



Folk Music as Resistance: Sartrean Authenticity in Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash's Anti-Vietnam War Songs

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Abstract

Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash, two seminal figures in American music, used their art to express profound protest against the Vietnam War, drawing upon Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of authenticity to frame their responses to the socio-political climate of the 1960s and 1970s. Through their songs like Dylan's *Masters of War* and *Blowin' in the Wind*, and Cash's *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* and *Drive On*, both the artists confronted the moral and existential crises provoked by the war. These songs, rooted in folk traditions, not only challenged the war's brutality but also questioned the societal structures that perpetuated it. Sartre's concept of authenticity, emphasising individual responsibility and freedom from societal conventions, resonates through these texts as they reflect the artists' rejection of political authority and their commitment to personal and collective truth. The songs serve as a form of cultural folklore, using the storytelling power of folk music to address the existential tension between personal freedom and social responsibility. In doing so, Dylan and Cash crafted an authentic protest that transcended traditional political commentary, positioning their music as a crucial part of the anti-war movement and a radical expression of their existential disillusionment.

Keywords: America, Existential Crisis, Folk Songs, Protests, Vietnam War.

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Introduction

Music as an artistic formation and cultural exhibition, just like any other literary genre is an innovative way to express deepest sentiments and various concerns related to life and living experiences. Folk songs, a sub-genre of the entire body of music illustrates the aspects of community-based issues of indigenous experiences, evoking socio-political paradigm and diverse existential crises. The American songwriters Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash accentuated the lives of the civilians during the Vietnam War via their songs, imbibing anguish and existential despair and the effects of the war upon the individuals. The American society has been impacted severely by the American-Vietnam war, exerting adverse impact on the cultural and societal legacy of disenchantment and dejection. In such circumstances, the soldiers, who fought in the war encountered dilemma, trauma and alienation, leading them to consume and abuse illegal substances which made everyday existence a struggle in itself. Hence, this paper discusses how the songwriters represented their struggle through songs by implying the phenomena of war and people's hardship subsequently.

The tradition of folk songs is a subtle embodiment of storytelling and a legendary vehicle to transmit the narratives of regional epochs in the form of music. But during the early 1960's this custom of folk songs served more than just an aesthetic purpose, as it instigated a social and political activism through their lyrics, a sort of resistance and interrogation regarding one's stance after the war situation. The Vietnam War (1950-1975) partitioned America and its people generating anarchistic and seditious affairs, of which the artists during that time produced songs of protests and dissent, seeking answers for the devastation that the war had prompted. One of the songs of Johnny Cash, "What is Truth" probed a thought provoking question on the mental agitation faced by children as well due to the conflicting atmosphere of war: "Daddy, what is war?" and when the father responds that it is "when people fight and die," the "little boy of 3 says, Daddy, why?" In the next verse, Cash describes a seventeen-year-old in Sunday school, facing the prospect of going to

the war in another year when “it may be his turn to lay his life down.” “Can you blame the voice of youth for asking: “What is Truth?” Cash asked.” (Foley 2). Such questions raise awareness on the ontological standpoint of human individuals where they grapple with existential crises due to the aftereffects of war.

Bob Dylan and Existential Angst

Bob Dylan, an influential figure in the history of folk music, remained a classic example of a protest musician who deliberately wrote for the purpose of raising socio-political awareness. His lyrics resonate with the anthem of civil rights and their lost hope. The existential element rests primarily on the social and political aspect of freedom and despair. Dylan referred to the “Port Huron Statement” in order to enhance the ongoing struggle for an egalitarian society. His most famous song called, *Blowin’ in the Wind* exhibits the cries of civilians for the injustice faced by them in the wake of wars and racial discrimination. He underscored the refrain, “The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind, The answer is blowin’ in the wind,” indicates the uncertainty of existence, without providing any definite answers to these struggles. Lemieux offered a diplomatic perspective on how Dylan cautiously articulated the argument that the latter is less politically engaged in his lyricism and more socially driven, towards the cause of injustice faced by the individuals: “Although Dylan insisted that the song wasn’t an act of protest, lines like “Yes, ‘n’ how many times can a man turn his head, /Pretending he just doesn’t see?” directly questioned those who refused to directly engage in the protest movement.” (Lemieux 6). As his songs capture a counterculture movement, it can be scrutinised from the lens of “authenticity” as highlighted by Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* and can be regarded as antithetical to the conventional way of thinking, making one’s own choice of freedom and credibility.

Based on the idea of Bob Dylan’s song *Blowin’ in the Wind*, Sartre’s idea of “authenticity” can be appealed to infer the existential notions of responsibility, freedom and self-introspection ingrained within the verses. Dylan through his song, posited questions about

human agonies, justice and peace, reflecting the philosophy of Sartre, by inviting listeners to encounter the obscurity and ambiguity of human plight. As Sartre's "authenticity" argues for a radical disposition of thought and action, likewise, Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind* compelled the listeners to analyse one's role regarding the social hardships and injustices to a considerable extent. Discerning intrinsically from an existential perception, the lyrics of Dylan encouraged an encounter with the self, similar to the concept of "authenticity", where it propounds to discard passive collusion and rather encourages to have an active participation with the world. This was to raise deeper awareness on one's freedom of choice and being responsible for the cause, irrespective of its ambiguity and vagueness, aligning it with the social injustices being practiced during his time. Basu opines that: "It will also highlight Dylan's position as the 'counter-culture' messiah-forever shifting his marginal position to accommodate social changes, perceptions and assumptions- and always speaking of social crimes and imbalances." (Basu 2).

Dylan's "Masters of War" is another example of protest song which constitutes existential undercurrent, focusing on the moral estrangement and individual's helplessness seemingly before the corrupt world that sustains war. Sartre emphasises the necessity for individuals to confront their freedom and make authentic choices, free from the bad faith of societal norms or external pressures. In this reframing, the "masters of war" can be seen as figures who have abdicated their existential responsibility, choosing to hide behind the façade of authority, thereby denying their freedom and the moral consequences of their actions. The song could be rewritten to highlight how these individuals, in their pursuit of power, reject authentic engagement with their own existence, opting instead for a life dictated by convenience, control, and illusion. By juxtaposing the stark suffering caused by war with the failure of the "masters" to take responsibility, the existential undertone would underscore the theme of bad faith: the avoidance of genuine self-awareness and the rejection of moral autonomy in favour of the status quo. The resulting narrative would challenge the listener to question their own authenticity, as Sartre's philosophy insists that individuals must recognise their role in shaping the world and confront the consequences of their actions. Bob Dylan's *Masters of War* can be

analysed through the lens of existentialism, particularly in how it critiques the socio-political structures that perpetuate war and the inauthenticity of those who wield power. According to Sartre, existentialism lays emphasis on individual freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. The “masters of war” in Dylan’s song symbolise political and military leaders who, rather than confronting the consequences of their choices and recognising their own freedom, adopt external roles of authority that obscure their true responsibilities. These figures live in *bad faith*, a key concept in Sartre’s existentialism, where they deny their freedom and moral responsibility by placing the blame for the destruction they cause onto abstract systems (such as the state or military) rather than acknowledging their active role in perpetuating violence.

Dylan’s lyrics condemn these figures as distant, morally detached individuals who profit from war without bearing the burden of its consequences. They are not authentic; they refuse to take ownership of their choices, instead hiding behind the false narrative of duty or necessity. The socio-political critique within the song is clear: it denounces a system where power is concentrated in the hands of a few who manipulate the masses, pushing others into violent conflicts while remaining shielded from the destruction they cause. These masters fail to recognise their existential freedom, and by choosing to ignore the humanity of others, they negate their own authenticity. In alignment with Sartre’s existentialism, Dylan challenges the listener to reflect on the societal systems that encourage such bad faith. The song calls attention to the way power structures through their manipulation of public sentiment and the alienation of individuals create a climate in which inauthentic, morally unaccountable choices are made on a large scale. Dylan’s critique goes beyond the individuals in power; it also implicates the broader society that allows such figures to thrive. For Sartre, this situation represents the collective failure to recognise and confront individual freedom and responsibility within the social order. In *Masters of War*, the listener is urged to reflect on the role they play in perpetuating these systems of power, challenging them to embrace their own freedom and responsibility, and to act authentically in defiance of the inauthentic choices of the powerful.

Melody of Despair

Johnny Cash's reaction to the Vietnam War and the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s reflected a deepening sense of disillusionment with the establishment and its treatment of the marginalised. While he initially garnered attention for his patriotism, his growing empathy for the soldiers and civilians affected by the war led him to subtly challenge the authority that perpetuated it. Cash's music had become a powerful vehicle for expressing the pain and despair of those disenfranchised by war and inequality, capturing the emotional toll of a society in turmoil. His lyrics often conveyed a radical critique of the status quo, aligning with the voices of protest that sought to expose the injustices of a system that left many behind. Through his raw and unflinching portrayals of suffering, Cash's work moved beyond mere commentary, offering a poignant reflection on the human cost of conflict and the deep yearning for change. In this case, Silverman commented: "He was associated, though not without his reluctance, with the genre of country music, generally a politically conservative genre of popular music." (Silverman 93).

Johnny Cash, in his rendition of the folk song *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* (written and sung originally by Peter La Farge), masterfully propounds the social injustices faced by Native Americans, particularly focusing on the story of Ira Hayes—a Pima Native American and a US Marine who became famous for his role in hoisting the American flag through the Battle of Iwo Jima during the World War II. The song highlights the stark contrast between the heroism associated with Hayes' actions and the tragic circumstances of his life thereafter. Through a poignant storytelling, the song critiques the broader societal and systemic inequities faced by Native Americans, especially their exploitation and marginalisation in American society. The ballad paints a vivid picture of Ira Hayes as a war hero, celebrated briefly for his bravery, yet it underscores the deep irony that despite his sacrifices, he returns to a life marked by poverty, discrimination, and a lack of recognition. The lyrics emphasise the painful disconnect between the nation's patriotic ideals and the reality for Native American veterans like Hayes, who return home only to be forgotten and neglected. By doing so, the song exposes the broader social injustices inherent in the American

treatment of Indigenous people, pointing to the false promises of equality and justice that were not extended to them. Through his rendition of the song *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, Johnny Cash not only immortalises the story of an individual but also raises a broader critique of societal structures that perpetuate racial and cultural inequalities. His choice to tell this story through the folk music tradition, known for its capacity to address social and political issues, enhances the song's impact, giving voice to a community that had long been silenced and marginalised. Through his rendition, Cash elevates the story of Ira Hayes into a powerful commentary on social injustice and the failure of the American government to honour the true contributions of its marginalised citizens.

The Ballad of Ira Hayes can also be aligned with Sartre's concept of authenticity, particularly in how it highlights the dissonance between societal ideals and the lived reality of marginalised individuals. Existentialism emphasises the importance of individuals acknowledging their freedom, responsibility, and the necessity of living authentically acting in a way that is true to one's own existence rather than conforming to societal expectations or external roles. In Cash's portrayal of Ira Hayes, there is a profound existential contrast between the authenticity of Hayes' individual sacrifice and the inauthenticity of the society that exploits and neglects him. In the song, Ira Hayes is initially celebrated as a hero for his role in raising the American flag at Iwo Jima, symbolising his brief acceptance within a narrative constructed by society. However, Cash's lyrics make clear that despite his service and sacrifice, Hayes is forced to return to a life of poverty, alcoholism, and racial prejudice elements that prevent him from achieving an authentic existence. This failure of society to acknowledge Hayes as a whole, complex human being is a direct example of bad faith in Sartrean terms, where society chooses to view him only through the lens of a narrow, constructed identity of heroism, while ignoring the existential reality of his struggles as a Native American. Rather than allowing Hayes the freedom to define his own life, society imposes a superficial narrative upon him, erasing his humanity and the complexity of his existence. Sartre would argue that the systemic injustice and neglect faced by Hayes reflect the inauthentic choices of both society and individuals who fail to take responsibility for their role in perpetuating these

conditions. The way Hayes' heroism is exploited for patriotic purposes, only to be discarded afterward, exemplifies how social structures through their norms and expectations denigrate the freedom and agency of individuals, forcing them into preordained roles and denying their authentic self. In contrast, Hayes' own struggle to survive after the war represents the challenge of confronting the existential realities of his identity in a world that refuses to recognise him as an authentic, fully realised person. Through *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, Cash underscores the anxiety between societal expectations and the quest for personal authenticity, inviting the listener to reflect upon how their own actions contribute to the larger systems that inhibit freedom and perpetuate injustice. Sartre calls for individuals to reject societal impositions and to live in accordance with their true self, a stance that Cash subtly advocates for in his depiction of Ira Hayes' tragic fate. Ultimately, the song acts as a critique of the inauthenticity of a society that, while quick to celebrate individuals like Hayes in moments of collective pride, fails to recognise and uphold their inherent worth and dignity in the long term.

In Johnny Cash's *Drive On*, the theme of alienation is poignantly conveyed through the narrative of a war veteran who reflects on the psychological and emotional toll of combat. The song encapsulates the alienation felt by soldiers both during and after war, highlighting the disconnection between their personal experiences and the society that sends them into battle. The lyrics capture the soldier's internal conflicts, as he tries to grapple with the brutal reality of war, the disillusionment with its glorification, and the estrangement he feels upon returning home. The line "Drive on, soldier / Drive on, it's all that you can do" suggests a sense of detachment, as the soldier is urged to continue, despite the profound isolation and trauma he endures. This alienation is compounded by the broader socio-political context, where veterans are often overlooked or misunderstood by a society that romanticise war without acknowledging its true costs. The soldier's feelings of alienation are both personal, rooted in the loss of his own humanity in the face of violence, and social, reflecting the lack of recognition and empathy from a civilian population that fails to grasp the full extent of his suffering. Cash's depiction of war's dehumanising effects emphasises how soldiers, once sent to fight, are

often left adrift, alienated from both themselves and the society they served, unable to reconcile their wartime experiences with the expectations of the world around them. In *Drive On*, Sartre's concept of authenticity can be applied to the war veteran's struggle to reconcile his own identity with the external expectations imposed by society. Sartre's philosophy asserts that individuals must deal with their inherent freedom and responsibility, and live authentically by defining their own existence rather than conforming to societal roles or pressures. In the song, the soldier is trapped in a state of inauthenticity, as his war experience is largely defined by the roles assigned to him, first as a soldier, then as a returnee expected to simply "drive on" without acknowledging the deep trauma he carries. His alienation reflects a denial of his own freedom to define his life outside the confines of the societal narrative of war and heroism. The song illustrates the soldier's inability to authentically engage with his own suffering because society pressures him to continue moving forward without addressing the emotional and psychological scars of battle. According to Sartre, the soldier's true existential struggle lies in his confrontation with the absurdity of war and his recognition of his freedom to reject the roles forced upon him by society. Only by embracing his full humanity and acknowledging the weight of his experiences can he begin to live authentically, transcending the alienation that defines his existence in the aftermath of war. The song ultimately challenges listeners to question the societal expectations placed on veterans and the importance of recognising their freedom to define their post-war identity. In *Drive On*, Sartre's concept of authenticity is deeply aligned with the war veteran's internal struggle to reclaim his sense of self after being defined by external roles, both during and after the war. Sartre emphasises that authenticity arises when individuals reject societal norms and expectations in favour of making their own choices and embracing the responsibility for those decisions. The soldier in Cash's song is caught between the expectations of a society that views him through the lens of his war service and the personal anguish he endures, a disconnect that prevents him from truly living in an authentic manner. The soldier's inability to process or acknowledge the psychological trauma he has suffered speaks to his existential crisis, where the world around him through phrases like "drive on" demands that he continue forward without ever confronting his own reality. In Sartrean terms, this is a

kind of “bad faith,” where the soldier denies his own experiences and freedom to define himself beyond the narrow, imposed identity of a soldier. The alienation he feels is both existential and social, as he is trapped in an externally imposed role, unable to reclaim his true identity in the face of war’s dehumanising effects. Sartre would argue that to live authentically, the soldier must confront the absurdity of the expectations placed on him and face the truth of his existence. He must acknowledge his suffering and redefine his life not as a soldier following orders, but as a free individual responsible for his own choices and meaning, despite the pressures of a society that demands he must continue without reflection. Only by embracing his freedom to shape his post-war existence can the soldier achieve authenticity, breaking free from the alienation that war has imposed upon him.

A Comparative Study

A comparative study between Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash regarding their protest music, specifically focusing on songs like *Blowin’ in the Wind*, *Masters of War*, *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, and *Drive On*, reveals how both the artists used their music to address social and political issues, but with different approaches in terms of their themes and expression. Bob Dylan, through *Blowin’ in the Wind* and *Masters of War*, uses his lyrics to challenge authority, war, and societal injustice in a broad, philosophical sense. *Blowin’ in the Wind* is a poignant rhetorical question that captures the longing for peace and equality, urging listeners to question the status quo. Meanwhile, *Masters of War* delivers a direct and scathing critique of the political and military leaders who perpetuate war for personal gain, with Dylan’s accusatory tone exposing the moral emptiness of those in power. His protest music is intellectual and poetic, using symbolism and abstraction to force the listener to confront complex issues of human rights, freedom, and moral responsibility.

In contrast, Johnny Cash’s *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* and *Drive On* approach protest music through a more personal, narrative-driven lens. *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* narrates the tragic story of a Native American war hero, highlighting the stark contrast between his heroism in war and the social neglect and discrimination he faced upon returning home. The portrayal of Hayes captures the emotional

and human costs of war, focusing on the lived experiences of marginalised individuals. *Drive On*, similarly, reflects the alienation and trauma felt by veterans, illustrating how they are discarded by society after serving in war. Cash's protest music tends to focus more on the personal and emotional impact of societal issues, using storytelling to make broader socio-political points.

Dylan's protest songs tend to be more abstract and philosophical, often questioning societal structures at large, while Cash's songs are grounded in real human stories, emphasising empathy and personal responsibility. While both artists criticise war, inequality, and injustice, Dylan's lyrics invite intellectual reflection, while Cash's narratives provide a visceral, emotional connection to the struggles of marginalised individuals. A comparative study of these songs highlights the different methods of protest within their music, poetic, symbolic critique and Cash's storytelling rooted in human experience demonstrating that both artists were deeply committed to challenging societal norms and giving voice to the voiceless, albeit through distinct artistic lenses.

Aligning Bob Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind*, *Masters of War*, Johnny Cash's *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, and *Drive On* with Sartre's concept of authenticity provides a profound critique of the socio-political systems that shape the individual's existence. Sartre's existentialism emphasises the necessity of living authentically by acknowledging one's freedom, assuming responsibility, and rejecting the roles imposed by society. In *Blowin' in the Wind*, Dylan calls for introspection and an awakening to the unjust systems that stifle human freedom, urging the listener to confront the societal structures that perpetuate inequality and war. The rhetorical questions in the song reflect a yearning for authenticity, a world where individuals are free to live with dignity, unbound by the inauthentic constraints of oppression and prejudice. Similarly, in *Masters of War*, Dylan condemns those who exploit others for power and profit, accusing them of living in *bad faith*, where they avoid confronting the moral consequences of their actions and deny the freedom of others. By refusing to take responsibility for their role in the suffering they cause, the "masters" embody Sartre's idea of inauthenticity existing

within a false narrative of control and superiority, while failing to acknowledge the humanity of those they harm.

In contrast, Johnny Cash's *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* and *Drive On* highlight the personal, lived experiences of individuals caught within these societal constructs. *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* narrates the story of a Native American war hero who, despite his heroism, comes back to a life of alienation and neglect. Hayes' struggle reflects Sartre's concept of *bad faith*, as society imposes a limited and dehumanising identity upon him, first as a soldier and then as a Native American, disregarding his full humanity and the complexities of his experiences. Cash's song reveals how the rejection of authenticity by both society and the individual results in alienation, as Hayes is unable to assert his freedom and redefine his life outside the expectations placed upon him. Similarly, in *Drive On*, the soldier is trapped in the role of a veteran, pushed to "drive on" despite the trauma and emotional cost of war. This societal demand for him to continue without confronting the existential weight of his experiences exemplifies Sartre's notion of existential alienation, the soldier is denied the space to reflect, grieve, or reclaim his identity, forced into a path defined by others. Both Dylan and Cash expose the alienating forces of war and social structures, revealing how these forces suppress authentic existence by defining individuals in limiting, inauthentic roles. Sartre's existentialism calls for individuals to confront their own freedom and responsibility, to reject the false roles imposed by society, and to live authentically. Through these four songs, Dylan and Cash reveal the ways in which social, political, and military systems infringe on human freedom, urging the listener to question and confront these systems in order to live more authentically and with greater moral responsibility.

Conclusion

Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan's music, through their poignant portrayals of war and socio-political struggle, vividly encapsulate the existential crises faced by individuals caught within the broader upheavals of war and systemic injustice. Both artists explore the tension between personal identity and societal expectations, illustrating how war serves as a crucible that not only tests

individuals' moral and existential boundaries but also exposes the alienating effects of political and social structures. For Dylan, the Vietnam War and the broader conflict of his time serve as a backdrop for his critique of the powerful figures who perpetuate conflict, creating a world in which individuals are stripped of their authenticity and freedom. His music calls for self-reflection, urging listeners to confront the dehumanising forces of authority, injustice, and militarism that impose inauthentic roles on both soldiers and civilians. Through his probing questions and direct challenges to power, Dylan highlights the existential dilemma of living under systems that demand conformity and complicity, forcing individuals to live in *bad faith* rather than embrace their existential freedom and responsibility. Cash, in a similarly critical yet more intimate manner, delves into the lived experiences of those directly impacted by war veterans and marginalised communities, who are often forced into roles defined by external expectations. Through his storytelling, Cash exposes how war's traumatic effects perpetuate alienation, both for those on the frontlines and those left behind. His portrayal of individuals such as soldiers and indigenous war heroes underscores the emotional and existential toll of conflict, as these figures struggle to reconcile their identities with the harsh realities of a society that fails to honour or understand their sacrifices. Cash's lyrics reveal how societal neglect and racial injustice trap individuals in inauthentic, dehumanised roles, preventing them from living freely and authentically.

Both Cash and Dylan use war as a lens to explore the alienation, disillusionment, and moral ambiguity that characterise existential crises, especially in the context of the Vietnam War era. They highlight the consequences of war not only on the battlefield but also on the very foundation of personal identity, illustrating how political and military systems, through their manipulation and dehumanisation, force individuals to suppress their true selves. The existential crisis in their music is one of confronting an absurd and often brutal world, where individuals must either accept the false roles imposed by society or confront the overwhelming challenge of defining themselves authentically amidst chaos. In doing so, both artists compel their listeners to reflect on the nature of freedom, responsibility, and the personal cost of living authentically in a world

that demands conformity. Ultimately, their music serves as a profound critique of war and social systems, offering a call to transcend inauthenticity and reclaim one's existential agency in the face of political and social oppression.

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