Original Intent

When I began my research on the impact of the Vietnam conflict on the music of jazz and Motown, I expected some fairly straightforward results. As a high school history teacher, I already spend a substantial amount of time on the protest music of the Vietnam era with my students, and I have a long list of songs that I use in class for this purpose. However, most of these songs are of the folk and pop variety. My goal with this project was to seek out examples of jazz and Motown songs and add them to my teaching materials. What I found was something quite different.

The Surprise

I was immediately struck by the fact that a simple Google search on the subject yielded very little. Again, lists of pop and folk songs relating to Vietnam were endless, but surprisingly, jazz and Motown seemed mysteriously underrepresented. Of course there were the expected finds: Edwin Starr’s “War” (1970), Stevie Wonder’s “Heaven Help Us All” (1970) and Marvin Gaye’s epic “What’s Going On” (1971). Further research yielded some other works that were a little more obscure. Dave Brubeck’s “Truth is Fallen” (1971) and Revolutionary Ensemble’s first official release, *Vietnam 1 & 2*, are both works that could easily be used to inspire class discussion on this topic. But the more that I searched, the deeper that I dug, I couldn’t help but wonder why more Vietnam material was not produced in terms of jazz and Motown music.
The Choice

My research had arrived at a crossroads. I could move on and accept that many jazz and Motown artists, for one reason or another, had simply been mute on the issue. After all, the civil rights struggle was still at the forefront throughout much of the Vietnam era. Maybe African American artists—heavily represented in the world of jazz and Motown—were simply too immersed in this battle at home to worry much about what was going on in Southeast Asia. My other choice was to assume that the influence of Vietnam must have been represented in the music, but that it was more subtle than direct. My decision to pursue this latter course was spurred by a statement that Dr. Early made one day in a lecture. Professor Early said, “Between 1959 and 1964, Americans were thinking that everything would be OK. Then, the country suffered a nervous breakdown.”

This statement struck me as both accurate and puzzling. After all, between 1959 and 1964, America was experiencing substantial change—politically, culturally, socially and economically. And yet throughout this period, we did not see massive protests from coast to coast. We did not see our cities burning. We did not see the sense of disillusionment that would soon blanket the nation, touching most every demographic, making even traditionally peaceful quarters of American society demand change. So what was responsible for this change, this “nervous breakdown”?

An Assumption: Vietnam as the Culprit

I believe that the answer to this question was the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam. This assertion is debatable. One could argue that economic conditions were the primary factor that drove national unrest. By 1964, unemployment hovered at around 6%, and by 1968, inflation
was at 4.7%. One could also argue that racial issues were the catalyst of the discontent that we started to see in 1964. After all, court rulings and civil rights legislation had offered great hope to African Americans, but that hope was far from becoming tangible reality by this time. This was in direct conflict with the fact that many white Americans were resisting these changes, and racial tensions were certainly on the rise by 1964. Though I recognize that those are all valid points, I believe that a close examination of this period of American history reveals that the conflict in Vietnam was at the heart of the unrest that began to boil over as we progressed into the late 1960s.

We know that our escalation in Vietnam had a devastating impact, in relative terms, on the African American community. We can see it in comparisons between the economic conditions in white America in the 1960s, and those same numbers in black America (both wages and unemployment were much worse for black Americans) as the war in Vietnam escalated. We can also observe it in the percentage of Americans serving in combat in Vietnam (as a percentage, substantially greater for Americans of color).

Marvin Gaye wrote poignantly about all of the aforementioned in his LP classic, *What's Going On*. This entire album was inspired by the return of Gaye's brother from Vietnam, and one will be hard pressed to find any other work that speaks so succinctly on this subject. The war is a narrative thread woven throughout the album, most obviously on the title track, but also in the camaraderie sob-song of "What's Happening Brother," in which Gaye assumes the role of a Vietnam veteran returning home and asking an old friend where the scene is, as the man's disconnect from American pop culture has left him feeling displaced. What made this album so unique in 1971 and what makes it so unique today, however, was how directly this work, produced by the Motown label, addressed the conflict. You will find nothing else like it in the
music of Motown and jazz. And yet to accept that Motown and jazz artists were not writing about and/or performing songs that addressed the Vietnam conflict is simply too strange to believe.

Looking for Vietnam in the Works of Coltrane

Having failed to find a substantial number of jazz and Motown works that directly addressed the war, I decided to look for more indirect evidence. For instance, did the artists of the day have much to say about the influence of the Vietnam conflict on their writing and/or performance? Interviews, memoirs and autobiographies seemed like a good place to start, but the evidence here was scant as well. The most pertinent evidence that I could find was Franke Kofsky’s interview with jazz legend John Coltrane in 1967. When asked about the war, Coltrane was elusive, responding, “Well I dislike war—period. So, therefore, as far as I’m concerned, it should stop, it should have already been stopped. And any other war. Now as far as the issues behind it, I don’t understand them well enough to tell you how this should be brought about.”

When Kofsky pressed Coltrane on how much his work was impacted by the war and social issues, he was coy again, saying, “I feel that for me, as a musician, this is the primary thing—the music. If you want to, let’s say, dedicate some time to discussing social problems, I feel that it’s a different category, even though it’s all related, but it’s still a different category, it’s a different subject.” So Coltrane practically denies being artistically impacted by the very war that by 1967 had already produced over 12,000 casualties. So did any of John Coltrane’s work address social issues?

The answer to this question is a resounding yes. By 1963, Coltrane had openly taken notice of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, in 1964, Coltrane played eight benefit concerts in
support of Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement. He wrote a number of songs dedicated to the cause, and his song “Alabama,” was based directly on the Birmingham Church bombing of 1963 where four little girls were killed at the hands of white supremacists. So in conclusion regarding artistic influence on Coltrane: Vietnam…no. Civil Rights…yes.

**Synapses: Connecting Vietnam to Civil Rights and Black Nationalism**

Any astute observer of the social sciences will tell you that studying specific areas of the discipline in isolation presents real problems. For instance, simply writing about American economic affairs without taking into account political, cultural, and even environmental factors will no doubt leave you with a very incomplete picture.

It was at this point in my research that I came across a fascinating speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. Today the speech is often referred to as his “Vietnam speech” or sometimes listed as “A Time to Break the Silence.” It was delivered to a congregation at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, and it represented a major evolution in King’s philosophy and goals regarding civil rights. It also gives us some real clues on how to reach some conclusions about the artistic impact of the Vietnam conflict on the music of jazz and Motown, and on black artists in particular.

By the mid-1960s, King had begun to move toward the political left. This speech is an excellent snapshot of this evolving strategy. In it, he said there was little purpose in being allowed to eat in a restaurant if you had no money to pay for a hamburger. He urged a radical redistribution of wealth and political power in the United States in order to provide medical care, jobs, and education for all of the country's people. And he spoke of the need for a second "March on Washington" by "waves of the nation's poor and disinherited," who would "stay until America
responds ... [with] positive action." The time had come for radical measures "to provide jobs and income for the poor." Most importantly for my research purposes, King denounced the Vietnam War as "an enemy of the poor," and described the United States as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," and predicted that "the bombs that [Americans] are dropping in Vietnam will explode at home in inflation and unemployment." Though this speech is the most well known on the subject, it was not the first time, nor would it be the last where King linked Vietnam directly to racial inequality and the Civil Rights Movement.

This contention that African Americans were negatively impacted at a disproportionate rate by the war in Vietnam was actually not new. Almost from the beginning of America’s involvement in Vietnam, Malcolm X had linked the conflict in Southeast Asia to racial inequality and the battle for equal rights here at home on numerous occasions. For the most part, his arguments centered on the assertion that more poor African Americans were being sent to Vietnam than their white counterparts. In addition, he pointed to the negative impact of the war on the economy, and how that also impacted black Americans more than white Americans. Malcolm and other black nationalists also drew direct parallels between the colonial domination of the continent of Africa, and America’s prolonged military presence in Vietnam. So neither King nor Malcolm X saw Vietnam and racial injustice as separate issues. Increasingly, they saw them as one and the same. The more that I read, the more I began to agree with them.

In Conclusion

From the beginning of my quest, my mistake had been to try and solely examine the impact of the conflict in Vietnam on the music of jazz and Motown artists. This is a common error in the world of social science research. We like to focus on one very specific topic at a
time. We are often taught to carefully define the boundaries and then, like a laser, we focus on
the minutia of that narrow search. In this case, the folly of examining the artistic impact of
Vietnam, separate from the artistic impact of other social—particularly racial—issues, became
more and more obvious as I recognized that civil rights leaders and black nationalists were
increasingly linking the two issues. Once this connection is established, one can argue (I do
anyway) that themes in the music of jazz and Motown that relate to racial inequality, civil rights,
and black nationalism often carry a dual meaning and implicitly address the Vietnam conflict as
well. Thankfully, finding themes of the former is much easier than uncovering themes of the
latter, and in the end, they really reveal each other.

Ben Gracey
Jersey Community High School
801 N. State St.
Jerseyville, IL 62052