

Looking for "Our Song": Canadian Soldiers, Music, and the Remembrance of War

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Abstract: Since 2012, I have interviewed Canadian veterans on their relationship with music. What emerged from my interviews is that many soldiers have sought an "anthem" during deployment, a song that, like those found in movie soundtracks, would help commemorate their service. In this paper, I consider why soldiers might seek these anthems by examining two pivotal musical moments: one during deployment (the music soldiers heard before going into combat) and one in post-deployment (the music they consumed upon their return home). I conclude by considering the anthems' short- and long-term implications by drawing from the work of Hannah Arendt.

Résumé: Depuis 2012, j'interroge d'anciens combattants canadiens au sujet de leur relation à la musique. Ce qui est apparu au fil des entrevues, c'est que de nombreux soldats recherchaient un hymne durant leur déploiement, une chanson qui, à l'instar de celles des bandes-son des films, les aiderait à commémorer leur passage sous les drapeaux. Dans cet article, je considère la raison pour laquelle les soldats recherchent de tels hymnes en examinant deux moments charnières du fait musical: l'un au cours du déploiement (la musique que les soldats entendaient avant d'aller au combat), l'autre après le déploiement (la musique qu'ils choisissaient en rentrant chez eux). Je conclus en considérant les implications à court et à long terme des hymnes à partir des travaux de Hannah Arendt.

For over a century, the American movie industry has produced a substantive repertoire of combat films for mass consumption; since the Vietnam War, the number of war movies has proliferated: from *The Green Berets* (1968), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Forrest Gump* (1994) to *The Hurt Locker* (2008), military combat has been a popular — and highly lucrative — subject. War films have also been important for many American veterans who feel recognized for their service through

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motion pictures; these films are especially meaningful when the narratives valorize images of conflict through landscapes, stories, and especially songs, even if many veterans acknowledge upon closer reflection that the depictions are not entirely accurate (Thorpe 2017).

But what happens to Canadian soldiers who — for better or for worse — are not depicted in these kinds of mass-mediated texts and don't have a soundtrack to represent their own experience? Since 2012, I have interviewed dozens of Canadian veterans who served in a range of tours — including Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan — on their relationship with music “in theatre” (a military term for the geographical space of war operations) and in post-deployment. What emerged from my interviews is that many Canadian soldiers sought an “anthem” during their tours, a song that, like those found in movie soundtracks, would help commemorate their service. In this article, I consider why North American soldiers might seek these anthems, and how these anthems in turn shape their ongoing mental health. I begin by considering the anthemic choices of American Vietnam War combatants, after which I turn to more recent conflicts and the meaningful songs identified by groups of American and Canadian soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. In particular, I am interested in exploring how their anthems functioned during two pivotal musical moments: one *during* deployment (the anthems soldiers heard immediately before going into combat) and one in *post-deployment* (the anthems they consumed upon their initial return home). While we might recognize the first moment as a heightened experience, we may overlook the importance of the second, post-deployment context when soldiers often listen to their chosen anthems repeatedly, and usually in isolation. To understand the anthems' short- and long-term psychological implications, I could draw from a small but growing literature that targets music as a tool to help veterans manage PTSD symptoms (Rorke 1996; Benisom, Amir, and Wolf 2008; Dillingham 2011). Instead, I have chosen to frame my analysis through a philosophical lens and, to this end, I borrow from the work of political theorist Hannah Arendt. Arendt's philosophical insights on loneliness and solitude may help explain what the soldiers experience psychically after their deployment, and why and how they might utilize anthems to protect their mental health when they return home and long after their service has ended.

In this article, I draw my information about American troops' relationship to music from the work of Lisa Gilman. Her book *My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of U.S. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan* (2016) is based on interviews with 34 veterans (and one spouse of a veteran), the majority of whom had been deployed one or more times to Iraq, with some having been deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan (Gilman: x). Because no

parallel interview archive exists for Canadian military personnel, I interviewed 25 Canadian veterans between 2012 and 2017 to learn about their musical practices during deployment. I located and interviewed these veterans through connections with professional colleagues who live and work close to CFB Edmonton, CFB Petawawa, and CFB Kingston. Once I had conducted my initial interviews in each of these cities, soldiers contacted one another and referred other veterans on to me. I conducted all of the interviews in person (in offices, coffee shops, etc.) except one which I conducted via Skype. These veterans ranged in age from 27 to 56, and their service spanned from Bosnia in the early 1990s to the more recent conflict in Afghanistan.

Before we turn to learning about the listening practices of American and Canadian veterans we should first ask: What is an anthem? Most likely we think of an anthem as a national song, what the *Oxford Dictionary* identifies as a “solemn patriotic sound officially adopted by a country as an expression of national identity” (2015). More broadly, however, an anthem can refer to a sound that is associated with a specific cause, group, or body (2015). An anthem, in other words, is a song of loyalty or devotion, as to a nation or college, or a song that is representative of a distinct group. There are pieces chosen by formal channels to take on symbolic significance: within Canada, for instance, there is an “official” national anthem (“O Canada”) and a Royal Anthem (“God Save the Queen”). Military institutions also have anthemic pieces: the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force, for instance, have authorized “Heart of Oak” and the “RCAF March Past” as their official marches, respectively. Beyond these “official” anthems, however, there are also the “unofficial” types: on a national level, for example, “The Maple Leaf Forever” is Canada’s “unofficial” anthem. Within military institutions, we might also recognize that soldiers, sailors, and airmen¹ choose their own anthems that become important sonic symbols, especially during and after wartime. These are pieces that most often don’t make it into films and television, songs that we as civilians may never encounter.

Sometimes these “unofficial” anthems are presented in the media with such frequency that they seem to define a generation. Take, for instance, songs from Hollywood films depicting the Vietnam War: Doug Bradley and Craig Werner argue that movies made about this conflict over the past 40 years (including films like *Forrest Gump*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Good Morning Vietnam*, among many others) have given audiences the impression that the “unofficial” anthems — songs the soldiers supposedly consumed on tour — were overtly political (Bradley and Werner 2015: 6). The authors point to songs like Creedence Clearwater

Revival's rock hit "Fortunate Son" (featured in *War Dogs*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*) that suggest an attitude of resistance.

Some folks are born made to wave the flag
 Ooh, they're red, white, and blue
 And when the band plays "Hail to the chief"
 Ooh, they point the cannon at you, Lord

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no senator's son, son
 It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate one... (1969)

Similarly, Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth (Stop, Hey What's that Sound?)" (featured in *Forrest Gump*, *Lord of War*, and *Tropic Thunder*) is another politically-inflected song popular in Vietnam films:

There's battle lines being drawn
 Nobody's right if everybody's wrong
 Young people speaking their minds
 Getting so much resistance from behind

It's time we stop
 Hey, what's that sound
 Everybody look – what's going down? (1966)

During Bradley and Werner's interviews with over 200 Vietnam veterans and musicians, however, they discovered that most often, the songs *actual* soldiers wanted to talk about from their deployment were not about resistance, but rather centred around loneliness and separation, including songs like Peter, Paul and Mary's "Leaving on a Jet Plane" and The Temptations' hit "My Girl," among others (2015: 3). Further, the authors found that the songs with which most Vietnam GIs most closely identified were about going home; one song in particular "plugged in with every aspect of the soldiers' experience" and reached anthemic status: The Animals' "We've Gotta Get Out of This Place" (10):

Watch my daddy in bed and tired
 Watch his hair been turning away
 He's been working and slaving his life away
 Oh yes, I know it...
 We've gotta get outta this place

If it's the last thing we ever do
 We gotta get outta this place
 'Cause girl there's a better life
 For me and you (1965)

Although this song was ubiquitous amongst American troops during the Vietnam War, Bradley and Werner point out that the various military units gave this anthem diverse meanings (2015: 11). Still, the song spoke to the majority of soldiers' desire to return home alive and be with their loved ones. Clearly, this research suggests a disconnect between the more personalized songs the soldiers actually consumed in theatre and the more politicized, distrusting songs used to depict Vietnam GIs for popular consumption.

Of course, not all 20th century films about war depicted soldiers as questioning combatants. As Wesley O'Brien argues, most films depicting World War II ("The Good War"), for instance, depicted American soldiers and their allies as having honourable characteristics; this positive depiction, reinforced by the musical score, supported the moral necessity of the war that changed so many lives (O'Brien 2012: 42).² Because the Vietnam War was so unpopular, it marked a turning point in the depiction of combat heroism and the patriotic narratives of earlier movies were superseded by stories of uncertainty. Soldier identities were now considerably more fractured and masculinity more unsure: consider Robert Altman's 1970 film *MASH* (which O'Brien called a veiled "response to Vietnam" [15]), the television show that ensued, or Oliver Stone's 1989 film *Born on the Fourth of July*, to name but a few. By the Vietnam conflict, the American movie hero of "The Good War" was far less shiny (O'Brien 2012: 15).

Over the past few decades, these uncertain and ambivalent American soldiers from the Vietnam movie trenches once again have been replaced, this time by the self-assured and committed warrior. This character is the result of a wildly successful hybridization of the military complex and the entertainment industry called "militainment," which has crept into television programs, movies, and video games so cleverly that many viewers are unaware of its social and commercial significance. As of 2016, first-person shooter games accounted for 27 percent of the gaming market, making it the most viable gaming genre in the 21st century (Statista 2017). The *Call of Duty* franchise alone has sold more than 250 million copies, totalling more than 15 billion dollars in sales (*Business Wire* 2016).

As Martin Daughtry argues, these cross-media renditions of war are often exoticized as a "state of exception," rendering audiences as voyeurs into an existence we could not imagine otherwise (2014: 230). The soldiers themselves

are reduced to base humans who cannot act or feel beyond their aggression; musically, metal and rap genres dominate their soundtracks which simultaneously reinforces the soldiers *and* the musical genres as hypermasculine and brutish (Gilman 2010: 10, 2016: 9). This is a very dangerous soldier stereotype, to be sure: the ubiquity of militainment means that the next generation of young recruits are being rewarded for disassociating from their feelings and executing unemotional violence. More immediately however, these images also inhibit our understanding of current soldiers, individuals who present publically as iron-clad, but frequently suffer with PTSD privately in post-deployment.³ If this damaging stereotype dominates our mediascape, how can we learn about the actual lives of soldiers and move beyond these limiting depictions? How might music help us in this endeavour?

Fortunately, Lisa Gilman's research on American veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan has broadened our understanding of these soldiers' subjectivities; musically, her work has revealed that these soldiers had a strong preference for heavy metal and rap genres, but that they also listened to a wide range of music beyond these two styles, including punk, reggae, and pop, among many others (Gilman 2010: 4). Her study has been critical in allowing us to see a wider range of the soldiers' humanity as fully-fledged beings with fears, joys, comforts, and pains that (not surprisingly) are linked with specific songs. Gilman's research, however important, has only considered American veterans, and did not cross any national borders. How then do their musical experiences compare with Canadian soldiers deployed to Afghanistan?

Before we consider similarities and differences between American and Canadian soldiers' relationships to their musical anthems, it is important to outline some differences in musical consumption practices between Canada and the United States that might uniquely shape Canadian soldiers' listening preferences. Despite the geographical proximity of the United States and Canada, and the pervasiveness of the English-language Western "international repertoire" in both countries, there are still important musical differences that separate the two. The two countries' musical uniqueness stems, in part, from different immigration patterns that resulted in particular regional musical articulations, such as rap on the American East Coast and Francophone musics in Quebec and among other French communities in Canada, for example. Differences at the border can also be traced to a 1971 Canadian federal legislation ("CanCon") that was designed to support, promote, and protect a range of Canadian musics, particularly from the powerful American music industry.⁴ Popular music on mainstream Canadian radio (and on Canadian music television) must feature a mandated minimum amount of Canadian content in addition to international programming and, as a result, the musical

repertoires are often wider than those on American airwaves (Pegley 2008: 39-41). Historically, particular musical genres receive heavier airplay “at home”: rap has long been identified as an “American” genre while, within English Canada, mainstream rock (with bands like The Tragically Hip, Sloan, and Blue Rodeo) has been symbolized as a Canadian cultural marker.⁵ All of these differences point to the importance of paying close attention to the heterogeneity of North American soldiers’ musical consumption practices and asking more culturally contextualized questions to determine whether and how Canadian soldiers’ musical preferences might differ from their American counterparts.

So which musics were American and Canadian soldiers listening to while they were deployed and for what purposes? While we acknowledge the diversity of American soldiers’ listening practices in Iraq and Afghanistan, certain songs still emerged in Gilman’s research as having special importance. Through her interviews, Gilman learned about many songs that were important to American soldiers, but identifies Drowning Pool’s “Bodies” as significant to many soldiers who used it as an “incitement to violence” with enough frequency that it reached anthemic status (2016: 53). One of the passages from “Bodies” includes the following text.

Skin against skin blood and bone
 You’re all by yourself but you’re not alone
 You wanted in now you’re here
 Driven by hate consumed by fear

Let the bodies hit the floor (repeat 4x) (2001)

That Gilman’s interviewees identified this nu metal song as the one “that immediately evoked their war experience” is not surprising: it is the genre of music used in American military boot camps where new recruits report being “saturated” by this sound while viewing “repulsive” images of exploding bombs and dead Iraqis (2016: 53-54). This music was then adopted by the soldiers as anthems to bolster themselves before combat; subsequently, music by metal bands was then used to depict and exploit soldiers within militainment texts like video games and films, which in turn were sold to youth, i.e., the next generation of potential recruits (more than a few soldiers recounted that military-style video games enticed them to enlist). In short, it’s not surprising that soldiers consume this music during deployment: it is heavily endorsed by both the mass media and the military complex.⁶

Like the American soldiers Gilman interviewed, some of my Canadian informants also remembered listening to artists like Linkin Park and Eminem,

particularly to help pump them up before going “outside the wire.” Some of them reported hearing “Bodies” often at base camp and it was also fairly common to hear Metallica resonating from the Canadian artillery combat vehicles. But what happened behind closed doors? What were the Canadian soldiers listening to when not within the purview of their colleagues on base? What were the playlists, for instance, within the armoured vehicles en route to combat?

In search of answers, I asked all the veterans in my study who served in the infantry (those who participated in the front lines of battle) about the music heard in the Canadian “tanks” (the LAVs, or light-armoured vehicles). Because I located many of the veterans through word-of-mouth and referrals, I was able to interview a cluster of veterans who served during “Operation Athena” (a mission in the Kandahar area of Afghanistan from 2005-2011). These veterans were deployed in 2006 and assigned to one particular LAV. This provided an opportunity to learn about the songs that were played in the LAV from soldiers of varying ranks and roles. This vehicle included a driver in the front (segregated in their own area), a gunner in the turret, a crew commander, and seven people in the back of the vehicle (from all of my interviews, these seven people invariably identified as men, and no interviewees knew of infantry women who ever travelled in the back of the LAV). The soldiers rigged portable speakers in the back, into which they would plug an iPod (or mp3 player). Two of my informants (Kevin and Ritchie, interviewed together, October 3, 2013) recalled that there were different phases of music listening for infantry personnel: during the first phase they were stationary (before they left base), and the second phase occurred after they arrived at their destination in the desert where they would often live behind their vehicles for 40-50 days at a time. Both of these contexts were more “public” because the soldiers were within earshot of other personnel living on base or behind other LAVs; my interviewees recounted how, in these moments, they listened to heavy metal through the LAV speakers, songs that reinforced a more “stereotypical” image of the hyper-masculinized soldier. While en route to the field or to combat, however, the music was markedly different; these musical decisions were usually made by one individual who had temporary control of the speakers, or by the group as a whole. Kevin and Ritchie remember one song that was played repeatedly during their tour (a favourite of their higher-ranking colleague): The Who’s “Behind Blue Eyes” (interview, October 3, 2013). I was surprised to learn that this song often accompanied them into combat: the lyrics don’t speak of or to the “enemy”; instead, they are more introspective and convey the misunderstood singer’s personal torment.

No one knows what it's like
 To be the bad man
 To be the sad man
 Behind blue eyes
 But my dreams
 They aren't as empty
 As my conscience seems to be
 I have hours, only lonely
 My love is vengeance
 That's never free (1971)

Although this song was chosen by a higher-ranking colleague, one can imagine the effects of these lyrics upon a young soldier mentally preparing for combat that is only kilometres away. Sometimes song choices were made unilaterally (as in this instance), but often they were chosen by the group, sometimes with even more surprising results. Steve, the ground combat (crew) commander for that same LAV, recalled in our interview that the music his crew listened to was not always like that depicted in the media:

You could see all of the videos of the Americans on YouTube. [Their music] was always like, disturbed, always these hard, thrasher things put together ... and I love that stuff, don't get me wrong, but when you're in the bush, or in a field, and you're going to do the business [attack the enemy], and you know what's coming, my section ... would be listening to mellow stuff. (interview, October 6, 2013)

Steve explained that during his 2006 tour, three LAV vehicles worked in tandem: he described his LAV unit as the most “professional” and “unified” and explained that they listened to what he called “mellow” music. This music was not what is depicted in the media but included more pop and easy listening artists like Neil Diamond, Tom Jones, and Fleetwood Mac (especially the *Rumours* album). According to Steve, members of the second LAV were always striving to emulate the professionalism of his unit and “thrasher” music would bellow from their vehicle. The third unit, he recalled, “never quite gelled,” and he could not remember any of the music that came from their vehicle (interview, October 6, 2013). Music was central to his unit's morale and ultimate success.

Steve explained that while he enjoyed his unit's music, he wished they had found a tour “theme song,” music that would somehow capture the time spent there. “I wish we had a theme like Vietnam,” he recounted, “I wish our

generation had one” (interview, October 6, 2013). Why would he wish for this? Because rock music was extremely important during the Vietnam conflict, the war often is called the Rock ‘n’ Roll war, and there are many films — and memorable soundtracks — devoted to its depiction (*Apocalypse Now*, *Forest Gump*, among others).⁷ Steve is not naïve about these depictions, and spoke articulately about the musical representations and *mis*-representations in Vietnam films, pointing out that it was temporally not possible for the soldiers to have actually heard some of the music included in the soundtracks. Steve recognized that this music was injected by Hollywood to market a rebellious and sexier image of the war. Still, he too would have liked some sort of musical legacy to take with him, or perhaps, more importantly, a musical legacy to have left behind. His unit was able to find a memorable song, although it was not the one they expected. Despite all of the “grungier” or “sexier” musical anthems available to them, Steve relayed to me (with some hesitation and slight embarrassment) that his “section’s theme song” was Deep Blue Something’s “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.”

You say that we’ve got nothing in common
 No common ground to start from and we’re falling apart
 You’ll say the world has come between us
 Our lives have come between us still I know you just don’t care

And I said “What about *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*”?
 She said “I think I remember the film
 And as I recall, I think, we both kinda liked it”
 And I said, “Well that’s one thing we’ve got” (1993)

Steve explained that sometimes they would play and sing along to this song when they were en route to the field and uncertain whether they would face any combat over the next 40 days. This song became acutely important to them, however, when they were called out to a confirmed conflict, often in the middle of the night:

Going in on a battle run ... a high gear battle ... we got woken up at two in the morning, going in to fight these dudes, bad dudes, about two kilometres away ... so of course we’ve got the music going. This was one of the ones when we *knew* [battle] was happening [and] you’ve got that nervous, jittery, before-the-hockey-game feeling, but times a million ... And then the fireworks start and our brothers ... are getting lit up by what was supposed

to be 6 dudes and there's 40 of them, and we're going in with 10 or 12 dudes to help our guys out ... [and] we've got "Breakfast at Tiffany's" going. (Steve, interview, October 6, 2013)

Steve wasn't sure why this song was so important to his unit; I would like to suggest a few possible reasons here. At first glance, the song seems to be about romantic love, but one might also wonder whether the "we" who have nothing in common could be soldiers thrown together in close quarters in a war. Is the "you" who "just doesn't care" a comrade you know little but on whom your life depends? Or is it the "enemy" or even the Afghani population who may have seemed indifferent to the presence of Canadian soldiers in the area? Within the Afghani context, the lyrics leave room for considerable ambiguity. Steve smiled when he thought about his unit singing along to this pop song: "Big tough-looking dudes at the back [of the vehicle] singing at the top of their lungs ... [and then yelling] ... Play it again!!!" (interview, October 6, 2013). Steve talked about not needing the "thrasher" music to pump up his platoon because they were all highly professional and exceptional at their jobs; instead, he seemed to associate professionalism with music that is more *in the present moment* and about singing together (pop) rather than with music that helps prepare soldiers for the *next* moment (rap, metal). Steve felt that the units listening to the metal soundtracks were overstimulated too much of the time. He explained: "The guys who were continually ramped up — their brains broke [down].... It's a marathon and not a race, so you've gotta kind of level out and go the long road, right?" (interview, October 6, 2013). Singing "mellow" music while en route to a conflict played a key role in managing his soldiers' brain stimulation, and sharing these musical moments was an important part of their bonding experience.

Is this choice of anthem somehow connected to Canada's complex role in the war in Afghanistan? At first blush, it seems plausible that such an ambivalent anthem might reflect the Canadians' feelings towards fighting a war on behalf of Americans who — within US foreign policy and popular discourse — were "fighting back" against the Taliban for the events of 9/11 and bringing "freedom" to the people of Iraq and Afghanistan by ridding the world of what George W. Bush called "the evil-doers" (Perez-Rivas 2001: 1). The Canadians themselves, however, were not directly attacked and politicians were not speaking about the importance of bringing Canadian "values" to parts of the Middle East. Did Canadian troops — as active allies to the United States — therefore have mixed feelings about their deployment? While many veterans spoke of their reservations around the conflict, I was surprised to learn that their doubts had very little to do with bitterness toward American

foreign policy. Canadian soldiers fought closely alongside their American counterparts, often lived and worked side-by-side with Americans on and off base, and never in my interviews did any soldiers express resentment for their deployment to Afghanistan to support the United States.

Instead, I believe that this choice of anthem is more connected with Canada's contradictory and complex self-image as a peacekeeping nation. Since peacekeeping was officially linked with the Canadian brand in the 1950s, it has taken a central place in the country's collective identity, and poll after poll has indicated that Canadians believe their country's international deployments involve some sort of generous and self-sacrificing effort. For instance, according to a 2016 Nanos Research poll, nearly 70 percent of Canadians support Canada's peacekeeping efforts in war zones and millions of Canadians hold on to this peacekeeping ideal (McPhedran 2016). What many Canadians don't acknowledge — or, perhaps more accurately, don't want to acknowledge — is that Canada has been involved in active combat for decades. In *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (2012), Jamie Swift and Ian McKay support this argument by outlining how Canada's active military involvement over the second half of the 20th century has morphed the Cold War peacekeeper into a combatant, situating Canada not as a peacekeeping negotiator but as a new "Warrior Nation." Today, they write, Canada "has nothing to do with peaceful accommodation and steady improvement in the public good prompted by movements for fairness. Rather, it was created by wars, defended by soldiers, and kept free by patriotic support of military virtues" (2012: xi). My interviewees would concur that Canada no longer engages in "peacekeeping" but rather "peacemaking" — duties that include active armed conflict. This nebulous position comes at a cost: soldiers have told me that they have not gone forward to have their PTSD diagnosed because they feel weak doing so. If the "official" Canadian policy is peacekeeping, they ask, then how could I have PTSD? What is Canada's active role in this war if the ultimate goal is to create lasting peace?

Is it possible that some of their musical choices reflect this conflicted situation? Could "Breakfast at Tiffany's" be an ideal song to communicate this uncertainty? By extension, is it possible that "Breakfast at Tiffany's" parallels "We Gotta Get Outta This Place," the conflicted anthem chosen by thousands of conscripted American soldiers from the Vietnam War?

I'd like now to consider the repercussions of this music for Canadian soldiers within the context of a second pivotal moment: that which immediately followed their return home. At the end of their Afghanistan tours, Canadian soldiers were sent to Cyprus for a few days to debrief and decompress, after which they were sent home to Canada. The military then gave them "time

off” for a few weeks to adjust and reintegrate. While a mandatory “vacation” after a tour initially might seem like a reward, this can actually be a highly disorienting time for at least three reasons. First, soldiers must suddenly shift from a state of constant mental hyperarousal in the field to the quiet — and often the isolation — of home. Second, some soldiers feel let down because the event for which they had trained for so many years is now over, and they may never again have the chance to engage in combat. When I inquired about this further, one informant asked me what it would be like to study for years to become an academic, to learn how to teach, to research, and never be allowed to publish or present a paper. Or, what would it be like to have one article — like this one — be both the first and last publication of my career? Imagine the frustration and sadness to have completed the one opportunity to experience your professional goal, and you are only 35 years old. Finally, “time off” at home can be disorienting because after so many intense months together, soldiers frequently view their colleagues as their new “family,” a family that can identify with what they have just experienced, unlike their legal and chosen families at home with whom many of them now struggle to relate. In post-deployment, then, soldiers are torn away from their professional families to spend hours and days alone at home, left to be with their new, sometimes traumatic memories. For some, there is only time, and more time. Many soldiers suffering from operational stress injuries experience inexplicable feelings of anger; some report driving quickly and angrily through town, losing their tempers easily, or engaging in self-sabotaging behaviours. Most soldiers don’t feel they can talk to military psychiatrists for fear they could lose their jobs (PTSD is a disorder that can result in a military reassignment or discharge, and this is frightening for a young soldier with a family who depends upon them, a family who may have relocated three times in the last six years and relies upon a single military salary).

During the post-deployment “break,” many soldiers are left with traumatic memories of their own actions. Numerous veterans communicated to me that during this time music was their saving grace: whereas many things changed during their deployment — families changed, landscapes changed, the soldiers themselves changed — music served as a comforting constant. In this initial moment of reintegration, music can be pivotal: if you are trying to forget your experience in the field, you would likely avoid anthems and listen to music unrelated to your tour. If, however, you are a soldier who is remembering the moment when you finally reached the apex of your professional career and formed your military family, listening to the music associated with your deployment can bring about feelings of empowerment and belonging. But, we must also remember, this is the music that, consciously or unconsciously, is also associated with injured lives — enemy combatants, your colleagues, or possibly your own.

To help understand how soldiers might engage with this music during the post-deployment “break,” I borrow from the work of Hannah Arendt. Many of the traumatized veterans whom I interviewed described feeling exceedingly lonely in this transitional phase, and loneliness is a state Arendt strove to understand. According to Arendt, loneliness is characterized by a sense of isolation; lonely individuals lose connection with others, but, importantly, also with the self: in loneliness, there is no “inner dichotomy,” no means by which one can ask questions and receive answers from oneself (Arendt 2009 [2003]: 98). But meaningful company, Arendt argues, is always possible through what she calls “the silent dialogue of myself with myself,” also known as “solitude” (98). In solitude, she explains, we have a conversation with ourselves that is like a “two in one” wherein one can question life’s meanings and engage in moral thought with *one’s own self as interlocutor* (98). The corresponding activity to solitude, according to Arendt, is “thinking,” whereby the conscious functions as something that guides us and, importantly, tells us what we should and should not do — like commit murder — for fear that we will have to live with the “perpetrator” afterwards and never be friends with ourselves again (Fry 2009: 85). “Thinking,” then, can be an infinitely rewarding activity, or, under other, more guilty circumstances, it can be a soul-destroying nightmare.

For many traumatized soldiers, the post-deployment “break” is unstructured and isolating, often with unending time. There are a number of options, mentally speaking, soldiers can pursue in this delicate moment: they can *avoid* their thoughts, *avoid* solitude, and music can be a valuable tool for escaping their own minds. How many of us have blared music far too loudly to numb painful memories, push them away, and only deal with what is immediately in front of us? Similarly, one of Gilman’s interviewees spoke of music as a means of blocking out his thoughts: although he had been in private therapy following his deployment, he preferred music because “I feel I am being judged by doctors and the music doesn’t judge anyone” (Gilman 2016: 126). Conversely, this can be a time for soldiers to be *with* their memories and face their past actions. For many combatants, this may mean coming to terms with the realization that directly or indirectly, they have taken and/or devastated “enemy” lives. But how can a soldier have that dialogue when they spend most of their days and weeks alone, and when turning to professional help and admitting mental illness might jeopardize their professional career and livelihood?

Two issues arose when I explored music and loneliness in the post-deployment break. First, I was struck by the ways in which Canadian veterans turned to music to explore how they had changed as a result of their actions during deployment. Gavin, for instance, was deployed to Kandahar in 2006

for a little over seven months; shortly before the end of his tour, three of his peers were killed and he was physically injured. Gavin was sent home where he recovered and was eventually redeployed to Kabul in 2011-2012. He recalled that he did not listen to one piece of his own music on either deployment, but instead was singly focused on the tasks at hand. After his two deployments his relationship with music changed: once he returned home he “couldn’t get enough” songs, and his playlists ranged from hard rock to classical crossover artist Andrea Bocelli (interview, September 20, 2013). After his 2006 tour, one piece stood out as his post-deployment anthem: Johnny Cash’s “Hurt.”

What have I become
 My sweetest friend
 Everyone I know goes away
 In the end
 And you could have it all
 My empire of dirt
 I will let you down
 I will make you hurt (2002)

Gavin explained that this song spoke to him on several levels: “Everyone I know goes away in the end” represents his colleagues he lost in the last three weeks of his tour and his “empire of dirt” reminds him of living in the desert for weeks on end (“Twenty-six-plus guys out in the middle of nowhere” [interview, September 20, 2013]). I was most interested, however, in the way he used this song to reflect upon changes within himself. He told me that he returned from his 2006 deployment “changed”; it was evident to everyone around him, and even his mother expressed her grief and told him she “wanted her Gavin back.” Who was he now? Or, as the song asks, “What have I become?” Gavin used his anthem to reach back (“To see if I still feel”) to touch the person he once was (interview, September 20, 2013).

Second, soldiers not only used music as a tool to question who they had become, but they used music *itself* as an interlocutor for thought. In other words, soldiers spoke of music as though it were another person. Keith, a traumatized Canadian veteran who served in Bosnia, returned to Canada with severe PTSD. During our interview, he told me that since his tour, he has struggled meeting new people because they are always a potential threat to his safety (interview, February 23, 2012). Further, he struggled to reintegrate with his family and friends because they seemed to have changed while he was away. As a result, he described his closest contacts as the songs he knew before his deployment. What was important about these songs was that they

were unchanging, consistent, reliable, and, like a friend in tough times, they were always there when he needed them. I wonder in this instance whether music gave him not only access to a version of his life before the trauma, but also to a version of himself before the trauma when he was in dialogue with himself, when he could enjoy his own solitude. Music might function for these soldiers as an access point to the other half of the “two-in-one,” as a stand in for themselves as their *own* interlocutor. Indeed, only music seemed to provide Keith access to his “other half,” especially when he grappled with his devastating memories of war.

In these two instances, music allowed Gavin and Keith to engage with their pre-deployment selves as they grappled with their new, fragmented identities. But what happens if a veteran wants to be friends with their *current* self, to engage in moral thought about their recent actions (perhaps having followed orders even when they may have felt it was “wrong”), but *also* try to be fully whole and integrated with the identity of the soldier they trained so long to become? It’s not easy to leave identity behind. Does this struggle to integrate their wartime experience into their new post-deployment lives help explain their prevalence to play and replay their war anthems? In other words, does this music become their new interlocutor as a way for traumatized soldiers to engage with both their military and civilian selves? If so, what are the repercussions of repeatedly listening to anthems that represent the height of professional power and the apex of connection, but also may hold the memory of trauma, killing, ambivalence, and confusion?

These anthems, embedded with contradictory meanings, are difficult and maybe impossible to disentangle: “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” seems like a “fun” and “lighthearted” pop song to which soldiers sang along in theatre, but it may also embody the ambivalence Canadian soldiers experienced in the field as they faced an inconsistent “peacekeeping” protocol. “Bodies,” meanwhile, might have pumped up American soldiers serving in Iraq, but it also represents the entertainment and military industries that sell armed conflict as an exciting, hyper-masculinized career. I therefore ask not only what soldiers are doing to themselves as they repeatedly turn back to these anthems in their trauma, but how our societies may inadvertently be contributing to their suffering. When we attach to a benevolent peacekeeping narrative so we can feel proud about our government’s role in international conflict, and entertain ourselves by playing violent video games that diminish the virtual combatants’ humanity, are we sacrificing our soldiers’ mental health? Are these anthems symptomatic of the dangerous narratives we sell to civilians and soldiers alike? If we listen closely the next time we hear these anthems in films or videos or on television, we might want to take the music more seriously and think about it as the soldiers’

post-deployment *interlocutor*, their “only friend” within their traumatized solitude. We then may want to contemplate how — indeed, whether — these soldiers will be able to find their way back to themselves again. 🍀

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Notes

1. All individuals, male or female, are called “airmen” within the Royal Canadian Air Force.

2. There were well over 100 films released between 1941 and 1945 about World War II, and at least 32 of them were combat films. For more information, see O’Brien (2012).

3. An estimated 8 percent of post-deployed soldiers suffer from mental health issues, and approximately 25 percent of soldiers returning home from Afghanistan in particular reported suffering from mental problems and “high-risk drinking.”

4. These regulations are reinforced by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). For more information on the CRTC and the regulations for recognizing a cultural product as Canadian, see http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/info_sht/tv11.htm.

5. For more on the relationship between rock and Canadian identity, see Pegley (2011), Pegley (2005), and Duffett (2000).

6. Jonathan Pieslak points out that the list of “inspiring” filmic musical references is now extensive (2009: 34-30). Inspiration for modern-day combatants is not just drawn from films but also from video games. As Martin Daughtry has written: “For a generation that has grown up with filmic depictions of battle and first-person-shooter video games, both of which tend toward music-heavy soundtracks, it is no surprise that the experience of live combat is at times interpreted through the prism of war movies or games” (2014: 234).

7. For a list of Vietnam war films, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Vietnam_War_films (accessed August 23, 2013).

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