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Alec Williams
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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From rain’s a-gonna fall to bricks in the wall: A comparative analysis of humanity’s core themes in the music of Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd

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By Alec Williams, BS
Biological Sciences and Economics
College of Arts and Sciences

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Faculty Mentor:
Dr. Scott Anderson, D. M. A.
Glenn Korff School of Music
Abstract

The 1960s were turbulent times of musical creation and revolution. From Motown to Dinkytown, the world suddenly became filled with blooms of creativity that stemmed from the freshly planted roots rock ‘n’ roll. Artists that garnered infamy in this flourishing era, including household names like Jimi Hendrix, The Beatles, and Janis Joplin, would become immortalized in music and pop culture. However, few stand out as pinnacle lyrical and musical influences, devout to the art of perpetual creation and development of the global music scene. Of those artists, Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd have contributed immensely to the synthesis of genres upon subgenres of music through their creativity and propensity to push the musical status quo. Though, perhaps the most valuable contribution from these artists has come through their lyrical composition. Both took the unique approach of exploring and capturing fundamental, central themes of humanity in music. Dylan and Pink Floyd were able to tackle a spectrum of issues through the application of topical songwriting. In doing so, they articulated the feelings, emotions, and sentiments of a changing human population. This paper will explore their adherence to, and description of such themes and how despite drastic differences in their musical styles, Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd captured very universal ideas. This paper will further explore how Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd’s expression of these themes created an impermeable distinction between their music and that of today’s contemporary pop scene. Their initiative to pursue a breadth of universal themes contributed to their distinguished position in music as distinct drivers of creativity who created timeless music reflecting central ideals of humanity. Their role in contemporary music is unparalleled, and their devotion to continual creation serves as an artistic accelerator that continues to propel music and art forward through the foreseeable future.
Forward

While a majority of contemporary pop and rock genres have roots in twentieth-century blues, the importance of music from the 1960s cannot be overstated (Bordowitz 2004). Revolutionary creativity gave way to novel genres and subgenres that would redefine the world’s definition and reception of music. Some of the most influential, well-known groups including Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones, and the Who had their start in this blossoming era. For some of these musicians, the ability to channel emotion and ideologically connect with listeners rapidly transformed them into superstars (Wall 2010, Booth 2000, and Marsh 2015). However, there was a subset of this 1960s artistic community that intrinsically contributed to the development of modern pop and rock through lyrical content and musicianship. At the forefront of this movement were two innovative artists who had, and continue to have, paramount influence on music: Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd.

Introduction

The presence Bob Dylan evoked as he stepped on stage at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival was nothing short of iconic. Just a few years prior, the self-proclaimed disciple of Woody Guthrie had been struggling to make ends meet in the folk collectives of Minneapolis and Greenwich Village (Sounes 2011). Now, hundreds anxiously awaited a follow-up performance to the 1964 acoustic showcase that had cemented Dylan’s status as a prominent folk musician. What no one in the audience expected was for him to appear on stage bearing a Fender Stratocaster, supported by a full electric band. The initial outcries of disgust about the injustice the he had done the community paled in comparison to the infamy of an electrified Robert Zimmerman.
The aura carried by the young folk prodigy went unmatched in the music world, the likes of which still resonate today, more than fifty years later. The intricacies and allusions Dylan incorporated in lyrics, coupled with his capacity to serve as a working artist set him apart from other musicians. Additionally, few before him had ever defined a cultural and political generation of people through lyrics and music composition. Dylan’s music was a gospel, and the concerts at which he performed them, a sermon to which thousands of ears intently listened. In short, he took the world by storm. Dylan’s writing still captivates audiences young and old with masterpieces ranging from ballads of love and death, to timelessly relevant topical songs, to insightful reflective memoirs of an aging person.

On the other side of the musical spectrum was the psychedelic, progressive rock band, Pink Floyd. Originally Fronted by Syd Barrett and Roger Waters, the band made a name for itself in the underground experimental art communities of England (Blake 2008). Revered for their creativity and stage presence in the later 1960s, Pink Floyd was notorious for atypical instrumentation and long lines of otherworldly sounds. However, the band was plagued with conflict early on, most notably due to the unpredictability and dwindling sanity of their front man, Syd Barrett (Schaffner 1991). The addition of the disciplined guitarist, David Gilmour, shifted the band’s direction and eventually gave way to the epoch concept album, Dark Side of the Moon in 1973.

The sheer writing power and creativity of the Gilmour-Waters duo created some of the most influential music of the 20th century. Waters’ intimate lyrics and reflections coupled with monstrous guitar solos from Gilmour emanated a unique sound that resonated with perfection. However, Pink Floyd was never content with just lyrics and dramatic melodies. Rather, they were
interested the art and experience of listening to music. Hence, they incorporated visual representations of their lyrics and concept albums centered on the stories of the music. The unison between sound and listener as performed by Pink Floyd was a completely novel initiative and one that distinguished them from other musicians, both past and current.

While the genres of each of these artists vastly differ, there are clear comparisons worth considering. Most notably, are the lyrical and thematic content of both artists. With meticulous musical composition, there is an ever-present echo of awareness of fundamental human experiences and emotions in the songs of Dylan and Pink Floyd. Hence, based on their adherence to these themes, the relevance of the songs is not restricted to the 1960s. The songs are personal, topical reflections on pervasive and recurring motifs of humanity, the essence of which Dylan and Pink Floyd capture in a fashion that renders them relatable to any ear. The emotions embedded within the lyrics are mutual to any listener. In fact, the obvious difference in genre and personality of both artists lends itself to the message of universality. Ultimately, the lyrics, while presented in different styles, resonate with a common syntax that is solidified with performance and presentation by Dylan and Pink Floyd. This paper will analyze and compare the presentation of the common themes that they explore in their music.

Moreover, there are many defining factors that create an impermeable distinction between contemporary pop music and that of Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd. The pop of today is composed in a style to be enjoyed temporally by listeners. While there are exceptions to this trend when a musician captures a timeless, recurring theme in recent music, it is unparalleled by the perpetual content of Dylan and Pink Floyd. Henceforth, their music distinctly juxtaposes with that of from many modern pop stars of this generation. This paper will further explore the
distinguishing qualities of Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd, and what creates the separation between their music and that of both past, present, and perhaps future artists.

**Comparative Analysis of Themes**

Bob Dylan and Roger Waters of Pink Floyd are widely regarded as two of the most accomplished lyricists in contemporary music. For Dylan, this has culminated in the highly coveted honor of a Nobel Prize in Literature for his tireless pursuit of poetic lyrics set to music. For Waters, it has resulted in continual magazine features that highlight his persistent, continued application of creativity to an ever-changing world. Their aptitude to capture universal themes of humanity is unique, and will be the focal point of this analysis. This paper will primarily focus on comparing how these universal themes manifest in the music of Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd through song-based comparative analysis through the following: empathy, mortality, confronting authority, discontent with the status quo, religion, war, and self-destruction precipitated by internal conflict.

**Section 1 - On Empathy**

Empathy is widely considered to be a central part of the human psyche; it has a basic role in developing people as social creatures (Decety and Cowell 2014). Empathy is specifically defined as a person’s fundamental ability to comprehend and share emotions or feelings with another person. It is so central and universal that those who lack the capacity to express empathy are considered societal scapegoats and psychopaths (Blair 2005). However, it can be difficult to put empathy explicitly into language, as it is mired with complexity beyond the feelings it evokes. Empathy can be even more difficult to lyrically capture in a piece of music. For the musicians able to accomplish this feat, communicating the empathy in a universally relevant
format is an entirely novel challenge. Despite this adversity, both Dylan and Pink Floyd were able to effectively communicate and describe empathy in the songs *Forever Young* and *Echoes*, respectively.

Dylan’s expression of empathy in *Forever Young* is heavily reminiscent of a parental figure conversing with someone decimated by hardship. There is a comforting, encouraging tone with which the song is delivered that lends itself to the underlying empathetic message. *Forever Young* was recorded on *Planet Waves* (1974), which was the only studio album that Dylan recorded with the group of supporting musicians, The Band. Dylan’s relationship with this group likely contributed to some of the lyrical content and emotions on this record. Prior to the album, Dylan spent the previous seven years out of the public eye following the self-induced injuries of his 1967 motorcycle “accident” that gave him an earnestly sought-after solitude (Griffin 2007). He produced a number of successful studio projects during this time, including *Nashville Skyline* and *New Morning*, but refrained from live performances as to avoid being cajoled into anything that resembled his 1966 European Tour (Sounes 2011).

During this period, Dylan surrounded himself with this group of Canadian musicians in a small home, later called Big Pink, near his private residence in New York. For this period of approximately seven years, Dylan and the Band wrote music with one another, giving rise to infamous *Basement Tapes* (Marcus 1997). These “tapes” were non-mixed and non-mastered tracks that reflected raw, intimate depictions of Dylan’s rebuilding state of mind (Griffin 2007). Many of the songs from *Planet Waves* and future records drew heavy influence and reflection from this constructive period, and Dylan’s exploration of empathy in *Forever Young* is likely
connected to the Band. This, compounded with the time Dylan had with his wife and their children, made for warm, comforting reflection on the world around him.

*Forever Young* could very well be interpreted as either Dylan empathizing with those around him, such as the Band, his wife and children, or perhaps a previous incarnation of himself. Exclusive of whom he references, the tone is that of an older Dylan reflecting on how in times of hardship, that we must persevere through each of life’s trials as those before us have by building, “a ladder to the stars” and climbing, “up every rung.” He further describes how a person must maintain resiliency when confronted with hardships by developing, “a strong foundation when the winds of changes shift.” Though both are more general statements, they reflect an empathetic tone through wisdom that communicates a universal understanding of the condition. Hence, the empathetic tone of the lyrics point toward Dylan’s counseling and understanding of having gone through the same tribulations as the person referenced in the lyrics. He then uses encouragement that signifies his understanding of how to overcome adversity and implies that those who exhibit empathy receive empathy: “may you always do for others and let others do for you.” Hence, *Forever Young* is an example of Dylan’s discussion and allusion to empathy through music.

However, Dylan does not limit himself to merely discussing empathy in music. Rather, he consistently describes empathy directly, even when hidden by his well-known aptitude for openly critiquing others (Sounes 2011). In songs like *Idiot Wind* off the album *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), Dylan is not private about distaste and disgust. The record was released shortly after his divorce with his first wife, and Dylan is frank about his sentiments. The song is riddled with demeaning insults pertaining to her, but has one redeeming moment in which Dylan states,
“You'll never know the hurt I suffered, nor the pain I rise above. And I'll never know the same about you, your holiness or your kind of love, and it makes me feel so sorry.” This is one of the last lines of the song, and it seethes with empathetic regret for both the atrocious song, and the relationship with someone he loved drawing to a close. The line, “I'll never know the same about you” implies that he understands the unique qualities of human emotion, and acknowledges his own inability to comprehend the indescribable feelings of others. Yet, he is remorseful that he cannot grasp the extent of those feelings, as he has become detached from her. Henceforth, Dylan’s music is inoculated with empathy, and he has consistently explored evolving ideas of empathy from the 1970s onward.

When comparing this to Pink Floyd’s lyrical expression of empathy, the mechanism of delivery is much different. Pink Floyd’s lyrical content is much more direct, and perhaps not as emotionally evocative as Dylan’s songs. However the song, *Echoes*, from the album, *Meddle* (1971), reflects an amazing expression of empathy. Exclusive of lyrical content, *Echoes* is an epoch song to say the least. At just over 23 minutes, it is one of Pink Floyd’s longest compositions, and is predominantly comprised of synthesizers and other worldly, experimental noises. The infamous live recording in Pompeii, Italy was adorned with abstract footage and imagery that lends itself to the mystery of the space-sounding screams of synthesizers (Schaffner 1991). The visual allusions, paired with the meticulously futuristic song, transport listeners through many emotions, and quite honestly, do not emanate shimmering bells of empathy.

The ominous imagery and effects, however, do not hinder the point that Pink Floyd lyrically conveys. The central message in *Echoes* is that empathy can be recognized, communicated, and understood by anyone. The second verse is the best example of this quality.
The lyric reads, “And I am you and what I see is me. And do I take you by the hand and lead you through the land and help me understand the best I can?” Similar to the sentiments Dylan expressed in *Forever Young*, Pink Floyd recognizes that all people are one in the same, and that in order for the speaker to receive empathy, or to, “help me understand”, the speaker must also show empathy, “and I do take you by the hand and show you through the land.” Even Roger Waters, the main lyricist for Pink Floyd, in reflecting on this particular song states its exuberant display of empathy: “The potential that human beings have for recognizing each other’s humanity and responding to it, with empathy rather than antipathy” (Reisch 2007). Hence, Pink Floyd communicates empathetic sentiments that are equally evident in Dylan’s lyrics.

Again, in a similar vein to Dylan, empathy is a frequently visited subject in Pink Floyd’s music. For instance, in the song, *Breathe In The Air*, off *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), the band reflects on empathy through the following lyrics: “Don’t be afraid to care, leave but don’t leave me.” In vocalist David Gilmour’s whispering, hushed tone, the lyrics somewhat resemble the cold-feeling phrases that came from *Echoes*. However, converse to the chilling tone, Pink Floyd is insisting on the importance of exhibiting empathy instead of merely reflecting upon it. That is people should always show empathy, and not prolong thinking about how to show empathy. Alternatively, they could be portraying an individual to whom the concept of empathy is foreign, perhaps one who is sociopathic. Through the cajoling, “breathe, breathe in the air” preceding the aforementioned lyric, they exhibit how common it is to express empathy. That is, as common as breathing air. This generates an interesting juxtaposition between the portrayals of empathy within the same song for *Breathe in the Air*. Again, while the principle of empathy is approached and delivered from different perspectives, it is a frequently revisited topic in the songwriting
repertoire of both Dylan and Pink Floyd. Their continual exploration of empathy indicates their understanding of its basic necessity to humanity.

Section 2 - On Mortality

When compared to sugar coated themes like love, life, and happiness, mortality is not commonly explored in contemporary music. In fact, generally speaking, people make a concerted effort to avoid discussing the universally imminent topic of death. However, mortality in itself represents a form of creative inspiration, and has been the centerpiece for some of the greatest artwork created by humanity. For instance, it has been the central theme of age-old paintings extending from morbidly realistic Renaissance-era representations to 20th century modernist’s abstract interpretations. Mortality is also represented and embraced through performance in works like William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, during which the protagonist ponders death with the skull of a deceased jester, Yorick. Hence, mortality is symbolic throughout artwork as a central quality to humanity. The strong emotions associated with mortality and exist unparalleled for the uniqueness. However, despite this, modern musicians oftentimes avoid confronting death, and seldom impart feelings about their own impending mortality. However, death is an intimate part of living, a definitive commonality that people share, and one of the few certainties that everyone must confront.

Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd address death in their lyrics, and instead of avoiding confrontation with mortality, they embrace it. This may have stemmed from their experiences with death and the reported influence it exerted on their music. For Dylan, this extends back to his roots as a young coming musician in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Dylan frequently cites the folk legend, Woody Guthrie, as being pivotal in his development as an artist. By the time
Dylan had the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to New York to meet him, Guthrie had become physically afflicted with the terminal genetic illness, Huntington’s Disease (Sounes 2011). The condition is neurodegenerative, and Dylan watched the degradation of his idol from an accomplished singer-songwriter to a completely bedridden middle-aged patient. Dylan had nothing short of deep admiration and adoration for Guthrie, which culminated in him writing the *Last Thoughts On Woody Guthrie*. The song about the short-lived icon reads like a poem, and is one of Dylan’s masterpieces dedicated to one of the forces that drove him into music.

Death and mortality have also been influential in the lyrical development of Pink Floyd as songwriters. Roger Waters consistently discussed the death of his father in World War II as a vital experience that contributed to his songwriting (Schaffner 1991). Mortality frequently arose on each of Pink Floyd’s albums when Waters matured as a lyricist following *Meddle* in 1971. However, Pink Floyd’s take on mortality led to the manifestation of death throughout their visual representations as well, including the film adaptation of *The Wall* (1982). For instance, the child-version of the protagonist for the film, Pink, is depicted caring for a dead rat, as a father might care for an ailing child. This scene was juxtaposed with Pink not being cared for when he fell ill earlier in the film, alluding to the role that death has played in Waters’ life as child. While the symbolism of the scene has myriad interpretations, at its core, Waters has always explored death in his music, and mortality continues to be a persistent factor in his musical compositions.

Based on their significant experiences with mortality, it is feasible that Dylan and Pink Floyd invested in writing about mortality in music. Dylan, as previously mentioned, has done this throughout his life as a songwriter. However, the specific and poignant references Dylan makes to mortality, particularly his own, occurred shortly after his 1966 European tour. This tour nearly
drove Dylan to death and permanently changed his life. The song Going, Going, Gone off Planet Waves was released soon after Dylan resumed touring in 1974. The song is not an epoch poem like many of Dylan’s songs from the 1960s, but its message is clear. This song is related to Dylan becoming more connected with organized Christian religion, and his own mortality. Throughout the song, Dylan seems to be writing under the assumption that in order for him to reach Heaven after death, he must change parts of his lifestyle. This is evident in the final lyrics of the song which read, “I been walkin' the road, I been livin' on the edge. Now, I've just got to go before I get to the ledge.” This is to say that before he dies, Dylan believes he must amend his current lifestyle of, “walkin’ on the road and livin’ on the edge” so that he is entitled to a pleasant experience after death. He believes this transition is dire, and must be made, “before he gets to the ledge.” Dylan is imposing an impending mortality in his current life, and reportedly shifting it so when he reaches his forecasted death, he has accomplished something worthy of entrance to Heaven.

The remainder of the song sounds like Dylan confronting other thoughts he has regarding death and mortality. The first verse reads, “I've just reached a place, where the willow don't bend. There's not much more to be said, it's the top of the end.” This sounds eerily like Dylan admitting that he has reached a place in life where he is comfortable with death. That is, he has become content with his own mortality by reaching “the top of the end.” In the third verse he writes, I been hangin' on threads, I been playin' it straight. Now, I've just got to cut loose, before it gets late”, implying that he’s recently been on a spout of worthy behavior, and “cutting it loose” may indicate that dying now could guarantee him a place in Heaven. This is a similar message to that discussed in the final verses as well. Dylan has perpetually visited the motifs
explored in *Going, Going, Gone*, and continued to do so through songs like *Death is Not the End* (1988). The songs, while open for interpretation, certainly have key statements regarding a heightened awareness for mortality.

On Pink Floyd’s part, *Time*, from *Dark Side of the Moon*, is an incredible reflection on the importance of limited time in life. The song begins with a harsh, powerful delivery of lyrics from David Gilmour: “Kicking around on a piece of ground in your hometown, waiting for someone or something to show you the way.” These lyrics describe a person waiting for life to happen, or rather, a person without initiative to drive their life forward. The character monotonously passes each coming day by regularly refraining from furthering their existence, opting to wait for, “someone to show them the way.” Then, the character awakes from this entranced state only to discover, “years have got behind you, no one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun.” The character’s decision to exhibit no drive or initiative led to a late start in an already constrained amount of time.

The remainder of the song describes the character’s epiphany that time is limited, and it simply cannot be made up: “And you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking, racing around to come up behind you again.” The song begins to assume morbid undertones as it approaches a discussion on mortality. Pink Floyd continues to describe the same idea of having no time, but shifts from talking about time relative to birth, to time relative to death: “The sun is the same in a relative way, but you're older, shorter of breath and one day closer to death.” Ultimately, Pink Floyd’s perception of mortality stems completely from the relativity of time. The song concludes with an insightful observation that, “Every year is getting shorter, never seem to find the time, plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines.” The message
being what a person concerns themself with in time and how they measure their time is ultimately indicative of the quality of life they will live. The point being that mortality represents the upper limits of our human-bound time, and that people must wisely select how they live, and take initiative in their lives. Pink Floyd asserts that time should not be wasted in light of the permanent condition that awaits everyone at the end of time.

Hence, both musicians actively portray mortality in their music. Dylan’s exploration of mortality in *Going, Going, Gone* is more personal, and it assesses his own comfort with death and mortality. Death is something that many think about, and something that everyone must inevitably accept. Pink Floyd has a more distinct interpretation of mortality and death. Instead of taking a literal interpretation, they use time as a metric to explain the juxtaposition of a person’s thoughts about mortality early in life and later in life. In *Time*, they are not as concerned with the moment of death; rather, there is a limited amount of time a person has before entering the inevitable permanent state. Both Pink Floyd and Bob Dylan have continued to explore mortality in their music, solidifying its presence in their lives and their desire to communicate the relevance of mortality to humanity.

**Section 3 - On Confronting Authority**

The premise of authority confrontation was central to the countercultural movements of the late 1950s and 1960s. From the film industry that was characterized by James Dean’s performance in *Rebel Without A Cause*, to the written word of Andy Warhol’s magazine series, *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, confronting authority became united with the mindset of many teenagers and young adults. By the baby-boomer generation was coming of age in this era, traditional societal norms, consistencies, and ideas started to crumble (Agar 2008). The boomers
yearned for drastic changes in self-governance, expression, and lifestyle. They instituted dramatic shifts in what they did in their free time, how they dressed, and how they communicated. Most of this movement appeared to be targeted at parental figures, or anyone that was representative of the authority they so earnestly wanted to abolish (Agar 2008).

The message of the countercultural movement was delivered through many outlets, including music (Cottrell 2015). The synthesis of rock ‘n’ roll provided youth across the globe with the tools needed to artistically rebel against everyday authority in their lives. Artists reflected on their interactions with such figures in their music, and channeled their own discontent with the oppression commanded by authority. Such confrontation gave rise to genres like punk, which was dedicated to loud revolution against everything for which parents and authority figures stood. Even today, the echoes of authority confrontation are readily apparent throughout modern music across a vast number of styles. Dylan and Pink Floyd, who have roots in the 1960s, were no strangers to this and readily used musical expression as a mechanism to confront authority.

Bob Dylan rose to popularity in the 1960s for a number of reasons, one of which was his aptitude to send messages in his music. Dylan carefully chose topics to reflect upon in his songs, and in that reflection, he articulated the voice and sentiments of the counterculture around him. This culminated in Dylan’s confrontation of authority through some of his early work. Throughout these groundbreaking songs, Dylan frequently questioned and confronted figures of authority in the 1960s as a method of unifying those around him. For instance, in his well-known piece, *Times They are a Changin’*, Dylan directly addresses representations of parental authority: “Come mothers and fathers throughout the land and don't criticize what you can't understand. Your
sons and your daughters are beyond your command.” This message was intended to encourage parents to not be restrictive in their children’s cultural development. He insinuates that the perceived authority should let them learn and engage, unabated by traditional power, norms and restrictions. Hence, this functions dually as both a critique, and a call to action for parental figures. Dylan’s charge is to learn, and let learn. This is but one of the examples of his challenging authority.

A year later, Dylan released Maggie’s Farm, which exhibits similar sentiments. However, this song is more personal than Times are a Changin’, as Dylan inserted himself directly into the first person-style song. Maggie’s Farm, in a sense, represents suppression by authority, and Dylan discusses throughout the song his desire to confront that authority and be released from its constraints. In the first verse he states, “I got a head full of ideas, that are drivin’ me insane, it’s a shame the way she makes me scrub the floor, I ain’t gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.” The intent of the lyric was to exhibit that Dylan assimilated himself with the young people in the countercultural movement. He, like many others, had ideas but was impeded by authority that continued to resist societal change. By concluding that he would not “work on Maggie’s farm no more”, Dylan stated that he refused to be subject to this suppression, and with ardent determination, he contested authority. Dylan repeats similar sentiments with different people on Maggie’s Farm for the remainder of the song, including direct references to “ma” and “pa”, concluding each stanza with defiance, stating he would not “work on Maggie’s farm no more.” Hence, Dylan’s expression of discontent with authority serves as a vocal articulation for those around him, and a call to challenge traditional power.
Pink Floyd’s interpretation of authority confrontation is different than that of Dylan, though still an example of how music was utilized to confront power. Dylan’s experiences with confronting and challenging authority more came in the form of protest rhetoric, and arguably, strictly protest rhetoric. He employed the use of topical songs and music as a tool for confrontation. Pink Floyd, at least earlier in their careers, had a more specific niche they addressed. The authority that Pink Floyd challenged was that embedded deeply within the music business. Most notably, at record company conglomerates that had become notorious for using musicians as means to make massive profits. Though this is seemingly more nuanced than Dylan, it is universal because of the people’s experiences with supervisors, bosses, or managers in the workplace: everyone works for someone. Pink Floyd questioned and righteously challenged the executives that represented heartlessness, disrespect, and complete infatuation with their own welfare.

This commentary was explicit on the record, *Wish You Were Here* (1975). Particularly, the song, *Have A Cigar*, sounds like it could be a reflection from a specific experience that Pink Floyd had when meeting record company executives. The opening lyrics ring with a charm that sounds like a slimy adult’s attempt to entice an ignorant child into a contract that disproportionately favors the greedy person who had drafted it: “Come in here, dear boy, have a cigar, you're gonna go far, you're gonna fly high, you're never gonna die, you're gonna make it if you try, they're gonna love you.” The empty promises and fluff represent a disguise that mimics flattery, and are in fact, ill intentioned. The endearing statements throughout the song are but a facade used to cajole young artists into signing a deal with the devil.
In the same tone, the lyrics go on to say, “I've always had a deep respect and I mean that most sincere. The band is just fantastic, that is really what I think. Oh, by the way, which one's Pink?” This line is especially poignant because it blatantly showcases the false perceptions and charm given by the authoritative figures at record companies. Pink Floyd clearly indicates that such people have no regard for the band, by asking the rhetorical question, “which one’s Pink?” This is in reference to the protagonist, Pink of The Wall, who really has no place on Wish You Were Here, further enhancing the message about ignorance of authority. The most pointed critique arises in the chorus of the song, which calls, “And did we tell you the name of the game, boy? We call it ‘Riding The Gravy Train’.” This single phrase is Pink Floyd’s synopsis of their experience with record company authorities. They characterize them as self-interested, egotistical figures that see bands as nothing more than a commodity and a tool to make money. The song seethes with sarcasm, and represents a direct confrontation of the authoritative giants of the music business: record company executives.

While both Dylan and Pink Floyd challenged and confronted authority through music, they did so in dichotomous manners. Dylan’s confrontations were directed at parental and aging figures that have maintained power over many years. This message was central to his role in the early 1960s as a protest singer and topical songwriter. However, Pink Floyd challenged a much different authority, and one closer to their unique experience as popular, up and coming musicians. This may have arisen from a less pronounce influence of politics in the United Kingdom, and more of an influence from experiences with record companies or past employers. However, Pink Floyd’s authority confrontation is arguably more universal and relatable than that of Dylan. Despite the specificity of their commentary, Pink Floyd made the emotions and
expressions general enough that they could be assimilated to other occupational experiences. Hence, while both musicians chose different mechanisms, they used their music to confront authority in a time when questioning those with power became normalized.

Section 4 - On Discontent with the System and Status Quo

As previously outlined, the countercultural movements of the 1960s had paramount influence on the music produced in the United States and the United Kingdom (Agar 2008 and Miles 2011). In addition to the movement inspiring rebellion against authority, it also spurred and vocalized discontent with the established political and social systems of the 1960s. Music that came from this era was frequently characterized as topical in nature, as it offered relevant critiques of the political and social status quos that were widely accepted by previous generations. The topical songs frequently represented ideologies to rally around, and typically transformed into protest songs that were cherished as beacons of resistance against institutionalized norms. Some of the most infamous topical and protest songwriting came from this era. This included pieces such as John Fogerty’s *Fortunate Son, Find the Cost of Freedom* by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, and Joan Baez’s *Saigon Bride*.

Ultimately, people need to have the opportunity to express institutional disagreement. It is a basic part of democracy. Without disagreement or discontent, there would never be significant societal progress and political change. Rights to protest and freedom of expression have proven to be time and time again to be incredibly important in humanity. It is this dire function that keeps elected officials in check with their constituents. Perhaps no American musician is more famous for protest music and utilization of music as a social-political commentary than Bob Dylan (Sounes 2011). Despite the brief time he spent writing protest-
specific music, Dylan created masterpieces that were defining for political and social movements of the 1960s. Inspired by Beat poets from the 1950s such as Allen Ginsberg, he channeled the voices of his peers, colleagues, and those without a voice. In doing so, Dylan became a passionate political and social activist through music (Sounes 2011).

One such tune, and one of Dylan’s best-known works, was *Blowin’ in the Wind*. This song became an anthem for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Naylor 2000). The song, specifically, is renowned for its moving lyrical content in support of social equality for all people. For instance, in the second verse, Dylan sings, “How many years can some people exist before they’re allowed to be free? How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn’t see?” This is an example of a blunt, direct critique of institutionalized racism and perpetual mistreatment of black citizens in the United States. The lyric, “how many years can people exist before they’re allowed to be free” is reflective of the consistent inequality that black citizens have been confronted with throughout the history of the United States. The phrase, “how many years can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn’t see” is one of Dylan’s critical comments of how the political establishment and the status quo of the United States has neglected to openly address and confront this pressing issue. *Blowin’ in the Wind* is one of a number of Dylan’s tunes from the 1960s in which he issued a stringent critique of the political establishment and status quo for their inaction.

An additional example of Dylan articulating countercultural sentiments with the status quo can be found in the song, *The Times They Are A Changin’*. It is a direct message of discontent with maintenance of the political system, characterized by representatives failing to function as effective public servants. Many of the lyrics are potent, and thoroughly describe the hard stance
that the new cultural movement has taken against the political establishment. For instance, in the lyric, “the line it is drawn, the curse it is cast, the slow one now will later be fast, as the present now will later be past. The order is rapidly fading, and the first one now will later be last. For the times they are a-changin’." Dylan insinuates that although those in the countercultural movement are not in elected power now, the future holds promise for them and their message. The political status quo will not persist unabated, and Dylan was able to compact this into a single verse set on channeling the core tenets of the countercultural movement.

Pink Floyd’s interpretation of discontent with the status quo is lyrically more apparent than that of Dylan. For example, in the song, Another Brick in the Wall Part II off the album The Wall (1979), Pink Floyd expresses discontent with the political and educational establishments in the United Kingdom. In a repetitive, chanting pattern, Waters sings, “We don’t need no education. We don’t need no thought control.” This certainly relates to Dylan’s message that the current system of ideological beliefs, both social and political, are outdated and that those beholding them are poisoning future generations by executing “thought control.” This message is emboldened by the students as being “just another brick in the wall”, where “the wall” represents the established system of flawed beliefs. Waters insinuates that current education systems reinforce the establishment by morphing minds into homogenous shapes that align with the tenets of the status quo. Ultimately, the lyrics are not complex in this song, and frankly, not deep. However, Pink Floyd tactfully enhances this message by altering a few key components of it. Most notably, are those singing the lyrics. Pink Floyd chose to hire a school children’s choir to sing these poignant lyrics (Schaffner 1991). This makes the content of the lyrics much more powerful, because the voice that Waters had channeled in lyrics is being embodied by the group
to whom he was giving a voice. That is, the song becomes more ardent and moving, as children are speaking this message to the political and educational establishment, as opposed to the adults in Pink Floyd.

Additionally, the somewhat macabre depiction of the song in the film version of *The Wall* also lends itself to the message. The film visually emphasizes the lyrics “all in all you’re just another brick in the wall”, as students are represented as physical goods being transformed into identical pieces of the Wall. The majority of the scene takes place in what appears to be a heavily industrialized factory, tactfully symbolic of a school building. Within this building, children are pushed into enormous classrooms, stripped of their personal identities, and manufactured into the establishment’s political and societal ideals for the next generation: bricks. Overall it is an extremely disturbing scene that depicts the commodification of people. However, near the end of the scene, there is an uprising, and students denounce the vicious system within which they have been committed. They destroy the factory and the machinery, representative of discontent with the status quo, and the desire to break out of the cyclic pattern of “mind control.”

Ultimately, while the song is inherently straightforward, the message is enriched by other components of the song.

While Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd originated in different parts of the world, both used music as a tool to disavow the status quo. The artists recognized the terrible repetitiveness and problems that were institutionally present in political and social establishments. Dylan used his music to target fundamental problems like racial inequality in the United States in the 1960s, while Pink Floyd focused on inherent flaws in the educational systems that discouraged individuality and freedom of thought. Dylan and Pink Floyd confronted different systems, but
both used music as a mechanism to challenge the status quo, something very fundamental to humanity. That is, the musicians lobbied for the ability to express and challenge the traditional norms, and embrace novel thought. Change is crucial to the longevity of society, and discontent with the status quo is an important first step in initiating change.

Section 5 - On Religion

Religion has been, and will likely continue to be an absolutely central aspect of humanity (Rappaport 1999). Nearly every culture was founded on the premise that a higher power existed, and that immortal power contributed to constructing the planet and life as a whole. Religion also persisted as set of beliefs and morals by which people could live their lives, with the hope that it would eventually lead them to prosperity and righteousness. Then, in preparing for death, religion could function as guiding principle into the unknown. Ample evidence exists that some of the most primitive humans established a religious code of sorts thousands of years ago (Leroi-Gourhan 1986). So, from a historical perspective, religion is intimately tied to our identity as humans. Even today, despite coming in a substantial variety, religion is a fundamental portion of the human psyche.

Similar to death and mortality, because of its critical role in the development of humanity, religion has been entangled with artwork and artists for centuries. For example, paintings like the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci have become renowned as some of the finest and most valuable pieces of artwork created. Architectural wonders like the intricate ceiling mural of the Sistine Chapel or the towering structures of the Hagia Sophia are some of the most iconic and cherished buildings on the planet. Then, of course, religion has naturally found its way into music well beyond that created strictly for the purpose practicing religion. The musical subgenres that
bear reference to higher powers and religious values are endless. Since the beginning of the 20th century, pop culture and mainstream music have certainly embraced religion and its role in the synthesis of rock ‘n’ roll. Fittingly, Bob Dylan and the Pink Floyd captured this hints of religion and spirituality in their music.

Bob Dylan consistently includes references to prominent literature in his song writing. From pieces like Desolation Row where he references classical fairytale lore and biblical scripture, to his works in which embodies the voice from that of poets like Allen Ginsberg, to well-known writers like T.S. Elliot, to infamous plays like Ophelia, and to lesser-known 19th century writers like Arthur Rimbaud (Heyin 2012). Dylan was no different with Christianity, and made plenty of references to the bible in songs throughout his expansive career. However, in terms of religious undertones, none compare to his music in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this brief span in his career, he identified strongly with Christianity and sought to deliver the message of an enlightened soul to all that would listen. The albums that most strongly reflect this, Slow Train Coming, Saved, and Shot of Love, were reflections on his experience with finding faith in Christianity. While this found faith was temporary, Dylan continues to write about Christian allusions and still actively applies biblical rhetoric to his music.

Dylan has a very intentional and literal approach behind his references to scripture. He is well read and uses the bible’s message artfully as a vehicle for communicating his point. Take for example, I and I, off the 1983 album, Infidels. The song is chalked full of references and scripture from the Christian bible, particularly, from the Book of Exodus (Gilmour 2004). The Book of Exodus is notorious for its theme of salvation, and is perhaps reflective of Dylan’s own aimless search for salvation during this period. The chorus of the song repeats the following phrase: “I
and I, one says to the other no man sees my face and lives.” This, amongst other phrases, is a direct reference to Exodus 33:20, which quotes God as speaking to Moses saying, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” Later on, Dylan makes an additional, albeit more common, reference through the line “And see an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” This is, again, quoted from Exodus 21:23 which states, “But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” Dylan adorned his lyrics with scripture to further the message that his speech was universally true, and that his ideas have been repeated for generations. His religious allusions often pertain to serious messages, the essence of which was reinforced by biblical scripture.

Perhaps conversely to Dylan, Pink Floyd does not always take religion as serious. This may have arisen from the band’s decision to not outwardly value a particular belief system. That in turn has led to the occasional use of religion in satirical representations. This is evident on their song, Sheep from the album Animals (1977). During this song, Waters included a sarcastic spin on Psalm 23 from Christianity: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, He makes me down to lie through pastures green he leadeth me the silent waters by. With bright knives he release my soul He maketh me to hang on hooks in high places. He converteth me to lamb cutlets for lo, he hath great power and great hunger. When cometh the day we lowly ones, through quiet reflection and great dedication. Master the art of karate lo, we shall rise up and then we'll make the bugger's eyes water.” Clearly this is a satirical adaptation of a biblical verse, and perhaps Pink Floyd’s critique of religion. In the album, Animals, Waters created a clever adaptation of George Orwell’s novel, Animal Farm (Schaffner 1991). In the book, Orwell characterizes the sheep as
common folk who are easy to manipulate, and somewhat ignorant to their surroundings. Waters could be inadvertently indicating that those who become too engrossed in religion may not see the world around them. That is, practicing members become so fixated on what their higher power tells them to believe that it is impossible for them to see society beyond religion. This is not to say that religion has no value, but rather, it is pertinent to remain in balance with reality. While it is more of an abstract critique on religion, Sheep and other songs on Animals exhibited that Pink Floyd considered religion in the broader context of the world and its people.

To contrast with the songs on Animals, the song Great Gig in the Sky, while not overtly religious, has an incredible tone of spirituality. The song, similar to pieces by Dylan, emulates comfort with the notion of death, perhaps implying something about a religious lifestyle. The narrator is content with the premise of dying, as if reinforced by their system of beliefs: “And I am not frightened of dying. Anytime will do, I don’t mind. Why should I be frightened of dying? There’s no reason for it, you’ve gotta go sometime.” Following this rhetorical question, guest singer, Clare Torry, heavily contributed to the spiritual quality of the song (Blake 2008). After the lyrics have concluded, Pink Floyd begins an instrumental portion that features her voice in a scat-solo format over the growing roar of electronic noises. She starts soft and reserved, but then begins erratic changes in pitch, coupled with belts of intensifying melodic voice. The listener cannot help but feel transported from just listening to the music, to feeling enveloped in the haunting tones of her voice. The sound feels like a religious sermon being given as someone is rising through the clouds, presumably to “the great gig in the sky.” Despite the apparent lack of words, Pink Floyd was still able to communicate a strong feeling of spirituality in this song.
While both artists show a difference in the way they portray religion, it is clear that spirituality is important in their music. Dylan, having gone through an intense phase of his life in which he strictly adhered to his coveted Christian values, takes religion much more literally than Pink Floyd. He specifically draws from scripture, and includes direct references to text throughout his music, even after the final “born-again” Christian album, *Shot of Love*. While Pink Floyd includes some references as well, it simply does not compare to that of Dylan. However, they approach religion in a more abstract manner, through the use of sarcasm and satire to more illustrate attitude about religion. Then, instead of making direct references to religion in *Great Gig in the Sky*, Pink Floyd attempts to make the listener feel spirituality. This unique take, while atypical, is certainly comparable to Dylan’s references to religion.

**Section 6 - On War**

War has been, and continues to be, an integral part of the human race. To quote Roger Waters on war and the military industrial complex, “it (war) is fundamental to all of our experiences that we’re sick of our men and women being slaughtered on the altar of avarice and commerce, which is what they are being slaughtered on the altar of” (Locker 2017). Since the dawn of modern civilization, war has represented materialized conflict between parties of disagreeing people. It has brought peace as well as terror, and relief as well as horror. Ultimately, war and macabre conflict have changed the course of humanity’s history many, many times. Both Bob Dylan and Roger Waters of Pink Floyd grew up in a period when the Second World War had ravaged and intimately touched most cultures. Both were coming of age at the dawn of the Korean War in the early 1950s. Both were rising to stardom during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Additionally, the Cold War encompassed a majority of their young lives. Hence, exclusive
of their personal interactions with war, Dylan and Pink Floyd grew up in a time when war perpetually occurred, and it would have been difficult to escape its cultural effects and influences.

For Roger Waters of Pink Floyd, war was instrumental in developing his ability to write songs. In addition to his experience of living during a time riddled with war, Waters’ father was killed in action during the Second World War. The absence of a paternal figure in his life had a tumultuous effect on his development (Schaffner 1991, Blake 2008). Waters, who never actually knew his father, frequently cites the importance of this experience in his writing for both Pink Floyd and his solo career. It was a driving force behind lyrical composition and content of infamous Pink Floyd concept albums like The Wall (Schaffner 1991). He blames this fatherly absence on war, and has since developed an obsession with confronting and exploring its intricacies.

Waters’ obsession and fascination with war manifests itself most notably on Pink Floyd’s final album, The Final Cut (1983). The album was written in response to the Falkland Wars, which broke out in 1982 when two former British colonies off the coast of South America were claimed by Argentina as sovereign territories (Blake 2008). The war, which lasted for a little more than two months, is widely regarded as entirely unnecessary and probably avoidable. Waters, a firm beholder of this belief, chose to write The Final Cut in response to the British decision to participate in the war. In reality, the entire album is the brainchild of Waters, and many songs are heavily reminiscent of war and how it extends well beyond those directly involved in the fighting (Schaffner 1991).
The song, *When the Tigers Broke Free*, is a classic example of Waters recounting the death of his father, illustrating the effect of the event on his career. The song chronicles the circumstances of father’s death during a battle in the Anzio region of Italy in 1944. The tale itself is gruesome and emotionally wrenching, as it recounts how the bridgehead at Anzio was held for, “the price of a few ordinary lives”, implying the fate of his father. Waters goes on to critique the government, “good old King George”, for how little it seemed to regard the loss of life so precious to him. Ultimately, he blames this, “high command”, for the death of his father, and the orders to, “sit tight”, being the precipitating force behind his loss. Hence, war is an inescapable topic for Waters, and not something that he considers lightly.

However, Waters also reflects beyond his personalized relationship with war on *The Final Cut*. In the song, *Two Suns in the Sunset*, Waters discusses the effects of war beyond what he feels at an individual and personal level. A major, albeit more subtle, motivation for writing *The Final Cut* was to bring light to the idea that everyone in a nation is affected with the looming outcomes of war. This is certainly a universal truth when considering the use of nuclear weapons at the conclusion of the Second World War, or the Carpet Bombing Campaigns of the Vietnam War. Anyone who has lost someone in a war knows the fighting extends well beyond the battlefield. Waters explores these ideas more thoroughly in songs like *The Gunner’s Dream* in which he describes the changed life of a soldier returning home from war. Families, regardless of their involvement in the war suffer imminent consequences and losses. Even on an indirect level, the absence of parents or other figures due to war has an impact on relatives, a perspective for which Waters passionately advocates.
He does so through *Two Suns in the Sunset* by describing the effects of what sounds like a nuclear explosion. The nuclear warhead detonation has a literal and figurative interpretation in this song. As an actual device, it is a physical embodiment of war and the absolute horrors that people have created. Symbolically, it represents that war touches home, especially when contextualized to the bombs dropped on Japan at the conclusion of World War II. Thousands of people succumbed to the explosion, both immediately, and many years later. *Two Suns in the Sunset* was written from the perspective of a normal citizen who describes the time leading up to death after a nuclear warhead explodes. There is further evidence for why the song is about a person indirectly involved in war because of the line, “and you’ll never see their faces and you’ll never hear their voices.” This inadvertently implies that citizens, while removed from the immediate setting of war and the horrors encapsulated in that setting, are not immune to the consequences of war. Each and every person is somehow affected, and as Waters points out in the conclusion of the war, “ashes and diamonds, foe and friend, we are all equal in the end.” War is inescapable, and the reality of war extends far beyond the boots on the ground.

Dylan, while perhaps not as intimately connected with war, still discusses it in his music. As previously highlighted, Dylan repeatedly exhibits topical songwriting, and in doing so, channels the emotions and sentiments of the generation around him. In the 1960s, the United States was deeply immersed in the Vietnam War, and persisted with what would eventually become a fight with no foreseeable end in which thousands of Americans and Vietnamese died due to short sightedness in the United States government. In Dylan’s songwriting about war during the 1960s, he discusses and artfully questions the decisions made regarding United States foreign policy. However he also confronts the military industrial complex, a term that describes
the alliance between a nation’s military and domestic weapons suppliers. The idea of the military industrial complex gained infamy in President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s farewell address of 1961, which shook and raddled the nation (Held 1999). Shortly thereafter, Dylan began making subtle references to the military industrial complex, which still has a pervasive influence on American culture and society today (Uchitelle 2017).

Together, these provisions provided Dylan with plentiful content in the early to mid 1960s. His song, A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall, has similar content to Pink Floyd’s Two Suns in the Sunset. The tune seems to describe a post-apocalyptic, or perhaps post-nuclear, war stricken setting in which the entirety of a community was terminally affected by war. The point is eerily similar to Water’s; war of any kind will reap destruction beyond the battlefield. In one of his last stanzas of the song, Dylan describes what is left over after war has concluded, further emphasizing the idea that while war in itself is terrible for those directly involved, the casualties extend to the community and beyond: “Where the people are many and their hands are all empty, where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters, where the home in the valley meets the damp dirty prison.”

In a different but related thread, Dylan’s song, Masters of War, explored the relevance of the American military industrial complex. He ardently critiques this organization and its core, greedy mission. He begins with a similar tone taken by the Eisenhower address in that he calls for those supporting the agenda to come out from their obscured position, and let the nation know of their vile deeds: “Come you masters of war. You that build all the guns. You that build the death planes. You that build the big bombs. You that hide behind walls. You that hide behind desks. I just want you to know. I can see through your masks.” He speaks from the perspective of
one who sees through their facade. Similar to Eisenhower, Dylan wants the public to know that
the true “Masters of War” are not overseas, but rather, behind desks, making money off the lives
of American and foreign soldiers alike.

Dylan proceeds to provide consistent critiques throughout the remainder of the song
about the military industrial complex’s role in providing people with tools to fight the wars on
their behalf. However, his second to last verse is one of the most potent in the song, where he
turns from a straightforward questioning of action, to a more fundamental question of morality:
“Let me ask you one question, is your money that good? Will it buy you forgiveness? Do you
think that it could? I think you will find when your death takes its toll, all the money you made
will never buy back your soul.” The lyric begs the question of how those actively participating and
orchestrating the military industrial complex can live with themselves, knowing the evil they are
committing. Overall, the song is an incredible, domestic critique of an entity that significantly
contributes and profits from war.

Ultimately, while each artist’s experience with war differs, they channel similar
sentiments about the horrors that war directly instigates on the battlefield, and indirectly in each
community with a stake in the fighting. Waters focuses on war primarily from personal
perspective, and emphasizes the various effects that war had on his life as a result of his father’s
death. Conversely, Dylan takes a more general perspective, and focuses on the systemic,
institutional problems that may contribute to the persistence of war. However, the most blatant
commonality arises when comparing the artists through their mutual idea that war and its
various effects extend far beyond the battlefield. Humanity as a whole is intimately connected
with war as a form of conflict resolution, and Dylan and Pink Floyd were able to effectively capture and critique the flawed qualities that arise because of that connection.

Section 7 - On Internal Conflict and Self-Destruction

The principle of destruction is inherent to music in many ways. It oftentimes manifests as both a creative inspiration, and a concurrent driver of destruction. There is a malignant dichotomy within a musician’s persona that creates a strong internal conflict in the application of destruction. That is to say that part of a their personality is dedicated to creation, and a subtle part to destruction. This destruction can take forms, and can arise through many avenues. For instance, Pete Townshend, the creative force behind The Who, became notorious in the 1960s for smashing his guitars to pieces at the end of live performances. The Rolling Stones were well known for ripping apart hotel rooms at parties following shows. Conversely, there were many artists, including Brian Jones and Janis Joplin, who had their creativity overtaken by self-inflicted destruction. Destruction, in conjunction with elevated creativity, was certainly present in the music of this era.

Dylan and Pink Floyd reflect more on the later form of destruction in their songwriting: destruction of self. Particularly, they explore a variety of self-destruction and harm that arises from serious internal conflict. Nearly everyone can relate to having to cope with such conflict, that familiar, nagging indecision that can have both light and heavy consequences. However, for prominent, prolific musicians, much of the internal conflict encompassed self-destructive behaviors that resulted from how traditional pop culture to portrayed the life of a rock star. From substance abuse onward, the toxic habits and attitudes of a rock star’s lifestyle culminate and
change an individual’s perception of the world around them. Though it arose in different circumstances, this was relevant to the music of Dylan and Pink Floyd.

For Dylan, self-destruction arose in the form of heavy drug use due to overexertion on tours. Most notably was his 1966 European Tour. Documentarian D.A. Pennebaker captures the anarchic breakdown of Dylan that resulted from the heavy use of stimulants in his documentary *Don’t Look Back* (Sounes 2011). In the film, the degree of degradation becomes obvious, as Dylan progressively begins to look more lifeless. Regardless of whether he consented to this level of self-destruction, it nearly drove him to suicide. This experience is explored in a tune he recorded in 1973 called *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*. The title and choruses are reflective of the message of the song. A person who is, “Knock, knock, knocking on heaven’s door, just like so many times before” has feasibly had multiple brushes with death. Dylan never chooses to specify who knocks on Heaven’s door, but it feasibly could have been him in the 1960s. Overall, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door* is a much more straightforward message for Dylan, but that does it justice. It is a clear reflection on his experience with self-destruction.

The song further relates to an ailing, past-Dylan through the imagery in some of the verses. At the time this song was recorded, Dylan had concluded an extensive collaboration with country-western musicians in Nashville to create his final studio album of the 1960s, *John Wesley Harding* (Sounes 2011). Hence, the imagery and allusions carry merit in relation to Dylan. Just as a self-destroyed cowboy or westerner may “put their guns into the ground” Dylan put his songwriting skills down and stepped away from music after this period of self-destruction. The song’s syntax insinuates that he had been carrying these tools for so long they had blinded him, making it, “too dark to see” his life beyond the world of music. It nearly drove him to death, or as
he frames it, “knocking on heaven’s door.” Despite the discrepancy in time frame, the song, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door* seems to reflect Dylan’s understanding and coping with self-destruction that he encountered in the 1960s.

Pink Floyd explored a different form of self-destruction, and not one necessarily centered about substance abuse. While the band had a brief encounter with destruction of self when former front man Syd Barrett lapsed into prolonged quasi-consciousness after copious psychedelics abuse, it was not a dominant issue (Blake 2008). Rather, with Pink Floyd, the self-destruction manifested in the form of emotional abuse. The band’s disdain for one another by their last album, *The Final Cut*, was nothing short of unbearable. Waters in an interview later conceded that, “You can hear the mad tension running through it all”, calling it “absolute misery” and “a horrible time” (Schaffner 1991). On the album itself, there are a number of songs that Water’s composed, such as *Not Now John*, that could be attributed to his mounting discontent and distaste with Gilmour. Additional songs on the album seem to be direct reflections on Water’s discontent for the entire idea of Pink Floyd. For more reasons than one, this album is truly the “final cut” in determining the future of Pink Floyd.

However, the song that shares the name of the album, *The Final Cut*, seems to be an intimate reflection on the development of self-destruction. This self-destruction certainly encompasses deteriorating band relationships and emotions. Most of this song seems to be Water’s becoming more and more discomforted with the idea of being a musician with his current band mates, Nick Mason and Gilmour. That is, the fruits and promises of the lifestyle were not rewarding given the struggle he endured, which is reflected through the first verse of the song. Waters is not well, as he states, “far from flying high in clear blue skies.” He proceeds
to further describe himself in a chilling spiral away from what could be interpreted as an ideal life. Throughout the song, he catalogues the trials that he had to surpass with Pink Floyd to get to the monumental stage on which they now find themselves, only to be confronted with the thought of whether any of it was worthwhile.

These incessant thoughts and possibilities nearly drive Waters to self-destruction as he describes, “holding the blade in trembling hands.” He is plagued and emotionally tormented by the question of whether those in Pink Floyd accept him for who he really is as his, “dark side.” The culmination of these woes drive him to point where he could attain complete destruction of self, but he “never has the never to make the final cut.” This is reflective of the self-destruction stemming from internal conflict and uncertainty. He cajoles himself from this highly emotional state that he has been driven to by failing relationships with those he should value utmost. Hence, similar to Dylan, Waters reflects on the fragile moment of the pinnacle self-destruction. Both artists reached and revisited this sensitive place, neither succumbed to it, and thus, there is a blatant presence of self-destruction driven by ideas of internal conflict for both Pink Floyd and Bob Dylan.

Interestingly, both songs are tied to a visual presentation that is relevant to their message. Dylan orchestrated most of the soundtrack for the film, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, which included the song, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*. The scene in which the song is showcased involves a moving death of one of the main characters; a cowboy that has evaded death many, many times, in a similar way that Dylan has also evaded self-destruction many, many times. For Waters, *The Final Cut* was accompanied by a video that included a number of songs from the record. One of those was *The Final Cut*, and in some of the more engrossing lines, the camera
pans to Waters who is emotionless, bathed in shadow, again, illustrating his proximity to self
destruction as he is confronted with “the final cut.” Both are physical depictions of the internal
conflict that may very well have precipitated self-destruction. While self-destruction is perhaps a
more nuanced form of internal conflict, it is still thematically relevant and understandable to
humanity. Humans are continually affected by indecision, and Dylan and Water capture extreme
characterizations of indecision in Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door and The Final Cut.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, as songwriters, both Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd exhibit striking similarities in
lyrical content. While each have unique styles and approaches to songwriting, their thematic
selection yielded songs that effectively capture core themes of humanity. From destruction of
self and war, to religion and mortality, Dylan and Pink Floyd produced commentaries and topical
songs focused on widely universal concepts associated with being human. Unwavering creativity,
and the propensity to push the status quo of music, lyrics, and performance have generated a
sense of timelessness that can be universally appreciated in either its raw form or influential
qualities. Both artists have the aptitude to lyrically capture the essence of feelings and emotions
that most could recognize in their music.

This certainly begs the question of why this should be regarded and explored as a
distinguishing attribute. After all, the argument could be made that any artist can feasibly
accomplish a similar feat, and that many will in the future. However, there are unique qualities
that create an impermeable distinction between the songwriting of Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd;
qualities that will make it difficult for parallel levels of creativity to arise and give way to their
monumental accomplishments.
One reason for this distinction is the time when the music was produced. The world was rapidly changing due copious pressures in the latter half of the twentieth century. On top of numerous wars, world powers were locked in a bitter nuclear stalemate for nearly four decades. Domestically, civil rights movements were flourishing across the globe, and colonial satellites were attaining independence. This culminated in confusion, and people turned to the arts to help them understand and make sense of the rapidly changing world. This was compounded with the drastic changes in music culture. With the synthesis of rock ‘n’ roll in the early 1950s, inspired by African American blues and jazz, came an entirely novel form of expression. For listeners, this musical revolution represented an opportunity for them to wrap their heads around what was happening in the world, and to connect over a mutual understanding of humanness. For musicians, this time represented an opportunity to channel and articulate the turmoil, emotions, and feelings of a vastly changing global culture. The amount of content available was unparalleled for musicians across genres, the likes of which may never be seen again. Music has not changed nearly as much in the last four decades as it did in the four decades following conclusion of World War II in 1945.

Bob Dylan and Roger Waters also had success capturing these central themes because of how familiar they had become with previous artist’s interpretation of the world and humanity. Most of their music is chalked full of literary and historical references stemming from a spectrum of eras. They cover 19th century poets like Edgar Allen Poe and Arthur Rimbaud, to 20th century authors like Jack Kerouac, to ancient writings like the Christian Bible, to fellow revolutionary musicians like Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Their embrace of the cultural history of the world lends itself to their ability to capture these highly central themes. Hence, Dylan and Pink Floyd
were able to capture humanity because they understood humanity’s historical context as catalogued by those before them. Even if they did not represent the most diverse background, Dylan and Pink Floyd were able to articulate these themes because they came to understand them by appreciating the past.

Additionally, the opportunity to create and experiment musically has recently attenuated. The way people listen to music has fundamentally changed in the last two decades to the discredit of the artist. An artist’s ability to experiment with new sounds and directions has been dramatically restricted. The arrival of streaming services have, by in large, eliminated the opportunity for artists to persist as middle-class musicians. The depleting role of record companies and advertising deals have limited musician’s exposure beyond their artwork on streaming platforms and websites. Ultimately, due to monumental fixed costs associated with beginning to make music, and sustaining a normal lifestyle, it is difficult now to get a solid foundation without jeopardizing health, wealth, or well being. It is because of this the creative envelope by in large remains unopened in recent times, due to the quotas the artists need to meet in order to sustain a lifestyle. Hence, this has culminated in the repetitious production of similar, homogenous products in popular music. The propensity for the next generation of artists to create is untapped and has monumental potential. The industry, however, is no longer conducive to the same creativity that was welcomed in the 1960s.

Though, this is not to say that such a phenomenon could not also happen in today’s music. Pop artists like Beyoncé and Conor Oberst of Bright Eyes have both exhibited astounding lyrical composition with respect to topical songs. Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* was largely a social commentary on inequality in America (Reeves 2016). Her work was well received and highly
coveted as being of paramount importance to society. Likewise, Conor Oberst’s record, *I’m Wide Awake and It’s Morning*, while not nearly as popular, explores political commentary and war extensively. It makes critiques on the social and political status of the United States in a Bob Dylan style (Sheffield 2009). Hence, there are contemporary pop artists exploring these central and fundamental human themes. However, when you compare the breadth and variety that Pink Floyd and Dylan pursued and were successful in emulating, there is a clear distinction. There is repetitive cycling of themes for artists, and they typically bind themselves to composing about similar themes from song to song not by choice, but by demand for a certain product.

Ultimately, Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd were at the forefront of a musical revolution, and pioneered some of the most relevant genres today. Their influence is indescribable and invaluable in terms of its role in contemporary music. Dylan and Pink Floyd’s music is nothing short of iconic, and rings with timelessness, whether when directly listened to, or indirectly felt through countless instances of musical influence. Even if their influence and aptitude to capture central themes of humanity through lyrics goes unacknowledged, their indirect influence is felt through people recreating what Pink Floyd and Dylan have done. Dylan is one of the most widely covered artists, and paved the way for immensely deep, poetic lyric writing that is still being employed today. Likewise, it is simply impossible to completely imitate the sound of Pink Floyd, but their over the top, avant-garde performances are imitated around the globe and widely used today as the golden standard for arena shows and concerts. Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd were creating a truly unique product that has, and will continue to have, an everlasting impact on music.
References


