



**TOURO COLLEGE**  
JACOB D. FUCHSBERG LAW CENTER  
*Where Knowledge and Values Meet*

**Touro Law Review**

---

Volume 32  
Number 1 *Symposium: Billy Joel & the Law*

Article 5

---

April 2016

## **Goodnight Saigon: Billy Joel's Musical Epitaph to the Vietnam War**

Morgan Jones

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.tourolaw.edu/lawreview>



Part of the [Law Commons](#), and the [Other Music Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Jones, Morgan (2016) "Goodnight Saigon: Billy Joel's Musical Epitaph to the Vietnam War," *Touro Law Review*. Vol. 32 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tourolaw.edu/lawreview/vol32/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Touro Law Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Touro Law Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Touro Law Center. For more information, please contact [lross@tourolaw.edu](mailto:lross@tourolaw.edu).

## GOODNIGHT SAIGON: BILLY JOEL'S MUSICAL EPITAPH TO THE VIETNAM WAR

*Morgan Jones\**

Billy Joel adopted new *personae* and took on new roles in several songs on both 1982's *The Nylon Curtain*<sup>1</sup> and his penultimate studio album to date, 1989's *Storm Front*.<sup>2</sup> In what some have seen as an attempt to reach a more adult audience, to "move pop/rock into the middle age and, in the process, earn critical respect,"<sup>3</sup> Joel put on new hats (literally, at times: his fedora-wearing balladeer appears prominently in the video for "Allentown") for "Allentown" and "The Downeaster 'Alexa,'" "Pressure" and "We Didn't Start the Fire," and "Goodnight Saigon" and "Leningrad."<sup>4</sup> Each of these pairs of songs saw Joel endeavoring to make statements about issues that were bigger than he and his own life, which was in stark contrast to his sources of inspiration for his earlier, more self-centered albums. In the first pair, he tackled failing industries and the hard-working people who have suffered as a result of government indifference and struggling economies: first, the steel workers of Pennsylvania in "Allentown," and then, closer to home, Long Island fishermen in "The Downeaster 'Alexa'." The middle pair addressed social and

---

\* Originally hailing from northern Canada, Dr. Morgan Jones holds a PhD in Musicology from the University of Western Ontario. His dissertation, entitled "The Other Sides of Billy Joel: Six Case Studies Revealing the Sociologist, the Balladeer, and the Historian," is one of the first works of serious research on the music of Billy Joel. Dr. Jones currently teaches music at Waterford Kamhlaba United World College in Mbabane, Swaziland, while he continues his research on Joel's extensive catalogue of songs.

<sup>1</sup> BILLY JOEL, *THE NYLON CURTAIN* (Columbia Records 1982).

<sup>2</sup> BILLY JOEL, *STORM FRONT* (Columbia Records 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Thomas Erlewine, *AllMusic Review*, ALLMUSIC, <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:h9fexq951d0e> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> BILLY JOEL, *Allentown*, on *THE NYLON CURTAIN* (Columbia Records 1982); BILLY JOEL, *The Downeaster 'Alexa'*, on *STORM FRONT* (Columbia Records 1989); BILLY JOEL, *Pressure*, on *THE NYLON CURTAIN* (Columbia Records 1982); BILLY JOEL, *We Didn't Start the Fire*, on *STORM FRONT* (Columbia Records 1989); BILLY JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, on *THE NYLON CURTAIN* (Columbia Records 1982); BILLY JOEL, *Leningrad*, on *STORM FRONT* (Columbia Records 1989).

cultural issues, while in the final pair, Joel engaged with the two great American wars of his lifetime, the Vietnam War and the Cold War. Following the same pattern as “Allentown” and “Alexa,” Joel treated what was for him the less-familiar topic of the Vietnam War first; while he had first-hand experience with the effects of the Cold War (indeed, “Leningrad” is autobiographical), Joel never actually served in Vietnam. “Goodnight Saigon” remains, however, one of his most emotionally charged and enduring works. An examination of this song will illuminate how Joel’s lyrics and music combined to produce perhaps “the ultimate pop-music epitaph to the Vietnam War.”<sup>5</sup>

Joel actually arrived on the scene of war-related music fairly late. From the beginning of the war, artists in North America and the United Kingdom produced innumerable songs related to the Vietnam War in some way, or the hostile atmosphere that the war and subsequent peace protests and anti-war rallies produced. These songs seem to fall into five categories: songs that promote peace in a general manner; anti-war protest songs; pro-war rallying songs; songs that deal with more specific themes, such as the effects of the war on soldiers on the front or back at home; and songs written after the end of the war in 1973. The first category includes songs such as John Lennon’s “Give Peace a Chance” (1969) and “Happy Xmas (War is Over)” (1971) and Bob Dylan’s “Blowing in the Wind,” which became an anthem for peace and American withdrawal from Southeast Asia despite its release prior to the official American involvement in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> Although songs such as these were clearly inspired by increasing tensions and, subsequently, the escalation that led to the Vietnam War, they tend to take a less aggressive approach to protest than do their close relations, the anti-war protest songs. Songs in this category include Eric Burdon & The Animals’ “Sky Pilot,” Chicago’s epic “It Better End Soon,” Edwin Starr’s 1970 number one hit, “War!” and Country Joe and The Fish’s satirical and disturbing, “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag.”<sup>7</sup> These songs often

---

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Holden, *The Nylon Curtain Album Review*, ROLLING STONE (October 14, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> JOHN LENNON, GIVE PEACE A CHANCE (Apple Records 1969); JOHN LENNON, HAPPY XMAS (WAR IS OVER) (Apple Records 1971); BOB DYLAN, *Blowing in the Wind*, on THE FREEWHEELIN’ BOB DYLAN (Columbia Records 1963).

<sup>7</sup> ERIC BURDON AND THE ANIMALS, *Sky Pilot*, on THE TWAIN SHALL MEET (MGM 1968); CHICAGO, *It Better End Soon*, on CHICAGO (Columbia Records 1970); EDWIN STARR, *War!*, on WAR & PEACE (Motown Records 1970); COUNTRY JOE AND THE FISH, *I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag*, on RAG BABY TALKING ISSUE NO. 1 (Vanguard 1965).

contain shocking and inflammatory lyrics, or treat difficult themes and discomfoting concepts. For example, in “Sky Pilot,” a war chaplain blesses fighter pilots, knowing full well the futility of his job: “He mumbles a prayer and it ends with a smile . . . but it won’t stop the bleeding or ease the hate.”<sup>8</sup> He also shows an awareness of the devastating irony inherent in what he is required to do: “In the morning they returned with tears in their eyes/ The stench of death drifts up to the skies/ A young soldier so ill looks at the Sky Pilot/ Remembers the words ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”<sup>9</sup> “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag” takes a more aggressive approach with lyrics such as “Well there ain’t no time to wonder why/ Whoopee! We’re all gonna die,” or “Come on fathers and don’t hesitate/ To send your sons off before it’s too late/ And you can be the first ones in your block/ To have your boy come home in a box.”<sup>10</sup>

The other side of the anti-war song category is the pro-war rallying song. This can take the form of songs that support the army in general, such as “The Ballad of the Green Berets,” by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler, which charted at number one in February of 1966, or songs that respond directly to war protesters, like Merle Haggard’s “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” which also peaked at number one in February of 1970.<sup>11</sup> Sadler’s paean to the Green Berets is the subtler of these two songs. While it heralds the bravery and dedication of the Green Berets (“Fighting soldiers from the sky, fearless men who jump and die/ Men who mean just what they say/ The brave men of the Green Beret”), it never alludes to, or mentions directly, the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup> Haggard, on the other hand, had no time for anyone who might criticize the American government or protest the war: “If you don’t love it, leave it;/ Let this song I’m singin’ be a warnin.’/ If you’re runnin’ down my country, man,/ You’re walkin’ on the fightin’ side of me.”<sup>13</sup> This type of war song was quite popular in the United States during the war, although Sadler only scored one more top thirty hit in his short recording career (“The A-Team,” 1966). Haggard’s music, in particular, seemed to resonate

---

<sup>8</sup> ERIC BURDON AND THE ANIMALS, *supra* note 7.

<sup>9</sup> ERIC BURDON AND THE ANIMALS, *supra* note 7.

<sup>10</sup> COUNTRY JOE AND THE FISH, *supra* note 7.

<sup>11</sup> STAFF SGT. BARRY SADLER, *The Ballad of the Green Berets*, on BALLADS OF THE GREEN BERETS (RCA Victor 1966); MERLE HAGGARD, *The Fightin’ Side of Me*, on THE FIGHTIN’ SIDE OF ME (Capitol Records 1970).

<sup>12</sup> SADLER, *supra* note 11.

<sup>13</sup> HAGGARD, *supra* note 11.

with the conservative element in the United States (his previous hit, “Okie from Muskogee,” also charted at number one).<sup>14</sup> Country artists such as Haggard have traditionally supported American wars, a trend that has continued today with songs such as Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning?),” released a mere six weeks after the attacks of September 11, 2001, “American Soldier,” by Toby Keith (“When liberty’s in jeopardy, I will always do what’s right/ I’m out here on the front lines,/ sleep in peace tonight.”), and the unfortunately-titled “I Raq and Roll,” a fervently pro-military song by Clint Black.<sup>15</sup> Black makes his opinion about American protests of the war in Iraq, which have often been compared to those during the Vietnam War, abundantly clear:

Now you can come along  
Or you can stay behind  
Or you can get out of the way  
But our troops take out the garbage  
For the good old U.S.A.<sup>16</sup>

This sentiment is remarkably similar to Haggard’s, a thinly veiled threat to anyone who gets in the way of American aggression, whether he or she is a Viet Cong, Iraqi insurgent, or even an American citizen.

The fourth category has provided some of the most haunting songs regarding the effects of the Vietnam War. Some songs, such as Glen Campbell’s 1969 hit, “Galveston,” and “To Susan on the West Coast Waiting,” a minor hit for Donovan in the same year, addressed the issue of soldiers with families back at home.<sup>17</sup> Many American men, keen to sign up for the war, discovered, in the harsh realities of Southeast Asia, that war was not as glorious as they had initially hoped it would be. Donovan’s narrator, a soldier in Vietnam (who, it appears, was a draftee, not a volunteer), writes a letter home to Susan: “I’m writing a note beneath a tree/ The smell of the rain on the

---

<sup>14</sup> *Top 40 Hits in 1966*, RETRO HITS, <http://retro-hits.com/1966.htm> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016); Stephen Thomas Erlewine, *Merle Haggard Artist Biography*, BILLBOARD, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/310586/merle-haggard/biography> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> ALAN JACKSON, *Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning?)*, on DRIVE (Arista Nashville 2002); TOBY KEITH, *American Soldier*, on SHOCK’N Y’ALL (DreamWorks 2003); CLINT BLACK, I RAQ AND ROLL (Equity Music Group 2003).

<sup>16</sup> BLACK, *supra* note 15.

<sup>17</sup> GLEN CAMPBELL, *Galveston*, on GALVESTON (Capitol Records 1969); DONOVAN, *To Susan on the West Coast Waiting*, on BARABAJAGAL (Epic Records 1969).

greenery./ Our fathers have painfully lost their way.”<sup>18</sup> Campbell’s lyrics refer less directly to Vietnam: “Galveston, oh, Galveston, I still hear your sea waves crashin’/ While I watch the cannons flashin’/ I clean my gun, and dream of Galveston.”<sup>19</sup> More poignant are the songs about the difficulties many soldiers encountered upon returning to the United States after their tour of duty. Reviled by the anti-war element and largely abandoned initially by the Department of Veteran Affairs, often crippled by injuries or psychologically scarred by their experiences at war, some Vietnam War veterans became active anti-war demonstrators. Others dealt with situations such as that of Kenny Rogers’ “Ruby, Don’t Take Your Love to Town,” from 1969.<sup>20</sup> In “Ruby,” a Vietnam veteran has returned home to his wife, paralyzed from the waist down, and he is losing his wife over his debilitating condition:

It’s hard to love a man, whose legs are bent and paralyzed  
And the wants and the needs of a woman your age  
Ruby I realize  
It won’t be long, I’ve heard them say, until I’m not around,  
Oh Ruby, don’t take your love to town<sup>21</sup>

These songs addressed the war in more visceral and realistic terms than the previous categories. Rarely do these songs make grand declarations for or against the American government, nor do they often make unilateral statements about the merits of the war. Of course, the subject matter of these songs, the suffering of war veterans and soldiers on the field of battle, makes it fairly clear that these are anti-war songs, but they tackle the issues in a different manner.

Finally, there are the songs that appeared after the war ended, after the Americans pulled the last marines out of Saigon in 1975 and began trying to forget the atrocities and mistakes that plagued the conflict in Vietnam. President Gerald Ford, in a speech to students at Tulane University on 23 April 1975, as North Vietnamese troops marched on Saigon and the world waited to see how Ford and the American military would respond, expressed his desire to move

---

<sup>18</sup> DONOVAN, *supra* note 17.

<sup>19</sup> CAMPBELL, *supra* note 17.

<sup>20</sup> KENNY ROGERS, *Ruby, Don’t Take Your Love to Town*, on RUBY DON’T TAKE YOUR LOVE TO TOWN (Reprise Records 1969).

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

forward with the following words:

Today, America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned. As I see it, the time has come to look forward to an agenda for the future, to unify, to bind up the Nation's wounds, and to restore its health and its optimistic self-confidence.<sup>22</sup>

Even as Ford made this speech, however, in which he urges not only the students in attendance at Tulane, but the entire nation, to look forward and rediscover American confidence in future plans, thousands of Vietnam War veterans returned home to a country that had been sorely shaken by the experience of losing a war. Many of these veterans bore scars from their experiences, both physical ones from wounds taken in battle and psychological ones from the terror of fighting an invisible foe in dark jungles thousands of miles from home. For these soldiers, and for the victims of the war at home, such as those killed or wounded during the shooting at Kent State in 1970, Ford's words rang false. The feelings of abandonment, disillusionment and anger felt by soldiers, draft dodgers and protesters alike spilled over into the arts, and fueled a new wave of anti-war songs that still has momentum today. These songs, while sometimes dealing with similar themes as those from the second and fourth categories examined here, often have a slightly different tone; the point is not to protest the war, which had ended, but to bring to light the fact that the horrors of war do not end when troops pull out and treaties are signed, and to remind listeners that moving forward, restoring "health and its optimistic self-confidence" takes more than simple words from a president.<sup>23</sup>

The United States has never had an outstanding track record when it comes to proper treatment of war veterans. For example, in 1932, during the Great Depression, the Bonus Expeditionary Force, or "Bonus Army," a group of over ten thousand World War I veterans marched on Washington, D.C. to demand a veterans' bonus that had been promised.<sup>24</sup> When the Senate denied this bonus, the

---

<sup>22</sup> Gerald Ford, *A War That is Finished* (Apr. 23, 1975), <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/ford-tulane.htm> (last visited Oct. 30, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *People and Events: The Bonus March (May-July, 1932)*, PUBLIC BROADCASTING CO.

veterans staged a sit-in that was eventually dispersed by the military on the orders of President Herbert Hoover.<sup>25</sup> Infantry and cavalry cleared out the veterans, leaving two dead and many injured.<sup>26</sup> Following the Second World War, despite the desegregation of the army during the war, black veterans were continually denied the same rights and benefits as their white compatriots, while women, known for years as the “invisible soldiers,” were also denied benefits and recognition until after World War II.<sup>27</sup> While most veterans of the Second World War enjoyed increased rights and benefits upon their return home, including financial support from the Department of Veterans Affairs and low-interest, no down payment loans from the American government as promised in the G.I. Bill of 1944, Vietnam War veterans had a very different experience.<sup>28</sup> The Second World War was popular at home, and the fight seemed just and honorable. The Vietnam War, however, had become highly unpopular by the time that the United States declared that hostilities between the U.S. and North Vietnam had concluded in 1973. Returning veterans, who were already vilified by students and war protesters across the country, often had difficulty adjusting to civilian life, especially due to the prevalence of a new illness amongst those returning from Vietnam: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Frequently misunderstood and misdiagnosed in the 1970s, soldiers with PTSD found themselves outsiders in the country for whose values they had been fighting. In 1984, Huey Lewis & The News attempted to address some of these problems with “Walking on a Thin Line,” a moderate hit from their smash second album, *Sports*.<sup>29</sup> This song details the experiences of a soldier, returning from the war, who tries to re-enter his life as a civilian. The bridge and chorus material outline his difficulties and the poor treatment he is given by his

---

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/macarthur/peoplevents/pandeAMEX89.html> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> RICHARD NORTON SMITH, *AN UNCOMMON MAN: THE TRIUMPH OF HERBERT HOOVER* 138-40 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

<sup>27</sup> *Post-War Economic Boom and Racial Discrimination*, UNDERSTANDINGRACE.ORG, [http://www.understandingrace.org/history/society/post\\_war\\_economic\\_boom.html](http://www.understandingrace.org/history/society/post_war_economic_boom.html) (last visited Jan. 24, 2016); see Gary A. Officer, *Female Veterans: The Invisible Soldier*, HUFFINGTONPOST.COM, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-a-officer/female-veterans-the-invisible-soldier\\_b\\_1539066.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-a-officer/female-veterans-the-invisible-soldier_b_1539066.html) (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, Pub. L. No. 78-346, 58 Stat. 284 (1944).

<sup>29</sup> HUEY LEWIS & THE NEWS, *Walking on a Thin Line*, on *SPORTS* (Chrysalis Records 1983).

neighbors:

Don't you know me, I'm the boy next door?  
 The one you find so easy to ignore.  
 Is that what I was fighting for?  
 Walking on a thin line, straight off the front line,  
 Labeled as freaks loose on the streets of the city.  
 Walking on a thin line, angry all the time,  
 Take a look at my face, see what it's doing to me.<sup>30</sup>

The pain, disillusionment and anger are evident here. Interviews with American soldiers on the fronts in Vietnam often revealed that the soldiers did not know what exactly they were fighting for, and any hope of real answers that they might have had upon their return home were quickly dashed, especially in the face of being labeled as “freaks” and marginalized by American citizens. Lewis gives us a stark vision of the ostracized war veteran: ignored, confused, “loose on the streets,” and worsening rather than healing, the effects clearly visible on the faces of the ignored.<sup>31</sup> Lewis and his band also express this soldier's instability and anxiety musically. The song begins with a slow fade up on a distorted bass plucking out a steady eighth note pattern, almost unpitched; a lower, synthesized bass line, outlines a descending triad on beats one, four and eight. This disconcerting syncopation continues throughout the introduction and first verse (and returns during instrumental interludes), in which the protagonist suffers through the darkness, praying for light, and curses “the tears and the sweat” that are constant reminders of his traumatic experiences. Even the lead guitar solo, after reiterating some of the chorus material, takes on a mocking tone in its upper register, taunting the suffering soldier who is trapped by his experiences, forever scarred by being under fire on the front lines. The music and lyrics together create an atmosphere of tension, frustration and derision.

Charlie Daniels' “Still in Saigon,”<sup>32</sup> which charted in 1982, expresses some similar sentiments, again written from the standpoint of a Vietnam War veteran after his return home. “Still in Saigon,” while more comprehensive than “Walking on a Thin Line” in its treatment of Vietnam War issues, as it spans a soldier's experience

---

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> CHARLIE DANIELS, *Still in Saigon*, on WINDOWS (Epic Records 1982).

from getting drafted to his return after a tour of duty, is less effective musically. Daniels' song, written by Dan Daley, a journalist and composer whose career does not seem to have included any time in Vietnam,<sup>33</sup> covers a wide range of themes. Daniels first sings of doing his duty as an American, stating that he "could have gone to Canada" or "stayed in school," but he was "brought up differently."<sup>34</sup> His experience, however, left him paranoid and suspicious: "When I got home I stayed alone and checked behind each door."<sup>35</sup> The symptoms of his PTSD are starkly clear, from the conflicting sensations, ("[t]he ground at home was covered in snow, and I was covered in sweat,")<sup>36</sup> and feeling of displacement, ("[e]very summer when it rains I smell the jungle, I hear the planes,")<sup>37</sup> to the flashbacks of traumatic events, ("[a]ll the sound of long ago will be forever in my head,/ mingled with the wounded cries and the silence of the dead.")<sup>38</sup> While the poetry is vivid, dark and disturbing, the music is straightforward and unmoving. Other than a brief attempt at an allusion to Asian music with a pentatonic riff in the lead guitar during the introduction, there is very little that sets this song apart from Daniels' other country-rock songs. "Still in Saigon" does little to differentiate itself musically, with its simple melody, basic structure (verse x 2, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, solo, verse, chorus x 2), and unadventurous guitar solo, but its vivid lyrics make it worthy of analysis in this discussion.

Stephen Holden, a contributor to *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and currently on the staff of the *New York Times*, provided a term for this category of Vietnam War song in his review of *The Nylon Curtain*, quoted earlier in this chapter: the epitaph.<sup>39</sup> While an epitaph normally refers to a physical commemoration to the dead, such as an inscription on a tombstone, it can also be a piece of writing, and it is this sense of the word that Holden intended when he described "Goodnight Saigon" as a "pop-music epitaph to the Vietnam War."<sup>40</sup> Holden believed that this song was the epitome of

---

<sup>33</sup> Dan Daley, *Biographical Information and Selected Works*, DANDALEY.NET, <http://www.dandaley.net/files/bio/biofr.html> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> DANIELS, *supra* note 32.

<sup>35</sup> DANIELS, *supra* note 32.

<sup>36</sup> DANIELS, *supra* note 32.

<sup>37</sup> DANIELS, *supra* note 32.

<sup>38</sup> DANIELS, *supra* note 32.

<sup>39</sup> Holden, *supra* note 5.

<sup>40</sup> Holden, *supra* note 5.

the category at the time of its release, the “ultimate” epitaph;<sup>41</sup> indeed, as I will demonstrate, Joel included many of the dramatic musical and lyrical elements already discussed here, which made these songs effective vehicles of protest, in order to create such a poignant and successful elegy for the war in Vietnam. The fact that Huey Lewis’ and Charlie Daniels’ songs, written on the same subject and treating many of the same themes, achieve such varied success in terms of effectively conveying a moving lyric musically, and that Joel’s effort in this category could lead Holden to make such an unequivocally supportive statement led to the question, what specifically makes a song such as this effective? What elements, and in what combination, did Joel use to create this “ultimate epitaph”?

Billy Joel never actually served in Vietnam, though, being born in 1949, many of his peers may have.<sup>42</sup> Although he did not graduate from high school as expected in 1967 (he was one credit short of graduation – Joel missed an English exam due to sleeping in), he was given an exemption from service because he was the sole provider for his mother and sister (his father moved back to Austria following his parents’ divorce in 1960).<sup>43</sup> It does not appear that any of Joel’s early bands, which included The Echoes (1964-67), a British Invasion cover band (1964-67),<sup>44</sup> The Hassles (1967-69),<sup>45</sup> a pop band modeled after The Rascals with whom Joel recorded two albums while under contract to United Artists, and the jazz-metal organ-drum duo Attila (1969-70),<sup>46</sup> recorded any songs related to the Vietnam War. Attila’s only album, *Attila*, widely considered one of the worst rock albums of all time, features Joel on an organ, accompanied only by percussion.<sup>47</sup> Joel himself called it “psychedelic bullshit,” and the album’s failure allegedly led him to

---

<sup>41</sup> Presumably, Holden meant the word “ultimate” in its more colloquial definition, meaning the best achievable of its kind, rather than the traditional meaning, final.

<sup>42</sup> *Readers’ Poll: The Best Billy Joel Songs of All Time*, ROLLING STONE, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/readers-poll-the-best-billy-joel-songs-of-all-time-20121205/10-goodnight-saigon-0619643> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> *Billy Joel*, NYCTOURISTGUIDE.COM, <http://www.nyctouristguide.com/billy-joel-singer-nyc.php> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> *Billy Joel Biography*, SING 365, <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Billy-Joel-Biography/B5E6E558FEF8C8D1482568700013A7BC> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> Stacia Proefrock, *Attila Biography*, ALLMUSIC, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/attila-mn0001412274/biography> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

attempt suicide.<sup>48</sup> The album has a cult following who liken Joel's singing to that of Robert Plant and the overall effect as coming close to that of Deep Purple, but the songs are mostly about the heavy metal holy trinity: booze, women, and rock. An interview with Joel on the back of the album does contain a reference to the Vietnam War. He claimed "he only 'sweated' two things – perfecting his sound and the war in Southeast Asia."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps Joel felt that the appropriate outlet for expressing his feelings about the war was not his lyrics but the genre, instead.<sup>50</sup>

The question that arises, naturally, is why, after having several opportunities in the late '60s and early '70s to write some form of Vietnam War song, whether in support or not, while numerous other bands were doing so, did Joel suddenly decide to write an epitaph song in 1981? This is actually a two-part question: first, why not earlier, and second, why include one on *The Nylon Curtain*?<sup>51</sup> The former is more difficult to answer than the latter. Very little is known about Joel's early compositional impetus. Much is known about his background – where he grew up, some of his family history, his early exposure to classical music through his father and his short career as a boxer – but not very much about the early bands, mostly because of Joel's embarrassment with his early efforts and because of the critical focus on his later, more mature works. We know so little that it is actually difficult to determine on which side of the war Joel might have come down in the late '60s; the only evidence lies in the interview on the back of *Attila*, but even that does not indicate Joel's opinion definitively. On the one hand, he showed an early interest in the arts, came from a family that placed a value on education and culture, and used his exemption to avoid service in the war. On the other, he came from a community of manual laborers, mostly fishermen and dock-workers; typically,

---

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* See also Steven Williams, *Billy Joel Explains His Dark, Yet Comic, Failed Suicide Attempt*, CONTACTMUSIC.COM (July 16, 2008), [http://www.contactmusic.com/billy-joel/news/billy-joels-foolish-suicide-attempt\\_1074467](http://www.contactmusic.com/billy-joel/news/billy-joels-foolish-suicide-attempt_1074467) (describing Billy Joel's failed attempt to commit suicide by ingesting furniture polish).

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Thomas Erlewine, *Billy Joel Biography*, ALLMUSIC, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/billy-joel-mn0000085915/biography> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Joel's other albums that appeared during the Vietnam War (*Piano Man* and *Streetlife Serenade*) do not include any songs that deal with the war in any of the ways discussed here.

<sup>51</sup> A. Morgan Jones, *The Other Sides of Billy Joel: Six Case Studies Revealing the Sociologist, the Balladeer, and the Historian* (November 2011) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Western Ontario) (on file with the Western Ontario Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository), <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1454&context=etd>.

many volunteers for American wars have come from the lower classes, especially those that worked in more physically demanding industries such as fishing, automotive and steel. A recent study on the demographics of recruits by Tim Kane, a visiting fellow and former director at the Center for International Trade and Economics (“CITE”), indicates that a disproportionate percentage of recruits for the United States military come from urban areas, and most from families that fall into income brackets below the national median.<sup>52</sup> This study is somewhat distant from the Vietnam War, as Kane did his study on 1999 recruits, but research conducted by Richard K. Kolb, editor and publisher of the VFW magazine, supports Kane’s numbers.<sup>53</sup> Kolb found that, by the end of the Vietnam War, 76% of American soldiers had come from working-class or lower income families.<sup>54</sup> Joel thus came from a community that likely contributed many soldiers to the war in Vietnam; Hicksville, NY was highly urban and dominated by the working and lower classes. Since Joel seldom discusses his early years, however, any thoughts on whether he would have signed up for the war had he not been the sole provider for his family are purely speculative.

The second half of this question is more easily answered, as there exists a plethora of information concerning *The Nylon Curtain*, particularly in the form of album reviews, most of which discuss “Goodnight Saigon” at length. Even those that do not, such as Stephen Thomas Erlewine’s review in *All Music Guide*, discuss Joel’s motivation for writing an album such as *The Nylon Curtain*, an album that represents a departure from his previous efforts.<sup>55</sup> Erlewine claims that *The Nylon Curtain* is “where Billy Joel went serious, consciously crafting a song cycle about Baby Boomers in the Reagan era,”<sup>56</sup> and that, after his attempt at writing a harder album (*Glass Houses*), it was time for him to return to his pop roots to

---

<sup>52</sup> Tim Kane, *Who Bears the Burden? Demographic Characteristics of U.S. Military Recruits Before and After 9/11*, THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION (Nov. 7, 2005), <http://www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/cda05-08.cfm>.

<sup>53</sup> David M. Halbfinger & Steven A. Holmes, *A Nation at War: The Troops; Military Mirrors a Working-Class America*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 30, 2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/30/us/a-nation-at-war-the-troops-military-mirrors-a-working-class-america.html?page-wanted=all>.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

<sup>55</sup> Erlewine, *supra* note 3.

<sup>56</sup> Erlewine, *supra* note 3.

attract a more mature, adult audience.<sup>57</sup> More telling, however, is the interview that David and Victoria Sheff (“Sheffs”) conducted with Joel for *Playboy* magazine in 1982.<sup>58</sup> Sheffs interviewed Joel before the release of *The Nylon Curtain*; the album was, however, in production and nearing release, and was thus the subject of a portion of the interview:

[Sheffs]: By the time this interview appears, your new album will probably be out. You’re calling it *Goodnight Saigon*. Is it a political statement?

Joel: No, but it [is] a serious album. It’s about the stuff kids in my age group have gone through, about our attitudes, not our politics. People my age, 25 to 40, who grew up as Cold War babies, we don’t have anybody writing music for us. There’s a lot of chainsaw heavy metal aimed at the 14-year-old market, and there’s stuff at the other end of the spectrum – Barry Manilow, Neil Diamond, and Barbara Streisand. But the music business seems to be writing people my age off. So, in a way, this is an album dealing with us, with our American experience: guilt, pressures, relationships, the whole Vietnam syndrome . . . .<sup>59</sup>

This portion of the interview reveals much about Joel’s inspiration for writing this album, the topics that he treats in the songs, and an important aspect of his mid-career evolution. First, Sheffs indicated that, prior to its completion, Joel considered calling the album *Goodnight Saigon*.<sup>60</sup> Joel’s albums as often as not were named for a track on the album, such as *Piano Man*, *The Stranger* and *An Innocent Man*, and so this is not surprising. This would, however, have been the first time Joel considered naming an album for a track not intended to be a single. Sheffs’ question, however, does give an indication of how important Joel felt “Goodnight Saigon” was for the integrity of the album.

---

<sup>57</sup> Erlewine, *supra* note 3.

<sup>58</sup> See David Sheff & Victoria Sheff, *Playboy Interview: Billy Joel*, *PLAYBOY* 96 (May, 1982).

<sup>59</sup> Sheff & Sheff, *supra* note 58.

<sup>60</sup> Sheff & Sheff, *supra* note 58.

Sheffs' initial reaction to this title is to assume that Joel intended a political angle for this album, something that he had not done previously, but Joel quickly corrects the interviewer's mistake by stating that this is not the case, but that it is indeed a "serious" album.<sup>61</sup> Prior to *The Nylon Curtain*, Joel's albums focused on the events of his life and his immediate surroundings; by the time of this interview, however, he had grown up and felt the need to write on themes that he considered more important. Rather than petulantly claiming to forget his early band's name and "sweating" perfecting his sound, as he indicated in the interview on the back cover of *Atilla*, Joel had now come to identify himself with an age bracket (albeit a rather large one) and to recognize that his listeners in this age bracket had worries of their own. In other words, Joel began, perhaps for the first time, to think about the world around him, to consider the effects of his music, and to conceptualize his albums on a much grander scale. Erlewine goes so far as to call *The Nylon Curtain* a concept album (or an attempt at one, at least), implying that Joel had a higher artistic purpose for the album; he argues that the end result, however, due to Joel's "lyrical shortcomings," is that "the songs paint a picture without arriving at any insights."<sup>62</sup> If we accept the definition of a concept album as being one wherein the tracks are unified thematically, then *The Nylon Curtain* is indeed such an album. Joel stated that this was to be an album about the experiences of his generation, and Erlewine and other reviewers immediately recognized the Baby Boomer theme inherent in the album. Joel even went so far as to conclude the final song, "Where's the Orchestra?"<sup>63</sup> with a simplified version of the theme from "Allentown," the first song on the album, creating a sense of bookends for the album. Whether Joel was successful in his efforts is a matter for the reviewers to debate.

Joel also expresses recognition that he had become part of a demographic that had little representation on the charts at the time, and so he deliberately wrote an album that aimed at Baby Boomers in hopes of filling the void that he perceived. A quick scan of the Billboard charts in the early '80s reveals that Joel's analysis of the musical market hit fairly close to the mark. In 1980, many of the top selling singles were in the pop/disco category, such as Olivia

---

<sup>61</sup> Sheff & Sheff, *supra* note 58.

<sup>62</sup> Erlewine, *supra* note 3.

<sup>63</sup> BILLY JOEL, *Where's the Orchestra?*, on *NYLON CURTAIN* (Columbia Records 1982).

Newton-John's "Magic," Captain & Tennille's "Do That to Me One More Time," and "Funkytown," courtesy of Lipps Inc., or hard rock/heavy metal, including Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall" and Styx's "Babe."<sup>64</sup> The "other end of the spectrum" from heavy metal is presumably adult contemporary, which also finds representation on the charts in the early '80s: Bette Midler's "The Rose," Kenny Loggins' "This is It," and "With You I'm Born Again," the Billy Preston-Syreeta duet, all claim positions in the top thirty.<sup>65</sup> These trends continued in 1981, with artists such as ABBA, Air Supply, Neil Diamond, Kenny Rogers, Dolly Parton, and Sheena Easton dominating the charts.<sup>66</sup> Until this time, Joel had had some difficulty nailing down an audience, finding a genre in which he felt most comfortable. He expressed some desire to be a punk rocker (perhaps a holdover from his Attila days), and attempted to produce a punk sound on *Glass Houses*, but he found little critical success with this effort. His previous hits came close to the adult contemporary genre with which he did not want to be associated; singles such as "Just the Way You Are" (from *The Stranger*, 1977), "My Life" and "Honesty" (both from *52nd Street*, 1978) charted higher on the Billboard Adult Contemporary charts than they did on the Hot 100.<sup>67</sup> Joel reversed this trend with "It's Still Rock 'n Roll to Me" and "You May Be Right" from *Glass Houses*.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, he won a Grammy for Best Male Rock Performance in 1980 for *Glass Houses*,<sup>69</sup> while he won for Best Pop Vocal Performance, Male, for *52nd Street*.<sup>70</sup> The

---

<sup>64</sup> OLIVIA NEWTON-JOHN, *Magic*, on XANADU (Jet Records 1980); CAPTAIN & TENNILLE, *Do That to Me One More Time*, on MAKE YOUR MOVE (Casablanca Records 1979); LIPPS INC., *Funkytown*, on MOUTH TO MOUTH (Casablanca Records 1979); PINK FLOYD, *Another Brick in the Wall*, on THE WALL (Columbia Records 1979); STYX, *Babe*, on CORNERSTONE (A&M Records 1979).

<sup>65</sup> BETTE MIDLER, *The Rose*, on THE ROSE (Atlantic Records 1980); KENNY LOGGINS, *This is It*, on KEEP THE FIRE (Columbia Records 1979); BILLY PRESTON & SYREETA WRIGHT, *With You I'm Born Again*, on FAST BREAK (EMI Records 1979).

<sup>66</sup> Artists whom Joel admired or with whom he might have identified also found success, such as Queen, Paul McCartney and Elton John, and the artists on the charts in the two years prior to the release of *The Nylon Curtain* fall into the hard rock, disco and adult contemporary categories.

<sup>67</sup> BILLY JOEL, *Just the Way You Are*, on THE STRANGER (Columbia Records 1977); BILLY JOEL, *My Life* and *Honesty*, on 52ND STREET (Columbia Records 1978).

<sup>68</sup> BILLY JOEL, *It's Still Rock 'n Roll to Me* and *You May Be Right*, on GLASS HOUSES (Columbia Records 1980).

<sup>69</sup> *Grammy Winners*, GRAMMY.COM, <https://www.grammy.com/nominees/search?artist=billy+joel> (last visited Jan. 24, 2016).

<sup>70</sup> *Id.*

Grammy nominating committee is certainly not the final word on generic categorization, but this evidence does indicate that Joel varied his sound on the albums from the late '70s and early '80s.

Joel's endeavor to write an album for his demographic led him to consider the important issues for people around his age, and he listed those issues in his interview for *Playboy*: "guilt, pressures, relationships, and the whole Vietnam syndrome."<sup>71</sup> Examples of each are immediately evident on the album. Guilt rears its head in the twisted love song "Laura," in which the protagonist finds himself inextricably tied to a manipulative woman and feels guilty for wanting to leave her since he thinks she needs him ("I've done everything I can/ [w]hat else am I supposed to do . . . / [h]ow do you/ [h]ang up on someone/ [w]ho needs you that bad?").<sup>72</sup> Pressure is self-evident: one of the most successful tracks on the album was "Pressure," a high-energy indictment of popular culture. Several of the other songs deal with relationships, including those of the romantic variety ("She's Right on Time" and "A Room of Our Own") and those relating to family ("Surprises").<sup>73</sup> Finally, Joel deals with the "whole Vietnam syndrome" in two different ways. In "Allentown," Joel examines a specific segment of American society, the Pennsylvania steel industry, and its history. In the process, he addresses the effects that the Vietnam War had on steel workers who went off to war searching for the same honor and glory that their fathers found in the Second World War. In his review of the album for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Stephen Holden describes "Allentown" as a "portrait of a crumbling Pennsylvania mining city in which the American dream has died hard . . . [it] could be a scene from *The Deer Hunter* put to music."<sup>74</sup> Of course, the most direct statement about the American experience in Vietnam appears in "Goodnight Saigon." It seems nearly inevitable that Joel would have to tackle the Vietnam War in order to address his generation's American experience successfully, hence his decision to write a song about the war at this point in his career.

Holden made "Goodnight Saigon" the focal point of his favorable review of *The Nylon Curtain*, calling it the album's

---

<sup>71</sup> Sheff & Sheff, *supra* note 58.

<sup>72</sup> BILLY JOEL, *Laura*, on *THE NYLON CURTAIN* (Columbia Records 1982).

<sup>73</sup> BILLY JOEL, *Pressure, She's Right on Time, A Room of Our Own, and Surprises*, on *THE NYLON CURTAIN* (Columbia Records 1982).

<sup>74</sup> Holden, *supra* note 5.

“stunner” and devoting almost half of his review to the song.<sup>75</sup> In his description of the song and its effects on the listener, Holden hits on some key points that are of utmost importance for an effective analysis of the song and its importance in the war song genre. First, he discusses Joel’s lyrical choices, and how in this song Joel’s “‘we’ becomes every American soldier, living and dead, who fought in Southeast Asia.”<sup>76</sup> “Goodnight Saigon” is told from the first-person perspective; this makes the story more effective and convincing. The fact that Joel did not serve in Vietnam is irrelevant; the power of good storytelling lies in making the listener or reader *believe* the words, regardless of their veracity or our ability to authenticate the details. Joel accomplishes this feat not only through disturbing visceral allusions to the fates of many Vietnam soldiers, (“[w]e came in spastic/ [l]ike tameless horses/ [w]e left in plastic/ [a]s numbered corpses”)<sup>77</sup> but also by referencing details about the life of a Vietnam soldier that seem authentic. These details include prevalent drug use (“[w]e passed the hash pipe”),<sup>78</sup> the appearance of American celebrities in Vietnam to provide entertainment (“[t]hey gave us Bob Hope”),<sup>79</sup> and elements of popular culture of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s (“[t]hey sent us Playboy . . . [w]e . . . played our Doors tapes”).<sup>80</sup> This is not to say that the details Joel includes *are not* authentic. Stories of rampant drug abuse are certainly true, as are the references to provisions of American entertainment for the soldiers in Vietnam. The mere inclusion of these details, however, makes Joel’s narration seem more authentic.

Second, Joel varies the accompaniment throughout the song in order to communicate different atmospheres and sentiments. He plays the initial theme, a four-note ascending motive in parallel thirds, on the piano, with descending octaves outlining a Gmin7 chord. This progression creates a sense of instability as the

---

<sup>75</sup> Holden, *supra* note 5.

<sup>76</sup> Holden, *supra* note 5.

<sup>77</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>78</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>79</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>80</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4. *See also The Unknown Soldier*, EXAMINER (May 28, 2012), <http://www.examiner.com/article/the-unknown-soldier>. Referencing The Doors may serve a double purpose here. One of the more provocative songs protesting the Vietnam War was 1968’s “The Unknown Soldier,” which includes a firing squad-style execution in the middle of the song. The inclusion of the reference to The Doors in “Goodnight Saigon” may be a form of *homage*.

resolution, double G's in the bass underneath an F-A diad in the right hand, is dissonant and unsatisfactory, and the ascending figure loops back on itself without attaining a sense of closure. In fact, Joel concludes the song in the same manner, repeating and fading out on the first four bars, endlessly looping on themselves, symbolizing the futility of this unwinnable war. As Joel sings the first words, however, the piano fades out, replaced by an acoustic guitar, strummed simply. Joel thickens the texture gradually as the story takes on a more universal tone, adding a bass line and bringing the simple percussion (a hand shaker) more forward in the mix (the percussion starts before the piano, but is quite *subtle* at first). In the first half of the first verse, for example, Joel sings of the protagonist's pre-war experiences, always in the first-person plural "we," of training in the Marine Corps Recruit Depot on Parris Island, while limiting the mix to acoustic guitar and shaker. As the story takes on a darker tone in the second half of the first verse, Joel strengthens the mix with the added bass line. At the end of the first verse, there is a short instrumental interlude of three bars (plus single beat pickup) that alludes to the opening sequence, but this time the ascending pattern is allowed to escape from its four-note restriction, straining upwards before descending at the beginning of the second verse. In the second verse, Joel complicates the texture again, combining piano, acoustic guitar, bass and percussion (only a shaker, still) as he relates more of the soldiers' experience on the front lines. This musical combination, layered gradually in this manner, provides an acoustic, "unplugged" feel to the beginning of the song, as if the song were almost improvisational in design.

Joel finally disperses this casual atmosphere by adding a full percussion set during the second half of the second verse, including bass drum, snare, toms and muted cymbals (perhaps a closed high hat). The tension increases at the end of the second verse as Joel's vocal tone changes and a snare roll, played on a field snare by Bill Zampino,<sup>81</sup> heralds the arrival of a verse extension in which Joel sings of the fraternity of soldiers that is born out of fear, desperation and confusion:

---

<sup>81</sup> See David A. Brensilver, *History of the Snare Drum: Eight Centuries of Innovation & Ingenuity*, DRUM! MAGAZINE (Sept. 10, 2015), <http://www.drummagazine.com/gear/post/history-of-the-snare-drum-eight-centuries-of-innovation-ingenuity/> (noting a field snare is a drum typically associated with American military history and designed to be performed outdoors).

And we held onto each other  
 Like brother to brother  
 We promised our mothers we'd write  
 And we would all go down together  
 We said we'd all go down together  
 Yes we would all go down together<sup>82</sup>

Joel extends the ascending line, heard earlier with the lyrics “[a]nd we were so gung ho,” and “[o]ur arms were heavy,” and the accompanying descending gesture is eliminated, delaying resolution until the word “write,” at which point the most dramatic textural changes occur. Here, on the line, “[a]nd we would all go down together,” Joel’s single voice is joined by a chorus of male voices, the refrain taken up by the plural “we,” the brothers in arms putting their lives on the line for each other.<sup>83</sup> During this oath, sworn in unison, the bass line yearns upward, slipping backwards after each iteration of “together,” until it loses all momentum and descends to the Gmin7 chord heard earlier on the final line of the refrain. The texture thins to that of the opening melodic gesture, and the repeating ascending gesture in the right hand of the piano returns, eliding the refrain with the beginning of the next verse.

The third verse is far more reflective lyrically than the previous verse, and shortened to accommodate the move to the bridge. In this abbreviated verse, our narrator takes on an elegiac tone, evoking the names of lost comrades (“[r]emember Charlie, remember Baker/ [t]hey left their childhood on every acre”) and mourning their loss.<sup>84</sup> Joel also reiterates a sentiment often heard from soldiers on the frontlines: “[a]nd who was wrong,/ [a]nd who was right? [i]t didn’t matter in the thick of the fight.”<sup>85</sup> Joel uses the same ascending theme from the end of the second verse to underscore this sentiment of futility and confusion, with its lack of proper resolution and extension into the upper reaches of his vocal range. The ensuing ascending thirds in the piano sound as if they are serving the same function as before, a movement to a new verse, but instead

---

<sup>82</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>83</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>84</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4. Joel’s choice of names here is intriguing. “Charlie,” of course, is the name American soldiers gave to the Viet Cong (Charlie being the radio alphabet word for the letter C), while Baker was the name of a 1967 operation whose main goal was to clear one of the main highways in South Vietnam.

<sup>85</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

of descending from G to F, the bass line ascends to A for the beginning of the bridge. Joel uses a similar gesture in “Allentown,” the opening song of the album, where the bass line, instead of descending as it had several times previously, ascends to support a new tonal center at the beginning of the bridge.

The bridge has a different tone from that of the verses, with its stripped down mix, lower vocal range, and simple but prominent percussion. Joel uses an unusual combination of piano, electric bass and snare drum in the bridge, relying on the bass mainly for support while the snare beats out an ominous, muffled death knell in the breaks between Joel’s broken lyrics: “[w]e – (snare) – held the day – (snare) – in the palm – (snare) – of our hands.”<sup>86</sup> The piano provides the remainder of the harmonic and melodic support in the eight-bar bridge, which features Joel using the lowest part of his vocal range (in fact, the low B on the word “palm” is the lowest note that Joel sings on the entire album) in his hushed assessment of the delicate balance between the American and Vietnamese forces. In the second half of the bridge (“[t]hey ruled the night, and the night seemed to last as long as six weeks”)<sup>87</sup>, Joel replaces the dotted rhythm of the muffled snare with hard hits on the backbeat, reinforcing the fear and desperation in the lyrics.

Joel elides the bridge with the next verse lyrically; the melody notes on “as long as” are the same as the three introductory notes earlier in the song (on “[w]e met as . . . “ and “[w]e came in . . . “).<sup>88</sup> He also makes a connection with an earlier reference, singing that the night lasts “as long as six weeks/ [o]n Parris Island,” the military boot camp where the soldiers met in the first verse.<sup>89</sup> This second reference underlines the fearsome reputation of Parris Island as a brutal shaper of soldiers, a reputation that Stanley Kubrick later reinforced in his 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket*.<sup>90</sup> In the climactic scene of the first act, Leonard Lawrence (Vincent D’Onofrio), an awkward and out of shape recruit nicknamed “Gomer Pyle” by drill instructor Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (played by R. Lee Emery), shoots and kills Hartman and then sits on the toilet in the barracks and kills himself with his rifle as a horrified “Joker” (Matthew

---

<sup>86</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>87</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>88</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>89</sup> JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>90</sup> FULL METAL JACKET (Warner Bros. 1987).

Modine) looks on.<sup>91</sup> In the first act of this movie, Kubrick focuses on the savage methods used by instructors to create American Marines at Parris Island. It is this environment of intense physical and psychological training to which Joel alludes with his reference to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at this moment in the song. The soldiers' treatment at Parris Island is of a kind with the fear they feel at the night in Vietnam.

At this point, Joel begins the final verse, but, as he often does, this verse begins halfway through. He also uses this structure in two other songs on this side of the album, "Pressure" and "Allentown." The intention behind this device is to lessen the temporal space between more dramatic moments in the song. Here, the harmonic structure at the beginning of the song is quite repetitive, allowing Joel to add layers to the mix without changing the underlying harmonies. The harmonic structure of the verse does not change until the end of the second verse, when Joel's vocal movement to the high A on the word "night" provides momentum for the verse extension that enables the movement to the chorus, the most dramatically effective section of the song. After the bridge, another chillingly dramatic moment in which Joel sings of the psychological pressure under which soldiers in Vietnam suffered, a full iteration of the verse structure would have been counter-productive, as the repetitive nature of the verse could cause the song to lose momentum. Also, one of the functions of the extended verse length had been to give room for changes to the mix, a dramatic effect that would be less effective a second time around. Joel thus returns to the second half of the second verse in order to shorten the length of time between the end of the bridge and the return to the climax of the song, the stirring chorus of unison male voices.

A third significant point that Holden makes in his review refers to Joel's vocal choices, a musical element not always relevant in previous discussion of songs of this type. Holden refers to Joel's vocal quality as "tight, wound-up . . . higher and tenser than usual . . . and then, later, "so fragile it almost breaks, and on *knives*, it suddenly jabs in sharp, strobe like echoes . . . he continues, again hesitant and sounding all of about nineteen."<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Joel uses a variety of vocal timbres in "Goodnight Saigon," fluctuating in

---

<sup>91</sup> *Id.*

<sup>92</sup> Holden, *supra* note 5.

strength, placement and quality. At the outset, he uses the simplest tone possible, employing his delicate head voice, verging on falsetto for the highest notes on “sharp” and “knives” in the first verse, an appropriate accompaniment for the instrumental mix (an acoustic guitar) and the subject matter (inexperienced soldiers in training). As the mix thickens, Joel’s voice gains strength and confidence, altering his tone to create a more chest-based timbre in the second verse. On the line “[a]nd it was dark, so dark at night,” Joel adopts an aggressive tone, using his full chest tone on “dark,” while on “night,” his voice shatters and splinters, fading into the darkness, in Holden’s “strobeline echoes.”<sup>93</sup> As he ramps up into the chorus, Joel sings in full voice, but the resultant strength and confidence is insufficient. His narrator must rely on the voices of his comrades in order to survive the traumas of Southeast Asia, hence the collective voices for the chorus, pledging their support for their fellow men-at-arms. Finally, in the bridge, Joel changes his tone once again, using the lower part of his range for the first time in the song. Usually known for his flexibility and purity of tone in the vast upper reaches of the tenor range, Joel adopts a breathy, muted tone for this section, reinforcing the hesitant and vigilant nature of the narrator in this section; he almost whispers the words “of our hand,” as if anything louder than this might alert the enemy. As previously noted, Joel sings the lowest note on the album in the bridge (a B two octaves below middle C) and uses a tone note usually associated with songs in his *oeuvre*. In fact, in the first three albums of the 1980s (*Glass Houses*, *Songs from the Attic* and *The Nylon Curtain*) Joel only sings one lower note: the final note in *Glass Houses*’ “Don’t Ask Me Why” is a B-flat, but it is a lower harmony note for the more audible F natural, a perfect fifth above; it is also the last note of the song. The low B in this song serves more of a dramatic purpose. In “Goodnight Saigon,” Joel launches from the low B to A, a minor seventh above, to describe the grip over the night held by the Viet Cong. Also, in the second line of the bridge, which is nearly identical to the first tonally, the expected movement to the B at the end of the phrase is thwarted by a repeated C, changing the supporting harmony from E major to G major, providing a transition to the verse material.

Finally, Joel uses atmospheric sounds, sometimes referred to

---

<sup>93</sup> Holden, *supra* note 5; JOEL, *Goodnight Saigon*, *supra* note 4.

as “found sound,”<sup>94</sup> to reinforce the message of this song further. This technique is a common one in songs meant to evoke a certain time, event, or place, and several of the songs discussed here have included in the mix either recorded atmospheric sounds or imitations of such on standard instruments. For example, the extended instrumental section in the middle of Eric Burdon & The Animals’ “Sky Pilot”<sup>95</sup> is intended to symbolize the air battle in which the pilots have engaged, after the protagonist, the military chaplain, blesses them and their mission. In this section, guitarist John Weider imitates the sound of fighter planes with his guitar. In addition, there are sounds of battle including gunfire, an air strike, and voices. This extended portion of the song, which comprises over two minutes of the seven and a half minute track, is complicated and confusing, with many layers built into the mix; there is even a recording of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards playing “All the Bluebonnets are Over the Border”<sup>96</sup> on the bagpipes, adding to the feeling of pitched battle. “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag” also incorporates a recording of battle sounds. At the conclusion of the song, after the oddly out-of-tune final chord, there are twenty-nine seconds of gunfire and fighter plane flyovers. The effect of this conclusion is especially jarring in consideration of the satirically upbeat nature of the preceding music. Finally, Huey Lewis includes the sound of a gunshot after the lyric “Taught me how to shoot to kill” in “Walking on a Thin Line.” This sound is artificial, but effective in its placement after this lyric about military training.

Joel similarly creates an atmosphere suitable for his subject matter through the use of ambient sound effects in “Goodnight Saigon.”<sup>97</sup> The opening chords do not arrive until fifty seconds into the song. Previous to this, Joel sets the scene for the song, using the same principle as Eric Burdon & The Animals. The first audible sounds, a combination of authentic “found sounds” and artificially created effects, are those of the jungle at peace: frogs, crickets and bird calls (recordings), and the tinkle of falling rain (percussion).

---

<sup>94</sup> The principle behind “found sound” is the same as that for “found art,” in which objects that would not normally be considered artistic are included in works of art.

<sup>95</sup> ERIC BURDON AND THE ANIMALS, *supra* note 7.

<sup>96</sup> ERIC BURDON AND THE ANIMALS, *supra* note 7.

<sup>97</sup> This is not the only example of the use of atmospheric sound on *The Nylon Curtain*. In “Allentown,” Joel included factory sounds such as a hammer hitting metal (presumably steel) and made machinery sound effects with his voice in order to create a greater sense of authenticity.

Twenty-two seconds in, the sound of helicopter rotors, perhaps in reference to the use of helicopters in Stanley Kubrick's iconic "Apocalypse Now"<sup>98</sup> only two years earlier, disturbs the pastoral setting, getting louder to simulate getting nearer, and then a high chord on synthesized strings (0:30) and a slow shaker beat (0:32) are added to the texture. This synthesized string sound progresses through a series of chords that achieve their ultimate resolution in the first piano chord, which arrives at 0:50. In this manner, Joel sets the scene for "Goodnight Saigon;" the stillness of the jungle at night is broken by the ominous approach of the instruments of war. The straight-forward nature of the opening melody, one of Joel's simplest, with its repetition and relatively narrow range, mirrors the calm of the pastoral setting while the rotors pass overhead. As the helicopter disappears into silence, the narrator feels safe enough to begin his story. Once the tale is told, Joel establishes a level of symmetry by reintroducing the ambient sounds from the introduction. After the final iteration of the chorus, during which the sound of men shouting commands and exhortations can be heard deeper in the mix, the simple piano melody from the beginning returns (5:52), accompanied by the shaker beat and a militaristic snare roll. The helicopter sounds return at 6:10 as they fade into the distance, the ambient jungle sounds return. For almost thirty seconds, the only sounds in the mix are the tinkling percussive rain sounds and the chirp of crickets; Joel thus creates an arch structure for the song, beginning and ending with the sounds of nature, unsullied by man and his military machinations; in Holden's words, "the song fades back into the night on a whirl of retreating rotors, into the jungle, leaving the memory of that chorus of hale and hearty ghosts."<sup>99</sup>

The story goes that Joel was approached by a group of Vietnam War veterans who asked him to write a song about the war. Joel hesitated, protesting that since he had not served in the war, he could not write a suitable tribute to the war and its victims. The veterans countered that since he did not serve, he would not be hampered by the trauma of having been in Vietnam; consequently, Joel listened to their stories and wrote a song that they approved of, "Goodnight Saigon." So important was this song for his upcoming album, this portrait of Reagan's United States that Joel initially

---

<sup>98</sup> APOCALYPSE NOW (Zoetrope Studios 1979).

<sup>99</sup> Holden, *supra* note 5.

intended naming the album after this elegiac tribute to American veterans and fallen soldiers. Joel's first endeavors to write songs about issues larger than those of his own life were largely successful, in part because of his use of the elements of effective war songs discussed here. Such elements include establishing a strong narrative structure by limiting the scope of the tale to that of an individual, employing ambient and "found" sounds to create an authentic atmosphere, one immediately recognizable to the audience, using a first-person narrative, and manipulating the mix in order to emphasize and underscore the lyrics. Audience's response and critical reviews of the track are almost exclusively positive. Many commentators laud Joel for treating a controversial subject with objectivity and sensitivity, stating that he neither criticizes the futility of the war nor blindly supports the government line that American soldiers were in Southeast Asia to preserve peace and protect democracy. Similar statements have been made about his treatment of "Allentown," that he humanized the situation without being openly critical. Joel realized, through his work on these issues that were so pressing on the American psyche, that simplicity was of utmost importance for treating American struggles with respect. Perhaps his most important decision regarding "Goodnight Saigon" lay with his setting of the chorus as a statement of fraternity, sung by a group of men, allowing his own voice to be swallowed up. Joel does not often perform this song in concert, but when he does, he ensures that the power of this chorus, mixed so masterfully in the studio for the album, is not lessened in its live format. He does so by inviting Vietnam War veterans to gather around the piano and sing the chorus with him; in fact, the video for "Goodnight Saigon" is nothing more than a series of still photographs of soldiers in Vietnam interspersed with a video of Joel playing the song in concert. On the chorus, a group of veterans, arms around each other, passion and pain equally present on their faces, sing along with Joel. Finally, as the snare drum rolls enter after the final chorus, a shot of the names of fallen soldiers on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. appears over the final image of Joel on the piano. Joel never forgot for whom he wrote this song. Through the song and the accompanying video, he made sure that the collective sacrifice of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who served in Southeast Asia remained the main focus of the song. Perhaps for this reason most of all "Goodnight Saigon" deserves Holden's accolade of "ultimate pop

music epitaph to the Vietnam War.”<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> Holden, *supra* note 5.