberal commentators sought to shape public memory of phenomena such as the civil rights, feminist and anti-war movements, the Vietnam War and the counterculture. In recounting the past these commentators were also looking to the future. Could announcing the Vietnam War to be, in Ronald Reagan's words, a "noble cause," prepare America for its next international incursion? Would an attack on the feminist movement warrant a return to "old-fashioned family values"? Such questions underpinned this heated debate as commentators of various political persuasions presented, in Daniel Marcus' words, "usable narratives of post-World War II national life."

Politicians were by no means the only players in this very public fracas. Marcus' book, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics*, argues that 1980s America saw political discourse and popular culture become increasingly "interlaced," working together "to shape collective understandings of the national experience." Much academic work has explored contemporary cinematic representations of Fifties and Sixties politics and society. To my knowledge there is, however, far less on the construction of public memories of the Fifties and Sixties by popular musicians. While Marcus offers a few illuminating examples of popular music's historical consciousness, his wide-ranging study of the Fifties and Sixties as expansive "discursive formations" limits the extent to which this topic could be addressed in any detail. For example, his claim that "More than any performer in the 1980s, Bruce Springsteen constructed an historically minded cultural and social agenda through the evocation of past

musical styles” is accompanied only by a brief reference to his public persona and the oft-noted quip that, with Springsteen, it was “as if Elvis had started singing Bob Dylan songs.” Other performers – like Madonna and the rap group Public Enemy, whose evocation and interpretation of as diverse phenomena as 1950s and 1960s female icons and civil rights figureheads – receive scant attention. But for a single quote attributed to the singer, Joel’s avid repackaging of the Fifties and Sixties is omitted. It is hoped that the analysis provided here will, firstly, offer a detailed case study of an under-researched popular musician and, secondly, encourage others to examine alternative musical contributions to this large-scale public debate. As a high profile and commercially successful public figure, Joel is an interesting channel through which to explore the interplay between popular music, politics and public memory. Like many other films, television programmes, political speeches and songs, his output can be seen as participating in prominent, and ideologically loaded, debates of the era.

The article complicates one common reading of 1980s popular music and, especially the music video, which claims that these cultural artefacts reject any sense of coherent narrative structure. It is often argued that the incessant flow of images and sounds offered by channels such as MTV and VH1 means that history is flattened out into nothing more than a string of meaningless, playful pastiches. I follow Andrew Goodwin, whose book *Dancing in the Distraction Factory* suggests that narrative often exists beyond an individual video (or, indeed, song). It can be found at the point where multiple publicity texts intersect. Many audience members would approach a single text with some knowledge of the star persona and back catalogue of the musician. Reading it in tandem with a musician’s broader oeuvre thus allows one to pay more serious attention in this case to Joel’s public historical narratives and its meaning for 1980s America. No attempt is made, here, to offer commentary on Joel’s

historical accuracy or truthfulness. Rather, I examine the songs, images and statements that entered the public sphere, those which intersected with and – at times – digressed from, broader public memories of the Fifties and the Sixties. Part One therefore addresses the concept of public memory and its applicability to discussions of the recent American past. I then turn to an analysis of Billy Joel songs and music videos produced throughout the 1980s.

Hanging out at the Village Green: The Fifties and Sixties in Public Memory

Public memory, as it has been defined in academic writing, refers to a vast network of statements – political speeches, press articles, films, monuments, television programmes, art works, songs, for example – that contribute to debates and conflicts on the past. The terms “collective,” “cultural,” and “public” memory have been mobilised by scholars in reference to this phenomenon. While their subject matter is diverse, they nevertheless share an approach to public memory that emphasises its dialogic nature. Marita Sturken, Daniel Marcus and George Lipsitz conceive memory as, in Sturken’s words, a “field of negotiation” and an “active, engaging process of making meaning.” To study memory, in these accounts, is to study conflict, negotiation and contradiction. There is no singular interpretation of the past but, rather, a host of competing voices vying to make themselves heard. Lipsitz calls for popular music to be treated as “part of historical memory and continuing social dialogue.” Much of his analysis revolves around issues pertaining to minority groups, in particular Mexican American musicians in Los Angeles, and how they adopt and appropriate elements from their own cultural histories in order to create challenging “counter narratives” to the (white, Anglophone) mainstream. And while commercial forces impacting upon the production of popular music – coupled with Joel’s reticence to take any particularly controversial, political standpoint – very much differentiate this mass-selling artist from those

of Lipsitz's study, Joel's response to broader social dialogue is also, given the context into which they emerged, of ideological import. His music emerged into a public sphere where the "meaning" of the past was subject to conflict and contestation.

Marcus highlights the power relationships that characterise the production and dissemination of public memory. The "ability of a group to establish its memory as a widely held 'public memory' is a key act of social power." Furthermore, "By establishing its memory as relevant to the wider polity, a group succeeds in placing its interests on the national agenda." A variety of groups and institutions can promote, validate and/or discredit any particular memory. Memory can therefore be viewed as a struggle for prominence and legitimacy. In Michel Foucault's terms (and Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* is clearly an influence on the above-noted work) public memory can be conceived as network of "discursive formations." These webs of discourse serve both as forums within which conflict and contestation takes place, and as a kind of epistemological police, shaping both the production and the reception of any given statement.

Certainly, when it came to remembering the Fifties and Sixties, a prominent set of motifs and narratives dominated. In many ways Joel was capitalizing on iconography already in wide circulation during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, his first engagement with the recent American past appeared at the same time as an intensified debate over the Fifties and the Sixties ravaged the American public sphere. Throughout the 1970s, there had already been a "nostalgia boom" in which the Fifties took centre stage. Pop groups such as Sha Na Na parodied Fifties-style rock and roll, while films and television programmes like *American Graffiti*, *Happy Days* (1974-1984) and *Grease* presented Technicolor reminiscences of growing up in small-town Fifties America. They helped to establish the iconography that

would come to define much Fifties commemoration: white middle class nuclear families, high-school proms, diners, greasers etc. Note here the slipperiness with which the Fifties are discussed. Films such as *Graffiti* (actually set in 1962) were bundled in with the Fifties. Indeed, in popular accounts at least, the Sixties are often understood to have begun post-1963. As the trailer to the 1979 film *The Wanderers* put it: “We know now that the Fifties ended in 1963.” The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963, the arrival of the Beatles – and the youthful uproar that greeted them – in 1964 and the growth of student protest and the anti-war movement are often stated as symbolic catalysts of the “turbulent sixties.”

As the 1970s came to a close, remembering the Fifties and Sixties became an increasingly ideological endeavour. In his book *Decade of Nightmares*, Philip Jenkins argues that from 1975 onward appeared an ever-growing number of diatribes against the political and social transformations of the Sixties. Conservative commentators and New Right Groups such as the Moral Majority and Heritage Foundation launched assaults on increased “permissiveness” with regards to sexual freedoms and drug use; attacks on the liberalised penal system and Great Society welfare programs begun under the 1960s Johnson administration; and laments that a combination of hippies, anti-war protestors, liberal politicians and journalists had somehow lost the war in Vietnam and left America standing as impotent giant against the “Soviet Menace.” In the public sphere, Jenkins goes so far as to say that the decade post-1975 constitutes an “anti-sixties.”

With the Sixties increasingly set-up as scapegoat for many of the nation’s contemporaneous (late 1970s and early 80s) ailments, conservatives needed to juxtapose this era with a more pleasant memory, a halcyon one of political, economic and moral stability. In

the Fifties they found just such a touchstone. The Fifties, which stretched to include the early 1960s, became for conservative commentators, a time of economic prosperity and moral stability. The “turbulent” Sixties, boiled down essentially to prominent events of the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s, were said to have sent America on an apocalyptic descent into moral decrepitude, familial disintegration and overall, national breakdown. On the other side of the political spectrum, the liberal or progressive reading suggested the Fifties to be a period of political and social oppression. The Sixties in this account was thus a necessary antidote to years of oppressive social and moral mores. Although ideologically complex and open to various readings, liberal and conservative, a number of 1970s and 1980s films at least gestured toward this reading: *Coming Home* (1977), *Four Friends* (1981), *Platoon* (1986), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) for example. Certainly, a number of critics and scholars have read such productions as having offered a critical, if not unequivocally progressive, challenge to “Reaganite” viewpoints present in the public domain.

Against this politicised backdrop Joel’s success and celebrity was on the ascendant. His first prominent representation of the recent past supported the conservatives’ glamorising of the Fifties and demonization of the Sixties. Though he had enjoyed success in the early 1970s with his single “Piano Man” (1973), a wry take on the life and acquaintances of a bar-room musician, it was the release of his multi-million selling album *The Stranger* (1977) that propelled him into fully fledged rock stardom. On this album appeared the song “Scenes from an Italian Restaurant.” Jumping from elegiac ballad to upbeat rock and roll “Scenes” is a chronicle of the transition from teenager to adult. It begins with Joel singing from a first person perspective: “A bottle of white, a bottle of red...I’ll meet you any time you want, in our Italian restaurant.” At this stage the piano accompaniment is the kind of saccharine tune one associates with a romantic encounter in a film. The opening refrain appears to be Joel

awaiting an old acquaintance. They will get a table “at [their] old familiar place” and, as the song will later attest, relive old times. With its focus on characters reminiscing about growing up in the Fifties and Sixties, “Scenes” presaged what would become an increasingly prominent trope in films and television programmes in subsequent years (*The Big Chill* (1983) and *thirtysomething* (1987-1991), for instance). Like these visual representations, Joel provides an elegy to the recent past, while at the same time allowing his characters to reject it in favour of a comfortable middle-aged, middle-class existence. He pounds the piano, while the lyrics affirm: “things are ok with me these days.” In seven short lines he and his acquaintance dash through initial pleasantries. “I’ve got a new wife, I’ve got a new life... You lost weight, I did not know.” With the small talk quickly dispensed with the song moves into reminiscing. It maintains its upbeat tone and asks: “Do you remember those days hanging out at the village green, engineer boots, leather jackets and tight blue jeans.” These initial lines are interspersed with the occasional flamboyant clarinet riff, which adds to the sense of optimism and excitement with which this cliché Fifties is depicted. After a lengthy instrumental we are introduced to the song’s emotional core: Brenda and Eddie. The young couple’s exploits are accompanied by a Jerry Lee Lewis-like piano rhythm; we hear that they were “the king and the queen of the prom.” Conjuring images of diners, convertibles and rock and roll music, the song presents a catalogue of standard Fifties paraphernalia. And, finally, as if to accentuate the sense of naïve optimism by which he defines the era: “Surely Brenda and Eddie would always know how to survive.” Music and lyrics intersect; Fifties rock and roll and fifties youth come to symbolise upbeat innocence.

After the teenage hijinks comes the serious relationship; which is cemented, but also concluded in the summer of 1975. The couple seemed to be living the dream, buying their own apartment and decking it with middle-class consumables (“a couple of paintings from

Sears”). Brenda and Eddie get married in July 1975, but, soon after, split up. Financial woes and the loss of their old optimism tear them apart. They “got a divorce as a matter of course, and parted the closest of friends.” Joel was here tapping one prominent concern bedeviling politically conservative commentators in the 1970s. Divorce rates had spiralled since the early 1970s. In 1958, there were approximately four marriages for every divorce; by 1976, this had fallen to two marriages for every divorce. Conservatives believed that the feminist movement’s attack on “traditional” gender roles and the patriarchal family unit as well as the increased number of women entering the workforce (and thus gaining economic independence) were the cause of this escalation. Joel seems to lament this development and, in line with conservative discourse, longs for Fifties “innocence.” A concluding verse of the Brenda and Eddie saga sees the “king and the queen” attempt to return to the “[village] green” of their youth. But, as Joel declares, they “couldn’t go back to the greasers, best they could do was pick up their pieces.” The Fifties become a lost golden age, one that can never be relived. A final return to the plaintive melody with which “Scenes” began only reinforces the sense that no amount of reminiscing can bring back, in Joel’s words, his “sweet romantic teenage nights.”

At the same time as this song’s appearance, images from the Fifties accompanied public discussion of Joel’s personal life. His adolescence spent in Levittown, Long Island, was a frequent talking point. While Joel’s upbringing was not exactly representative of the stereotypical suburban nuclear family, he was the son of German Jewish immigrants and his father left when he was seven, memories of a *Happy Days*-like adolescence could nevertheless be found in interviews with the singer. One 1977 interview in the *New York Times* began: “living in Levittown... was like walking through an episode of *Happy Days*.” The singer informs us that he “was in a gang.... I would cut school, smoke cigarettes and

play handball all day.” Joel’s public persona was associated with a positive version of the Fifties – one defined by optimism and childlike innocence. Themes of innocence and experience continue to pervade his work into the 1980s, when personal experiences began to be recalled alongside events of national consequence.

JFK blown away: Joel’s Fifties and Sixties in the 1980s

The rise to prominence of the music video, especially after the introduction of MTV in 1981, allowed Joel to literally, visually place himself upon a historical canvas that went beyond his own youth. Videos to songs like “The Longest Time” (1984) continued in the vein of “Scenes from an Italian Restaurant” and glamorised the Fifties. The Musicologist Walter Everett suggests that this song, which appeared on the album *An Innocent Man* (1983), pastiches the style of early 1960s soul vocalists such as The Tymes and Betty Everett. Indeed, the entire *Innocent Man* album was promoted as Joel paying homage to favourite acts of his adolescence. (Note the use of the word “Innocent” in the title, once again suggesting the musician’s insistence that this was somehow a more naïve and innocent age).

The video that accompanied “The Longest Time” featured Joel attending a high-school reunion for the “Class of ’59.” Grey haired and jaded, the singer sits slouched amongst after-reunion debris of empty glasses and paper plates. The sound of harmonising vocals suddenly wafts into earshot. Dulcet tenors gently reverberate against the ever-present bass vocal. The sound itself connotes an idealistic vision of Fifties youths (the tenors) creatively expressing themselves, but always guided by the stern authority figure (the bass vocal). It is the sound of wholesome, strictly supervised, recreation. Four middle-aged men walk into the room, crooning, snapping their fingers and waiting for their leader. “If you say good bye to

me tonight, there would still be music left to write” – the song commences. Joel leads his posse of backing vocalists on walkabout around their old high school. Two minutes into the video and a temporal glitch occurs. The aging crooners suddenly become their old teenage selves. It is as if being back at the school and singing this old Fifties-style music has managed to transport them back to happier times. The remainder of the video sees a constant switching between old men and youths. Aging is eventually rendered irrelevant as even their older selves begin acting like teenage boys, drawing on the blackboard and playing with classroom study aids.

Only one character in this video does not morph into his younger self. Joel and fellow man-boys are observed throughout the video by an African-American janitor. He watches from the periphery and is not offered the chance to relive his youth. At the video’s conclusion each of the singers exits the changing room and rather patronisingly ruffles the janitor’s shirt or squeezes his face. The video’s latent racism sees the janitor become a figure of fun for the white singers (and seemingly he even enjoys it). Joel is once again playing into the hands of conservative Fifties nostalgia, erasing memories of racial injustice and instead painting the era as one of fun and frolics for blacks and whites alike. He is also following one prominent trend in 1980s music video. Andrew Goodwin notes that African-Americans frequently featured in videos accompanying the songs of white rock bands. Black pleasure was incorporated into numerous videos “as a sign of authenticity,” providing these acts with a cultural legitimacy and hipness. Thus acts such as The Police, John Cougar Mellencamp and Madonna had black spectators prominently featured in their videos. Joel himself often included black characters in his videos. Perhaps the most absurd example can be found in “Uptown Girl” (1983). The setting is an imaginary garage called Downtown Motors. In Frankie Valli-style vocals, he pays homage to his uptown girl (who, in the video, turns out to

be his then wife Christie Brinkley). Amongst the ultra-camp choreography of Joel and backing singers prancing about and polishing cars in time with the beat, appear out of nowhere two black men. They proceed to body-pop to Joel's "Woah oh oh" introduction to the final verse. For a few brief seconds, "Uptown Girl" strives to associate itself with what was, for many, the height of urban cool.

If African-American characters are briefly portrayed in "The Longest Time" and "Uptown Girl," they become central in the video to "Tell Her About It." Here, Joel's music is promoted as bridging racial divides. The song does not include any historical references. It does, however, as Everett notes, hark back to Motown groups such as The Four Tops and The Supremes. The accompanying video is very deliberately historicized. It is a send-up of the *Ed Sullivan Show* and dated to the year 1963. We are treated to a live performance of Joel's imaginary 60s soul band BJ and the Affordables. Bestowing upon Joel the same status often attributed to early 1960s soul and Motown acts, the video presents the singer as an agent of social change. The video begins with a caption: "July 31, 1963." It then cuts to an Ed Sullivan lookalike introducing Joel's act. The date and setting are significant. July 31, 1963, is less than a month before the mass civil rights march on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. Given the video's engagement with race this is a significant historical signpost. In public memory, King's speech marks the high point of the early civil rights movement; a period of supreme confidence and optimism before the movement began to split into more radical factions and inner city uprisings. As a number of scholars of the civil rights movement have pointed out, King in public memory is frequently "frozen in time" at I have a Dream. The later 1960s King, whose politics become more radicalised and who fought for racial equality in the North, not to mention his increasingly anti-imperialist, anti-Vietnam War views have been lost in this obsession with his most famous speech.

Joel is thus locating events of his video squarely within the “good” 1960s – a last gasp of optimism before America choked under a deluge of radical protest and activism. This is further signified through the fact that in terms of dates, this show is historically located as one of the final episodes of *Ed Sullivan* season sixteen. Season seventeen would subsequently bring the four performances of the Beatles and another popularly remembered turning point in rock and roll and even social history. In this video, Joel is about to make history. He leaps up onto the stage, sings, swings and brings people together. Young blacks and whites dance to the same tune, suggesting the first signs of an emerging cross-racial unity. The video begins in a television studio populated by an audience of white youths. It then fades out to various romantic trysts, lovers’ squabbles and friendly banter, all the while jumping between all white and all black audiences. Joel’s music is presented as a unifying force. It even stretches beyond American race relations to encompass international solidarity. Toward the end of the video, a Soviet Cosmonaut can be seen jiving to the song in his space capsule. “Tell Her About It” becomes a palliative to racial and Cold War conflict. At the song’s conclusion Joel exits the stage to cheers and the next act is announced. A stuffy looking comedian stands at stage side waiting for his name to be called, but his moment never comes. The starched suited era has come to an end.

“Tell Her About It’s” historical setting of July 1963 was significant for one more reason. It located the video’s action a few months before what would be looked back upon as a monumental event of national importance – the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963. In his book *JFK: History of an Image*, Thomas Brown points out that although many historians, and especially since the early 1970s, had debunked the “Camelot” version of JFK’s presidency as a golden era, public sentiment remained “placidly unaffected”

by this revisionism. His death was generally discussed as having been a monumental rupture in American history – a “loss of national innocence” for a country that would, in its wake, descend into the upheavals and transformations of the Sixties. As seemed to be de facto amongst prominent public spokespeople in the 1980s, Billy Joel got his opportunity to air his views on the assassination and the significance this had for America. On 22 November 1988, CBS ran a documentary in aid of the assassination’s 25th anniversary. Joel was interviewed and observed “we were never really kids after that. Life just wasn’t Mickey Mouse, rock and roll and shiny cars. It was different, everything was different after that.” The “we” of Joel’s comment was the baby boomers. Strictly speaking a baby boomer is anyone born between 1946 and 1964. By the 1980s there were some 78 million baby boomers alive in America, thus constituting a sizable section of the adult population. Joel was here positioning himself as a spokesman, a kind of “every baby-boomer” figure made clear in this quote through his use of the word “we” as opposed to “I.”

The following year, he released what would be described by many commentators as an anthem for the baby-boomers: “We Didn’t Start the Fire”, which took the form of a list of events from 1949-1989, put to a beat and accompanied by the eponymous refrain. Unlike songs from *An Innocent Man*, there is no attempt to explicitly pastiche musical styles of the Fifties or Sixties. The sound is very much of its time, incorporating sturdy electric guitar riffs and synthesisers. In the accompanying video, a new Billy Joel persona appears. This time he is not an active agent, as he was portrayed in “Tell Her About It’s” video, but solemn observer to history. His all black suit, shades and haircut feel very much of the 1980s – a Huey Lewis-like chic – which adds to the sense that this time the singer is playing time traveller as opposed to participant. Special effects and jump cuts allow Joel to disappear and reappear like a ghost. He loiters unnoticed in various cliché historical households: from

happy fifties families to hippy sixties families to bourgeois eighties families. Occasionally he can be found sat in front of photographs that signify events of national importance, the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam War, for example.

The song spends one verse per year from 1949-1963. Famous figures and events of the 1950s are reeled off: “Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Studebaker, television.” Joel had claimed that this song was a response to a young man’s suggestion that the 1950s and 60s were uneventful (noted in the introduction) and the song is constructed very much like a vitriolic response. Interestingly though, even if this was Joel’s intention, through the song’s lyrical structure and in the music video he ends up consecrating the very narrative he sought to debunk. Large events may have happened in the 1950s and early 60s, but in this song they are well contained within a strict verse structure. This changes when Joel reaches the year 1963 and the line “JFK blown away, what else do I have to say.”

From here on in, the song speeds up. While the rhythm remains the same, everything from 1964 to 1989 takes place within the same extended verse. “Woodstock, Watergate, punk rock... Reagan, Palestine, terror on the airline” goes one short section, which seems to cover events from 1969 until 1980. The video’s visuals mirror this increased fragmentation as fire engulfs the screen to a greater and greater degree and rapid editing suggestive of a bad trip flashes us backward and forward in time. The video comes to an end with a 1980s family sat in a destroyed house surrounded by flames. In a few lines, Joel charts his late Sixties disaster narrative. Yet again, 1963 stands as a threshold into the turbulent and destructive Sixties. America descends into chaos and disillusionment; “I can’t take it any more” Joel concludes. Those that watched this video or even learnt the song in school would find a narrative of recent American history that progresses – not without its turbulence – but logically

nonetheless from the 1950s to the early 60s. But from 1964 onward, chaos ensues. If “Fire” charts America’s national breakdown in the Sixties, Joel offered another downfall narrative that focused upon psychological breakdown. It was one that engaged with a key debate of the 1980s: the legacy of the Vietnam War.

Joel and Vietnam

On Joel’s 1982 album, *The Nylon Curtain*, appear two songs that offer references to the Vietnam War. The first “Goodnight Saigon” chronicled the experiences of a soldier in Vietnam; the second “Allentown” focused upon the economic deprivation of an industrial town in Pennsylvania, while also gesturing toward the war and its impact upon those that fought. “Goodnight Saigon” was one of several 1980s popular songs that commemorated the Vietnam veteran. It appeared at a time of intensified public debate over Vietnam and its legacy for America. While it is impossible to demarcate periods of public debate with complete chronological specificity, the years following 1982’s construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. are particularly notable for a changed tone in discussion of the war and those that had fought in Vietnam. Debate increasingly shifted from a focus on the war’s morality toward a politics of “healing” as the veteran became a much-discussed figure in the public sphere.

“Goodnight Saigon” was part of a broader response from popular musicians to this shift in public debate. Songs such as the Charlie Daniels’s “Still in Saigon” (1982) Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” (1984) and Paul Hardcastle’s “Nineteen” (1985) were concerned with the war’s devastating effects on the lives of veterans. Joel made his intentions clear in interviews. He said that he had been against the war in the 1960s, but his new stance

was to make an apolitical statement. He commented in one interview that “whether it was right or wrong, they [Vietnam veterans] laid their asses on the line.” Or, as a line in “Saigon” put it “what was wrong, and what was right/ it didn’t matter in the thick of the fight.” In making such a statement Joel was distancing himself from the anti-war movement and the numerous rock and rollers that had explicitly protested the war in late 1960s and early 1970s. Just as significant was his attempt once again to chart America’s lost innocence. The soldiers begin as “soul mates on Parris Island” but end as “inmates from the asylum.” Like “We Didn’t Start the Fire” this song promotes a descent into chaos – in this case psychological chaos – in the Sixties. The war dashes the hopes and optimism of those that fought and of America in general.

In an essay on musical representations of Vietnam, David James criticises “Goodnight Saigon” for its failure to place the war in political context. Vietnam becomes not so much an immoral incursion into another country, or even a lens through which class inequalities can be observed (the working class are forced to fight while the middle class are able to avoid the draft). Rather, the problems of Vietnam are placed “in an overwrought imagination” with images derived “from a decade of cultural exploitation of deranged vets.” Certainly, its references to asylums, smoking hash-pipes and general mental degeneration are very much keeping with the crazy veteran that appeared in such films as *Welcome Home Soldier Boys* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and even Bruce Dern’s character in *Coming Home* (1977). Joel’s vocals at times seem to contribute toward a sense of psychological coming-apart. In particular his use of echo at the end of lines such as “it was dark, so dark at night-night-night-night-night” adds an unnatural, nightmarish quality to his first-person narration.

It would, however, be unfair to label Joel as entirely unconcerned with the politics of Vietnam. While “Goodnight Saigon” avoids political commentary, another song appearing on *The Nylon Curtain* “Allentown” does attempt to provide some form of economic critique, and, furthermore, in its accompanying music video, explicitly references Vietnam as part of a broader culture of class oppression. The song is a commentary on unemployment brought about by factory closures in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Its historical canvas stretches from World War II through the Sixties. It notes the rifts in values and aspirations between two generations: those that fought in WWII and their children, the baby-boomers. “We’re living here in Allentown,” it begins, “and they’re closing all the factories down.” Both the song and its accompanying video offer a portrayal of the ravages inflicted upon a community reliant upon the steelworks for their livelihoods. The video begins with post-war festivities; images of men returned from combat in Europe and the Pacific dancing with their sweethearts. But these images soon become a sepia freeze-frame and fade into another short vignette. This time it features a group of baby boom youths gathered around a car. One is dressed in army uniform, about to leave for Vietnam. Joel’s lyrics mirror this darkening mood with the song’s repeated refrain “it’s getting pretty hard to stay.” The following verse explains the double bind the baby-boom inhabitants face. At school they are filled with dreams “all the promises our teachers gave” while none of the education prepares them for the only career path open to them “iron and coke, chromium steel.” The only jobs in Allentown are in the factories, and the factories are closing down. While it is “getting pretty hard to stay”, escape also proves dangerous. In the video, the one character that does try to escape, to Vietnam, returns in a wheelchair. The lines that accompany this scene offer an indictment of government economic and Vietnam policy: “Every child had a pretty good shot, to get at least as far as their old man got, but something happened on the way to that place [Vietnam], they threw an American flag in our face.” The “they” of this quote can be no other than the system that sent working-

class young men to fight an unpopular war. In these lines Joel clearly moves away from the psychological focus of “Goodnight Saigon” and locates the war within a broader social and political context.

Indeed, while much of this article has highlighted the manner in which Joel’s music and videos intersect with conservative discourse regarding the Fifties and the Sixties, there are occasional anomalies. In “Leningrad” Joel again offers an – albeit brief – denunciation of the Vietnam War as part of a broader culture of communist paranoia instigated by official institutions. The song compares the singer’s childhood and adolescence to that of a Russian clown called Viktor, whom he met while performing in the Soviet Union in 1987. Joel describes his childhood brought up in a culture of communist paranoia “a cold war kid in McCarthy time.” Both American and Soviet governments are chastised for fostering international hatred; US communist-baiting leads to the Vietnam War, which is dismissed by Joel with the line “why’ve they gotta keep fighting for.” This time the war is located within a historical context whereby government propaganda leads to the death and suffering of Vietnam. Yet, even taking these more political offerings into account, Joel’s representation of the Sixties remains a “safe” one. Controversial events and movements of the late 1960s and 1970s – the feminist movement, the continued civil rights struggle, the anti-war movement – are carefully avoided. His is a populist Sixties; one defined more by opportunism and drawing on commemorative trends already in circulation than by any strident ideological critique.

Conclusion

In season ten, episode six of *The Simpsons* (1989-), Homer decides to become a hippie. His choice of “freak-out music” would undoubtedly surprise some. Billy Joel’s 1983 chart-topper “Uptown Girl” blares from the car stereo during his psychedelic jaunt around town. Yet, as I hope this article has gone some way to demonstrating, Homer’s cultural faux pas was speaking rather profoundly to notions of public memory in the American public sphere. As a multi-million selling artist, Joel was a prominent player in a debate that saw America publicly contesting its recent past. The Fifties and the Sixties became a crucible within which various political debates and conflicts were addressed. Songs like “Scenes”, “Fire”, “Goodnight Saigon” and “Tell Her About It”, offered conservative renditions of American history; others like “Allentown” and “Leningrad” approached the era from a liberal perspective, but still eschewed dealing with issues that might cause controversy.

By asking listeners and viewers if they “remember those days,” Billy Joel’s invitation to reminiscence came freighted with ideological import. Just like films and television programmes of the period, popular music produced narratives of the Fifties and Sixties, emphasising the immense political legacy of the recent American past. Future research might consider how other musicians and groups – Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, Public Enemy and Cyndi Lauper, to name but a few – contributed toward public political debates of the 1980s. In what ways do the historical narratives offered by these artists intersect with and digress from broader political and cultural currents? More than just meaningless, empty nostalgia, popular music’s portrayal of history can shed new light on the complexities that pervade public memory at any single point in time. It would seem to me just as important to examine performers who, like Joel, have not received the same critical/scholarly attention and approbation as his more “worthy” contemporaries (Springsteen and Madonna especially). Joel enjoyed several multi-million selling albums, and appeared frequently in various media

outlets. Clearly, whatever one may think of a song or music video's quality, it can still tell us a great deal about the ways in which the past was and is communicated to different audiences. Throughout the 1980s, Joel and a host of other popular musicians presented a range of Fifties and Sixties narratives, which resonated within the American public sphere. In lyrics, videos, and by sheer force of personality, they left an imprint on public memory of this most contested of eras.