

# Iron Curtains and Satin Sheets: "Strange Loves" in Cold War Popular Music

Russell Reising



Cover of Jefferson Airplane's "Crown of Creation"

Many Americans know of Dr. Ruth Westheimer, a tiny, grandmotherly woman with a heavy Germanic accent who, throughout the 1980s, dispensed love and sex advice to American television and radio audiences, often in shockingly, or at least titillatingly, graphic physical detail and frank language. A different doctor, one who also spoke in Germanically accented English, however, was in residence as the popular culture love and sex guru during the height of the Cold War. Stanley Kubrick's fictional Dr. Strangelove, the ex-Nazi defense theorist who stifled "Heil Hitler" salutes as he planned post-World War III orgies, lingers as a haunting reminder of the toll wreaked on human love and intimacy by the emotional terrors of the Cold War and its threat of instant nuclear obliteration. Even the resourceful Dr. Ruth would have a hard time offering advice to the Chiffons asking "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow," when nuclear attack rendered the inevitability of "tomorrow" problematic, or to Tommy James and the Shondells's lovers who pant to each other "I Think We're Alone Now," if a nuclear war

left them genuinely alone, the only two surviving human beings on earth.

In some respects, rock and roll is the ultimate Cold War art form, the vehicle for the cathartic wails of a generation which was told to conform and aspire to a middle-class existence, but which knew all the while that the entire world could be incinerated in thirty minutes. Of course, it wasn't only rock and roll that registered the impact of Cold War nuclear destruction. Folk, blues, spiritual, country, rockabilly, and jazz forms, all of which inform rock and roll in various synergistic configurations, were well established by midcentury, and they intervened in Cold War culture in important and various ways. Fortunately, we never had to hear the ultimate, or at least the most dreaded, soundtrack of the Cold War, the final Strangelovian gasp. Outside of some chillingly routine air raid drills, we never heard those civil defense sirens wail in earnest, or even as loudly or movingly as Jimi Hendrix's guitar riffs. Every blast of civil defense white noise we endured on our televisions or transistor radios was followed by the temporary reassurance that "This was just a test." The screaming that came across the sky to open Thomas Pynchon's account of the first hard rain of missiles in *Gravity's Rainbow* never escalated into the hydrogenated sizzle of our mutually assured destruction. In this essay, I'll be focusing on the ways in which American popular music, specifically the Cold War love song, responded to the threat of nuclear war and global devastation. Some of the songs we'll listen to reference specific military "hot spots," but, according to the logic of the Cold War, any hot local conflict could escalate into WW III, and that fear colored most popular imaginings, just as those local conflicts were processed by the White House, State Department, and Pentagon to represent the contagion we had to contain, the domino we could not let wobble.

As diverse as they are bizarre, Cold War love songs range from the nuclear *carpe diem* to unsettling, and often unsavory, celebrations of strange love in its atomic, radioactive, spiritual, and militant manifestations. Images of untroubled teenagers in love, lovers willing to climb the highest mountains or swim the widest seas, still abounded in popular music throughout the Cold War era. Not surprisingly, however, the knowledge that most of the northern hemisphere could be dead within a matter of minutes pressured many songwriters into newly urgent lyrical strategies. In the following, I will endeavor to classify the varieties of emotional experience of human beings under the threat of nuclear destruction. By tracing the contours of those responses, we can also get a glimpse of one of the ways that popular culture registered the warping effects the Cold War had on the populations that endured its terrors.

I know of no work of art that better articulates the complex skein of emotions that popular music revisits with endless fascination and variety than Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. Drawing most of its plot basics from Peter George's novel *Red Alert*, Kubrick's film derives many of its key concepts, like the apocalyptic "Doomsday Machine" and the idea of "megadeaths" from actual Cold War strategic manuals, like Rand Corporation defense theorist and LSD aficionado Herman Kahn's *On Thermonuclear War*, and from Henry Kissinger's 1957 study, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. *Dr. Strangelove*, as its title suggests, explores the warping of sexual desires, presenting a bleak emotional landscape in which human feelings are themselves



Slim Pickens in "Dr. Strangelove"

all blasted into nearly unrecognizable forms, even before gaggles of nuclear warheads vaporize the world at its conclusion. Nearly all of the characters names play on some aspect of sexual deviance, excess, or strangeness, including, most obviously, General Jack D. Ripper, named after the brutal English serial sex killer. Both General "Buck Turgidson and Major T. J. "King" Kong have names that imply rampantly aggressive masculinity, either in beastly

rut or in pursuit of Faye Wray atop what is once again the tallest building in New York. Both the family and given names of U. S. President Merkin Muffley recall both eighteenth-century "merkins," or pubic wigs worn by syphilitics as well as period slangs for a woman's pubic area and hair. Soviet Premier Kissov suggests the violent ending to a love affair, while Ambassador de Sadesky, of course, references the infamous Marquis de Sade. Finally, as Slim Pickens rides the hydrogen bomb down to its target in one of cinema's most famous scenes, he rides it to destroy "the missile base at Laputa." In a sexual reference that nobody has yet commented on, "la puta" is Spanish slang for "the whore." In other words, Pickens riding the phallic warhead is destined to utterly obliterate a woman. Quite appropriately, the gentle Right-Wing Commander Lionel Mandrake takes his name from the mandrake root, a medicinal love plant said to encourage fertility or potency, and often used as an aphrodisiac. Unfortunately, just as the President yells at two brawlers "there's no fighting in the war room," there's no love in Dr. Strangelove's bedroom either.

Framed by optimistic love songs, Kubrick's film opens with a refueling plane inserting its nozzle into the aperture of one of the waiting American bombers prepared to attack the Communist empire at any minute. Establishing Kubrick's theme of "strange love," the blatantly copulatory plungings of the refueling procedure are accompanied by the soundtrack song, "Try a Little Tenderness." But there's no room for tenderness in the cock-pit of a B-52, either, and this scene actually constitutes the film's only moment of "coupling." Indeed, the film's first scene with visible human characters, and the only scene in which a man and a woman are both present, places George C. Scott as General Buck Turgidson laboring on the toilet as Miss Scott, his bikini-clad secretary, sprawls then kneels wantonly on the bed. Turgidson emerges only to abandon her as he decides to forego the romantic pleasures she promises and, instead, to "wander on down to the war room" at three in the morning. Miss Scott purrs temptingly that she's not tired, but, the duty calls, and the general leaves, urging her to start her own autoerotic countdown to "blast off." Airborne refueling as sex, and masturbatory orgasm as missile launch, then, establish *Dr. Strangelove's* vision of human sexuality as a casualty of aggressive

masculinity and military readiness. This was not the ecstatic and joyous petit mort of the French orgasm, but the BIG ONE, the world heaving in one final vaporizing burst. In fact, the rest of the film focuses on three claustrophobic sets, the war room, a cock-pit, and an Air Force base sealed off as though it were a virgin wearing a chastity belt, all of which are populated exclusively by men in the midst of repudiating human love in favor of waging war.

Most of *Dr. Strangelove's* themes and motifs register thwarted, withheld, or deviant forms of love. For example, the psychotic Air Force commander General Jack D. Ripper, played by Sterling Hayden, recounts how he realized that ejaculating at the culmination of the sexual act drained him of his precious bodily fluids. As he relates the epiphany to Lionel Mandrake,

I first became aware of it, Mandrake, during the physical act of love. . . .  
Yes, a profound sense of fatigue, a feeling of emptiness followed. Luckily I -- I was able to interpret these feelings correctly. Loss of essence. I can assure you it has not recurred, Mandrake. Women, er, women sense my power, and they seek the life essence. I do not avoid women, Mandrake...but I do deny them my essence.

Ripper, in other words, reprocesses sexual climax with a woman as tantamount to a Communist conspiracy, even an invasion. In these scenes, as well as in others, *Dr. Strangelove* dramatizes a broad ensemble of "deviated preversions," the dehumanization of love, the militaristic thwarting, coopting, mechanizing, and avoidance of actual human contact. Moreover, within those frames lie a veritable catalogue of scenes revisited by popular music of the Cold War period.

### **"Smile on Your Brothers": Cold War Love Starts at Home**

Of course the Cold War had its share of what Paul McCartney calls "silly love songs," but the era also spawned a new generation of love songs that, however naive in their hopes and however "simple" in their solutions to the Cold War and what many saw as a prevailing ethos of hate and fear, were far from "silly." Jesse Colin Young and the Youngbloods performed the [omit phrase] era's best-known paean to the optimistic power of love, "Get Together." The Youngbloods offered love as the only antidote to the fear that they saw gripping the land, and they sang about it in the most mellifluous tones:

Come on people now  
Smile on your brother  
Everybody get together  
Try to love one another  
Right now.

On the soulful Motown front, Marvin Gaye offered a similar answer to his famous musical question of "What's Going On?":

Father, father, father,  
We don't need to escalate.  
You see, war is not the answer,  
For only love can conquer hate.  
You know we've got to find a way  
To bring some lovin' here today.

While addressed to his "father," Gaye's song joins in the tradition of Bob Dylan's "Masters of War" and many other songs in positing a generation gap and in assuming that the generation of "fathers" controls what the era's ultimate "kind father," President Eisenhower dubbed the "military-industrial complex." But generational love also worked the other way, as parents anguished over the possible fate the Cold War held for their children. In Dylan's "Masters of War," for example, angered parental love generates one of the most powerful stanzas:

You've thrown the worst fear  
That could ever be hurled  
Fear to bring children  
Into the world.  
For threatening my baby  
Unborn and unnamed  
You ain't worth the blood  
That runs in your veins.

After the Berlin Wall was dismantled, Roger Waters assembled an international group of musicians there, at one of the Cold War's most famous sites, to reinterpret Pink Floyd's monumental concept album, *The Wall*. For their encore, they performed Roger Waters's moving "The Tide is Turning," which includes the angry thoughts of a father, and the fearful thoughts of a mother as she watches her babies sleeping:

Who is the strongest, who is the best  
Who holds the aces, the East or the West  
This is the crap our children are learning.

I used to look in on the children at night  
By the glow of their Donald Duck light  
And I frightened myself with the thought of my little ones burning.  
Oh, oh the tide is turning.

Even as the Cold War ground to its relatively quiet close, ex-Police frontman Sting still anguished over the fate of the children of the world in his song "Russians" that begins with the ominous ticking of the world's clock.

How can I save my little boy from Oppenheimer's deadly toy  
There is no monopoly of common sense  
On either side of the political fence

We share the same biology  
Regardless of ideology  
Believe me when I say to you  
I hope the Russians love their children too

These versions of domestic and familial love -- brother for brother, son for father, and both mothers and fathers for their children surely tugged at millions of heartstrings during the years when people knew the world could end within an hour. Powerful emotions, yet, like Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder's attempt to transcend racial hatred in "Ebony and Ivory," too contained and sentimental to have had any effect other than the powerful expression of familial love and the cathartic release of pent up fears. Imagining that the "Russians" might not love their children and that, could they only be humanized, humanity might survive, also obscures the fact that it was the United States, not the Soviet Union, that vaporized hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, all noncombatants, with the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan, that American generals and politicians, not Ho Chi Minh, lied about the true state of affairs as they sent off hundreds of thousands of their sons and daughters to die in Vietnam, and that it was the Ohio National Guard, not Chairman Mao's "Red Guard" that killed four students at Kent State. As Country Joe McDonald suggested in "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die Rag," the dictates of war often trumped parental love;

Come on mothers throughout the land  
Pack your boys off to Vietnam.  
Come on fathers and don't hesitate  
To send your sons off before it's too late.  
You can be the first one in your block  
To have your boy come home in a box.

Without too much introspection, many Americans realized it wasn't the Russians' humanity that was in question.

### **Iron Curtains and Radioactive Sheets: Cold War Lovers on the Rocks**

But domestic love, parental, fraternal, or filial, constituted only one emotional front in Cold War popular music. Far more common were songs that speculated on the state of lovers in a dangerous time and that schemed to gratify sexual desire. The Cold War itself provides a chilling geo-political metaphor for love on the rocks. Floyd Tillman's often-covered song "This Cold War With You" more or less sets the tone for such numbers.

The sun goes down and leaves me sad and blue  
The iron curtain falls on this cold war with you.  
Though you won't speak and I won't speak it's true  
Two stubborn people with a cold war to go through.

Joni Mitchell's "Blue Hotel Room" houses a similarly strained couple:

You and me, we're like America and Russia  
We're always keeping score  
We're always balancing the power  
And that can get to be a cold cold war  
We're going to have to hold ourselves a peace talk  
In some neutral café  
You lay down your sneaking round the town, honey  
And I'll lay down the highway.

Love gone wrong could emotionalize and personalize the notion of "coldness" from the geo-political phenomenon to emotional intricacies of the bedroom, and some "neutral café" functions as a Helsinki or Switzerland of the heart. But for these lovers, one already prone to "sneaking round the town" and the other to long absences, what form of detente could possibly bring back the love?

Occasionally, these lovers' quarrels escalate into emotional holocausts. Americans cringed as we witnessed Nikita Khrushchev threatening "we will bury you" while pounding his shoe on his United Nations desk. But rockabilly siren Wanda Jackson upped the ante in "Fujiyama Mama," her 1957 hit.

I've been to Nagasaki, been to Hiroshima, too.  
The same I've done to them, baby, I can do to you.

Well you can say I'm crazy, stone deaf and dumb,  
But I can cause destruction just like the atom bomb.  
Cause I'm a Fujiyama mama,  
And I'm just about to blow my top  
And when I start erupting, ain't nobody gonna make me stop.

Even with its references to the incinerating of two Japanese cities, "Fujiyama Mama" was a "Number 1" song in Japan in 1959. Compared to Jackson's incendiary performance, the Gap Band's bad break-up song, "You Dropped a Bomb on Me," sounds anemic, in spite of its comparable lyrical drift.

### **"Let's Get it On": Sexual Opportunism and the Cold War Carpe Diem**

Occasionally, popular music drew on the power of the atom bomb as a positive metaphor for the power of love or the strength of sexual attraction. Such is the case with "Atomic Bomb Baby" (1957) by the Five Stars.

Atomic bomb baby I love her so  
Nothing else like her anywhere you go  
Man, she's anything but calm  
A regular pint-sized atom bomb  
Atom bomb baby, little atom bomb  
I want her in my wig-wam

Atom bomb baby, Boy she can start  
One of those chain reactions in my heart  
A big explosion, big and loud  
Mushrooms me right up on a cloud  
Atom bomb baby, little atom bomb  
I want her in my wig-wam  
She's just the way I want her to be,  
A million times hotter than TNT.1

In such songs, Doris Day's "Tic, Tic, Tic" is another example, the novelty of atomic power, even of the atomic bomb, functions merely as a convenient metaphor for passionate excess, a more volatile version of what Jimi Hendrix means when he says "let me stand next to your fire," trumps the anxieties that will eventually preoccupy popular music.

American popular music frequently imagined the post-apocalyptic scenario as one of sexual opportunism. Again, *Dr. Strangelove* exploits this dimension of Cold War culture. Once the reality of war is inescapable, the male characters scheme to position themselves so as to maximize their potential for post-nuclear war sexual opportunity. After Major (King) Kong verifies that their orders to bomb the Soviet Union are authentic, he briefs his B-52 bomber crew on their orders and walks them through the contents of their survival kits. In addition to money and the usual practical tools, the American Air Force's survival kits include nine packs of chewing gum, one issue of prophylactics, three lipsticks, and three pair of nylon stockings. Himself surprised at the lavishness of the gear, Major Kong comments approvingly: "Shoot, a fella could have a pretty good weekend in Vegas with all that stuff." In other words, nuclear Armageddon isn't so bad: after going "toe to toe with the Ruskies," you might get lucky with some sexy Vegas (or Moscow) sexpots!

The film reveals its ultimate vision of sexual opportunism in its final minutes, just prior to the incineration of the globe. *Dr. Strangelove* plots the survival of the human race by proposing communities of carefully chosen humans occupying mine shafts deep beneath the earth's surface in which, to satisfy the prodigious mating responsibilities incumbent upon the survivors, there will need to be ten women for every man. Just to make sure he's heard correctly, General Turgidson observes that such an arrangement would "necessitate the abandonment of the so-called *monogamous* sexual relationship, I mean, as far as men were concerned?" After *Strangelove* concurs and again reinforces the notion "the women will have to be selected for their sexual characteristics which will have to be of a highly stimulating nature," every man in the war room perks up and looks convinced by *Strangelove*'s scenario of endless sexual access to sexy women, and even the Russian Ambassador remarks, "I must confess, you have an astonishingly good idea there, Doctor." *Strangelove*'s future of "strange love" imagines love-less, assembly-line, mechanical sex carried out in the stark confines of abandoned mine shafts, all lying below a world that has been reduced to cinders. A strange love indeed, and one revisited in the science fiction film, *A Boy and His Dog*, in which a young Don Johnson is the sole fertile male left after a nuclear war and is abducted to serve as a robotic sexual slave



inseminating a surviving tribe of attractive women, all, as Jason Robards explains, in an attempt to preserve middle-class values after Armageddon.

Popular music jumped on this particular bandwagon with remarkable enthusiasm, starting at the dawn of the rock era. The flip side to Bill Haley and the Comets' immensely popular and now classic 1954 "Rock around the Clock" is called "Thirteen Women (and Only One Man in Town)." Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" is frequently credited with launching the very idea of a teen rock culture and with establishing the exuberant tone of teens celebrating their youthful energies by rocking around the clock. In a strange wrinkle of Cold War history, the flip side of Haley's 45 rpm hit single introduces its teen audience to the specter of nuclear annihilation, albeit one tempered by risqué lyrics and a vision of sexual luxury. As Bill Geerhart notes, it even features "a plucked guitar chord weakly approximating a nuclear explosion."<sup>2</sup> Even more remarkable is Ann-Margret's lounge-style cover version, aptly renamed "Thirteen Men (and Only One Gal in Town)," surely one of most sensuous accounts of the destruction of the human race. "Thirteen Men" conjures up a dream vision, but far from the nightmare of a scorched landscape and shadows of vaporized bodies, both versions capitalize on the opportunity for individual fulfillment. Haley's version anticipates the kind of lifestyle that Hugh Hefner would later attribute to "the kind of man who reads *Playboy* magazine, replete with luxuries and a bevy of bountiful babes at his service, while Ann-Margret's offers a woman's sexual utopia.

Last night I was dreaming  
Dreamed about the H-Bomb  
Well the bomb it went off and I was caught  
I was the only man on the ground  
There was thirteen women and only one man in town.

I had two gals every morning  
Seein' that I was well fed  
And believe you me, one sweetened my tea while another one buttered my  
bread  
I had three gals dancin' the Mambo  
Three gals ballin' the jack  
And all of the rest really did their best  
Boy they sure were a lively pack.

The morbid irony of this "lively" harem entertaining, tempting, and fulfilling Bill Haley or Ann-Margret while the rest of the world's population lies dead among smoldering ruins seems lost on the singers, whose sexual satisfaction seems to trump any global catastrophe. But they do insert one of the strangest forms of utopian longing into Cold War popular music, the desire that this state of affairs actually happens and returns them to this sexual paradise.

I thought I was in heaven  
And all of these angels were mine

But I woke up and ended the dream'  
Cause I had to get to work on time  
Well, a-thirteen women and only one man in town  
There was a-thirteen women and only one man in town  
No, I can't tell you where I've been  
Cause I kinda think that someday I'll go back again  
To those thirteen women and me the only man around.

Protective of this heavenly retreat, both Haley and Ann-Margret tantalize the listener, but refuse to divulge its exact location. Since each song's singer wakes back up the banal world of getting to work on time, the consequences of the holocaust and the morbidity of these wish-fulfilling fantasies are never examined.

Bob Dylan crafted a slightly more complex version of post-apocalyptic love. His 1963 release, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, includes such dramatic and serious Cold War classics as "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Masters of War" but it also includes one of his two comedic pieces, "Talkin' World War III Blues," a close stylistic and compositional cousin of the paranoid classic "Talkin' John Birch Society Blues," in which Dylan, after becoming a full-fledged, card-carrying John Bircher, begins to suspect *everybody*, including Betsy Ross for having smuggled the color red into the flag of the United States of America. "Talkin' World War III Blues" complicates the nightmare or dream vision song genre by recounting it on a psychiatrist's couch. Like *Dr. Strangelove*, Dylan's song begins with World War III interrupting a potential love-making session. As he tells his shrink:

Well, the whole thing started at 3 o'clock fast,  
It was all over by quarter past.  
I was down in the sewer with some little lover  
When I peeked out from a manhole cover  
Wondering who turned the lights on us.

In addition to various images of loneliness and futility, Dylan pens his own vision of strange love, including, but surpassing, a puritanical vision of love as "sewer" behavior. After being rebuffed by one of two other survivors, Dylan's survivor makes a play for the only other remaining woman:

Well, I spied me a girl and before she could leave,  
I said: "Let's go and play Adam and Eve."  
I took her by the hand and my heart it was thumpin'  
When she said, "Hey man, you crazy or sumpin',  
You see what happened last time they started."

Frustrated by this encounter, Dylan turns to more mechanical forms of engagement and, he hopes, of promise:

Well, I remember seein' some ad,  
So I turned on my Conelrad.  
But I didn't pay my Con Ed bill,  
So the radio didn't work so well.  
Turned on my record player --  
It was Rock-A-Day Johnny singin',  
"Tell Your Ma, Tell Your Pa,  
Our Loves Are Gonna Grow Ooh-wah, Ooh-wah."  
I was feelin' kinda lonesome and blue,  
I needed somebody to talk to.  
So I called up the operator of time  
Just to hear a voice of some kind.  
"When you hear the beep  
It will be three o'clock,"  
She said that for over an hour  
And I hung it up.

Dylan's New York resembles the chillingly depopulated streets that the American submarine crew finds when they return to the United States after World War III in *On the Beach*. There, too, where they had hoped to find evidence of human survival, the Morse Code message they had received was actually caused by a Coke bottle bouncing on the telegraph key. Every other human in "Talkin' World War III Blues" rejects Dylan's survivor, fearing strangers and suspicious of communist infiltration into their insular, bunker world. Bereft of human community and rebuffed in his every attempt at intimate physical contact with another person, this man turns to the mechanized voice of the "Correct time operator," where like the mating war planes at the beginning of *Dr. Strangelove*, he "tries for a little tenderness."

Even "Sh-Boom," that apparently innocuous doo-wop classic love song by the Chords, takes on more sinister meaning when placed in the context of these songs. One of the most interesting gauges of the impact of the bomb on popular music, this up-tempo tune owes its title and refrain to the men and women of the Manhattan Project.

In a 1994 interview with CNN, a surviving member of the Chords recalled the inspiration for the group's best known song. He said that the group was sitting around one day when news of the Bikini atom bomb test appeared on television. "Wouldn't that awesome sound of a big bomb exploding make a wonderful song title?" he thought. The group began working right away and ultimately produced one of the biggest selling records of 1954.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, "Sh-boom" could have been titled "KaBoom," the more conventional onomatopoeic approximation of an explosion. The song's seductive drift merges with an eschatological opportunism right out of *Dr. Strangelove*.

Oh, life could be a dream (sh-boom)  
If I could take you up in paradise up above (sh-boom)

If you would tell me I'm the only one that you love  
Life could be a dream, sweetheart  
(Hello, hello again, sh-boom and hopin' we'll meet again)  
Oh, life could be a dream (sh-boom)  
If only all my precious plans would come true (sh-boom)  
If you would let me spend my whole life lovin' you  
Life could be a dream, sweetheart  
Now every time I look at you  
Something is on my mind (dat-dat-dat-dat-dat-duh)  
If you do what I want you to  
Baby, we'd be so fine!

Most lines in "Sh-Boom" conclude with the singing of the explosion sound of "sh-boom," suggesting that this love song gets sung in the midst of a hard nuclear rain falling on humanity. Given this scenario and in "Sh-Boom"'s hopeful "hopin' we'll meet again" line, the song actually, and very strangely, anticipates the horrifyingly ironic conclusion to *Dr. Strangelove*. In that film's final orgy of destruction, we witness scores of hydrogen bombs exploding, signaling the complete destruction of the world to the soundtrack tune of "We'll Meet Again Some Sunny Day." These utopian impulses, of course, get vaporized with every man, woman, child, tree, animal, and building in the world.

Moreover, embedded in all the utopian sexual longing and doo-wopian nonsense syllables in "Sh-Boom," we find the Chords' singer actually longing for a hydrogen bomb to transport him with his dream girl into the safety of a post-nuclear paradise, not one at the bottom of a mine shaft as in *Dr. Strangelove*, or in some swinging bachelor or bachelorette pad as in "Thirteen Men," but actually in a Christian heaven. Like many fundamentalists who believe that only the rapture can put an end to earthly suffering, these lovers presuppose the destruction of all worldly matters as necessary for the fulfillment of their passions. Of all the dream visions that characterize nuclear disaster films and music, perhaps "Sh-Boom" is the most chilling in its blithe disregard of this world and its hunger for the next.

From his first solo album, Steely Dan's Donald Fagen's "New Frontier" (1981) indicates the endurance and the flexibility that this nuclear fantasy carried well into the 1980s. It became accessible as shorthand metaphor for lovers on the make and looking for a secluded environment to do some courting and non-nuclear sparking. A nostalgic concept album from the point of view of someone growing up in the 1950s but envisioning the end of the century, Fagen's *The Nightfly* revisits that decade with innocence and compassion, even covering a Dion and the Belmonts favorite, "Ruby Baby." Coupling adolescent hopefulness with an ironically noirish sensibility, Fagen sings about the dangers of the nuclear age, with songs addressing high-tech atomic innovations and nuclear escalation, from the point of view of someone at its promising dawn.

Yes we're gonna have a wingding  
A summer smoker underground

It's just a dugout that my dad built  
In case the reds decide to push the button down  
We've got provisions and lots of beer  
The key word is survival on the new frontier

Let's pretend that it's the real thing  
And stay together all night long  
And when I really get to know you  
We'll open up the doors and climb into the dawn  
Confess your passion, your secret fear  
Prepare to meet the challenge of the new frontier.

The popular MTV video for "New Frontier" used a fallout shelter as its set, beginning with a couple crawling into it and ending with them emerging to embrace the New Frontier. Fagen's urging that they "pretend it's the real thing" suggests that by the 1980s, while the threat of nuclear war was still very real, the post-apocalyptic scenario had become part of any successful bachelor's come-on repertoire.

Not all nuclear war love songs were as peppy in their ability to translate post-apocalyptic scenarios into dreams of sexual fulfillment, and an entire subgenre emerged to visit, as did *Dr. Strangelove*, the darkly comedic implications of nuclear disaster. The Sheldon Allman's 1960 album, *Folk Songs for the 21st Century*, features several ghastly love songs as told from the radioactive rubble. In "Crawl Out Through The Fallout," for example, Allman croons

Crawl out through the fallout, baby, when they drop that bomb.  
Crawl out through the fallout with the greatest of aplomb.  
When your white count's getting higher, hurry don't delay,  
I'll hold you close and kiss those radiation burns away.  
Crawl out through the fallout, baby, to my loving arms,  
Through the rain of Strontium 90.  
Think about your hero, when you're at ground zero,  
And crawl out through the fallout back to me.

And in "Radioactive Mama," Allman pens another tale of love under the shadow of the mushroom cloud:

Radioactive mama we'll reach critical mass tonight  
Well when we get together clear away the crowd  
There won't be nothing left except a mushroom shaped cloud  
Radioactive mama, treat me right.  
Radioactive mama we'll reach critical mass tonight  
Well, your kisses do things to me in oh so many ways  
I feel them going through me all those gamma gamma rays  
Radioactive mama treat me right  
Radioactive mama we'll reach critical mass tonight.

Early shock-rocker Alice Cooper jumped on the nuclear band wagon with "Nuclear Infected," another grisly look at lovers after nuclear disaster. In addition to being able to scare people with his radiation glow, Cooper's protagonist glories in his radiated state:

I'm nuclear infected  
I really don't mind  
I just go out when the sun goes down  
And have a real good time.

But the real point of "Nuclear Infected" is to score with some similarly radioactive chick:

I'm nuclear infected  
Looking for a mate  
So slip on something lead, babe  
And go out on a date  
When I'm happy I glow yellow  
When I'm sad I glow blue, yeah  
And I glow red hot when I'm in bed with you.

The narcissism in these songs, their total indifference to the state of their obliterated world, recalls the plotting generals near the end of *Dr. Strangelove*, whose only concern is how much of a frolic they'll have with ten sexy women for every surviving man, and the ghoulishness recalls the dark fantasies of films like *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and even David Cronenberg's *Crash*.

### **"He's Got the Whole World in His (Nuclear) Arms": Deviated Divine Love**

Recall that the survivor-narrators of both "Thirteen Women (and Only One Man in Town)" and "Sh-Boom" merely dreamed they had entered paradise or wished they could be transported to a heavenly retreat for solitary lovers. Some of Cold War popular culture actually envisioned what REM calls "the end of the world as we know it" in optimistically religious terms. Again, *Dr. Strangelove* figures as our ur-text, forcing religiosity and the idea of divine love through the same deviated wringer that warps most of its other emotional registers. The film's two generals, Buck Turgidson and Jack D. Ripper are not only the film's most virulent Communist haters and hawkish war mongers, but also the only characters who express any religious sentiments whatsoever. For example, just before locking himself in a bathroom and blowing his brains out, General Ripper articulates his belief in an afterlife and in divine presence at the helm of the universe: "I happen to believe in a life after this one. I know I'll have to answer for what I've done." Of course, Ripper also "believes" that fluoridated water and male orgasms and ejaculations are part and parcel of a Communist conspiracy to sap and pollute the precious bodily fluids of right-thinking Americans. But it is Turgidson who focuses on divine love and assistance. Immediately after the gathered chiefs of staff believe they have averted an all-out nuclear exchange, Turgidson mounts a chair, asks for quiet, and leads the group in a jumbled and bizarrely bellicose prayer:

I think we ought to all just bow our heads and give a short prayer of thanks for our deliverance. LORD, we have heard the wings of the Angel of Death fluttering over our heads from the Valley of Fear. You have seen fit to deliver us from the forces of evil. . . .

And, after tensions mount again, Turgidson signs off a phone call from his sexually frustrated secretary by placating her demands, but also by issuing a final warning:

Well, look baby, I can't, can't talk to you now, but . . . My president needs me. Of course Bucky would rather be there with you (Pause) Of course it isn't only physical. I deeply respect you as a human being. Someday I'm gonna make you Mrs. Buck Turgidson. (Pause) Listen, you go back to sleep. Bucky'll be back there just as soon as he can. All right? Listen, sug', don't forget to say your prayers.

Just minutes before the entire world gets blown to kingdom come, Turgidson articulates the normative stance of Cold War domesticity: he's going to make his secretary an "honest woman" by sanctifying their love in the holy institution of marriage. Whereas he urged her to "start her own countdown" the first time he left her to go to the war room, at his crucial juncture his thoughts and admonitions turn to God.

Lest we believe such attitudes were merely the stuff of nightmarish fictional monsters, we need to recall that such beliefs actually characterize many of the Cold War period's most influential evangelical ministers. According to the sensationalistic *Weekly World News*, Dr. Richard Crawe has actually urged blowing up the entire earth in a last-ditch effort to kill Satan. As the News reported Crawe's sermon, "A controversial Bible scholar says Satan and Hell are real and insists that we can destroy them both -- by blowing the Earth to smithereens with nuclear weapons!" "I'm not doing this for self-glorification or because I'm crazy," he said. "I'm sounding the alarm and calling for action because the Lord came to me in a vision and said this is what must be done. The Bible makes it clear that the final battle between good and evil -- between God and Satan -- must be fought and won before Christians are taken up to Paradise. God is asking us to fight that battle for Him, to destroy Satan and Hell by destroying Earth, which is Satan's home. It really is that simple." Dr. Crawe urged Christians everywhere to contact their congressmen and other key officials to show their support for the initiative, which would require the simultaneous detonation of America's entire nuclear arsenal to split the Earth, in his words, "wide open." "If we don't do it for ourselves, let's do it for God," Dr. Crawe said."<sup>4</sup>

Cold War spiritual music offers some interesting examples of this strange fusion of the warlike and the spiritual, reconfiguring the figure of Jesus Christ to fit the Cold War paradigm. Conventional Christianity aligned itself very readily with mainstream anti-Communism, but evangelists like Billy Graham, who owes his rise to prominence to his virulent anti-communism, took the agenda a bit farther. "My own theory about Communism," he declared in 1957, "is that it is master-minded by Satan." "If you would be a loyal American," he advised, "then become a loyal Christian."<sup>5</sup> Too many prominent

members of the popular music scene took even Graham's injunctions a step farther. For them, nuclear war was part and parcel of God's plan for humanity, inseparable from Christ's love for his faithful.

One of the most astonishing pieces of all the Cold War canon, "Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb" modernizes the "hell-fire and brimstone" style of evangelical preaching reminiscent of the eighteenth-century divine, Jonathan Edwards. Edwards envisioned an angry God whose "arrows fly unseen at midday," but this song actually codifies a spiritual nuclear arms race and reconfigures Jesus, and his love for humankind, as the ultimate nuclear threat. The song begins by documenting an alternative Christmas, the nativity of the American and the Soviet nuclear arsenal:

In nineteen-hundred and forty-five  
The Atom Bomb became alive.  
In nineteen-hundred and forty-nine,  
The USA got very wise:  
They found out a country across the line  
Had an Atom Bomb -- the very same kind.

Now don't get worried just bear in mind:  
Seek King Jesus and you shall find  
Peace, happiness and joy divine with my Jesus in your mind.

Strange consolation for a world on the eve of destruction, and to many perspectives, even for many who might believe in Jesus, about as effective as our old duck and cover routines in which we were told that our ply-wood school desks would be ample protection from a nuclear blast. But "Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb" strains against its own logic, suggesting that, far from being the consolation for a people dreading nuclear war, Jesus himself *is* nuclear war. Marking the nativity of the atom bomb like Christians celebrate the birth of Christ, this song offers this new force as a virtual substitute, a body double for the son of God, but with a critical difference over most New Testament versions of Christ's life and significance. "Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb" fuses the Old Testament "angry God" with the New Testament bringer of love, peace, and forgiveness. But, rather than urging his faithful to turn the other cheek, this Christ threatens to vaporize the other hemisphere. In this respect, "Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb" revitalizes the typological equivalence of Son with sun, but with the lethal difference that as an atom bomb, Jesus would actually inhabit the man-made solar blast of a nuclear detonation. Jesus might have the whole world in his hands, but unlike the story from the popular children's spiritual, that is not a happy scenario for the human race. As if the Soviet nuclear arms build-up missiles in Cuba were not enough, now Jesus Christ himself presides over the incineration of the world, his white robes changed into Fidel Castro's signature generalissimo outfit, his gentle beard morphed into Stalin's bushy mustache.



### **"Up Against The Wall Motherfucker": Militant Love**

But the cold war also provided a sense of embattled togetherness in this world, and prior to any apocalyptic event reduced lovers to heaps of ashes, burned-out daddies, or radioactive mamas. In American cinema, the pressures of the Cold War, and sometimes even of nuclear annihilation itself, generate some strange love affairs, in a desperate Cold War *carpe diem*. In *On the Beach*, you may recall, American submarine commander Gregory Peck, and Australian society-girl and alcoholic Ava Gardner fall madly in love as they await radioactive fall-out to kill them, even though Peck's character continually refers to his wife and children as though they still live. Rather than envisioning a nuclear aftermath as primetime for sexual opportunism or as some warped "kingdom come," some Cold War popular musicians struggled to reconfigure love within the context of a necessary militancy, one that could fight back against the nuclear terror. In so doing, however, these songs certainly complicate the genre and run the risk of jeopardizing and corrupting the contexts and possibilities of the tenderness and love they attempt to defend and recuperate. For example, Edwin Star's "War" affirms life, yet nevertheless rejects the frenzied rage of its articulation in favor of some unstated tactic.

Life is too precious to be fighting wars each day  
War can't give life it can only take it away  
Peace love and understanding  
There must be some place for these things today  
They say we must fight to keep our freedom  
But Lord there's gotta be a better way.

Bruce Cockburn's 1983 "Lovers in a Dangerous Time," one of the greatest lyrical accomplishments of Cold War popular music, originally appeared on *Stealing Fire*, the album on which Cockburn also included the angry and militant "If I Had a Rocket Launcher." Cockburn's song begins with the most common of all Cold War themes, immanent destruction from nuclear bomb or missile attack.

Don't the hours grow shorter as the days go by?  
You never get to stop and open your eyes  
One day you're waiting for the sky to fall;  
The next you're dazzled by the beauty of it all  
When you're lovers in a dangerous time

In the midst of paralyzing fear of nuclear Armageddon, "waiting for the sky to fall," Cockburn discovers the preciousness and beauty of existence, perhaps because of its precariousness. Cockburn focuses this abstract mystical sense of appreciation in his next stanza, by lingering on the specifically human qualities to which his lovers in a dangerous time become sensitized:

These fragile bodies of touch and taste  
This vibrant skin -- this hair like lace.

Spirits open to the thrust of grace  
Never a breath you can afford to waste

Both psychedelic and Christian philosopher, with mystical leanings, Cockburn engages the physical presence of these lovers in an embrace of cradling tenderness. They seem poised on some pivot point into eternity, saturated with the wonders of their physicality, while simultaneously spiritual beings open to some visitation of grace, surely a different kind than offered by some Jesus who hits like an atom bomb.

But Cockburn refuses to sentimentalize his song by introducing and then ignoring the aura of disaster that hovers over his subject.

When you're lovers in a dangerous time  
Sometimes you're made to feel as if your love's a crime  
But nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight --  
You got to kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight

In this final stanza, Cockburn offers the fullest and most complex image of human love within the omnipresent threat of danger and destruction, "kick[ing] at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight." Unlike General Turgidson's secretary, these lovers won't have to begin their countdowns in masturbatory solitude. Their shared ecstasy, and their struggle to evoke daylight manifests the violence of their context while simultaneously representing their struggles against the violence that threatens the human race. Cockburn's song stops short of suggesting that love, or art, can effectively transcend the horrors of nuclear war, and he senses that the Youngbloods were naive when they crooned that everybody simply "smile on their brother" and "get together right now," just as the Beatles were wrong when they proclaimed that "love is all you need." Suggesting the depth to which this ethos has permeated Cold War lyricism, Cockburn imagines such embattled love as normative, offering "nothing worth having comes without a fight" as a natural state of affairs. Cockburn's lovers realize, of course, the wisdom of the popular Cold War automobile bumper sticker proclaiming that "arms are for hugging," but they also know that the arms entwined in their loving embraces can be reduced to ashes by the nuclear arms manufactured by the masters of war, deployed by universal soldiers, and unleashed by Jesus Christ himself. When the ministry seems all too eager for Jesus Christ's return as an atom bomb obliterating this kingdom and kingdom come, and if two different military industrial complexes seem unrelenting in their willingness to reduce the world to its subatomic constituents, maybe all that remains for musical culture to do is to gather in tribal unity as Jimi Hendrix strums his culture's ultimate jeremiad at Woodstock or to duck and cover in some fall-out shelter with some little lover. Strange love, to be sure, but what other recourse, certainly during those years of the Cold War, and maybe even now, than to keep kicking at the darkness?

That is, if we accept the underlying assumptions of many of these songs, that love is a completely private matter between two people, often in closed quarters. The Cold War notion of containment, or the privatization of all human relations, applied, of course, to the United States' expressed policy of trying to contain Communism within certain

geographic and political borders, like a contagion we had to quarantine, and the domino we simply could not allow to fall. As Elaine Tyler May has demonstrated in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, John Foster Dulles's notion of the "containment" of communism found parallels in the triumph of "a domestic politics of containment." "More than merely a metaphor for the cold war on the homefront, containment aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behavior, and even political values were focused on the home."<sup>6</sup> As May points out, fulfilled eroticism, albeit only in marriage, becomes a central point of majority discourse, to the point that women were counseled to pour more energy into their mates' fulfillment, sexual and otherwise, than the children of the household. Such domestic containment revitalized the Victorian notion of the home as a "haven in a heartless world." The home, as May points out throughout her study, was redefined to be the only secure retreat in a very dangerous world. About as secure as our schoolroom desks.

Popular music testifies to both the success and failure of such an ideology of domestic containment. Some popular music registered, but ultimately denied, the horrors of political brinkmanship and nuclear annihilation, as it strove to create a well-stocked fallout shelter in a heartless world. These songs represent rampant sexuality, but only rarely is that imagined as monogamous sexual relations between a husband and wife. So containment failed in that respect. However, the claustrophobic conditions of most of these songs does function as an alternative kind of containment. Lovers in these songs meet in sewers, fallout shelters, blue hotel rooms, enclosed rooms with thirteen lovers, in remote heavens, or at the bottom of mine shafts, or amidst smoking debris. Most also express absolute indifference for the rest of the human race, assuming the isolated lovers are free to pursue their sparking. It is in this respect that the limitations even of Cockburn's lovers in a dangerous time become most palpable.

It was the Jefferson Airplane who persistently struggled to formulate radical and militant alternatives, who politicized the intensely personal. And they often articulated scenarios of extraordinary violence to do so. In "We Can Be Together," for example, Jefferson Airplane fuses, as they often do, a sense of communal solidarity and love with outraged rebellion. Like their post-apocalyptic fantasy, "Wooden Ships," "We Can Be Together" is a suite of song fragments, each with different styles, degrees of intensity, and vocal effects, "We Can Be Together" begins with the celebratory "We can be together / Ah, you and me / We should be together," the Airplane defines their kind in explicit opposition to the U.S. Cold War status quo:

We are all outlaws in the eyes of America  
In order to survive we steal, cheat, lie, forge, fuck, hide, and deal.  
We are obscene, lawless, hideous, dangerous, dirty, violent, and young.

In these two catalogues, one verbal and the other adjectival, the Airplane enumerates the constituents of the Cold War's worst domestic nightmare, youthful and exuberant opposition to a culture addicted to death. Revitalizing a rhetoric of commitment, not containment, the Airplane reasserts the affirmative agenda that underwrites their brand of radicalism:

But we should be together  
Come on all you people standing around  
Our life's too fine to let it die and  
We can be together.

But again, the Airplane doesn't rest in hippified assurances of communal solidarity, and "We Can Be Together" vacillates violently between poles of hatred and poles of love. This interlude of utopian peace and cooperation based on their high valuation of life yields to the song's more radical drift and escalates into the embattled community and articulates rock's most famous call to violent action:

Up against the wall  
Up against the wall, motherfucker,  
Tear down the walls,  
Tear down the walls!

Once again, though, "We Can Be Together" returns to its more pastoral vision of a community united, albeit in their commitment to victory over the forces of lunacy and death.

We must begin here and now  
A new continent of earth and fire  
Come on now gettin higher and higher  
Tear down the walls  
Tear down the walls  
Tear down the walls  
Won't you try

By the end of the song, tearing down the walls becomes an act of excited constructivism. Similarly, the "my friends" addressed in the final surge encompasses both the "we" of the song as well as the "they," the "motherfuckers" previously ordered up against the wall now torn down.

In "War Movie," the final song of their final album as the Jefferson Airplane, lyricist Paul Kantner gives the general theory of "We Can Be Together" a science-fiction drift, reaffirming both the earlier song's articulation of loving community and commitment to militant action. Set in what at that time appeared to be a future within which social evils could be eradicated with advanced technological systems, "War Movie" opens with a retrospective appreciation of what happened back in 1975:

In nineteen hundred and seventy-five  
All the people rose from the countryside  
To move against you government man  
Do you understand?  
Locked together hand in hand  
All thru this unsteady land --

Gonna roll roll roll the rock around  
Roll roll roll the rock around  
Lift the rock out of the ground.  
At the Battle of Forever Plains  
All my people hand in hand in hand in the rain  
The laser ray won the day  
Without one single living soul going down.

Not content merely to assume that domestic love is adequate, to "hope the Russians love their children," or to "crawl out through the fallout" for a secret tryst with their radioactive or Fujiyama mamas, Jefferson Airplane insists that love and struggle are intertwined as passionately as are lovers arms and that both are necessary to combat nuclear arms. Like Bruce Cockburn, the Airplane envision a strange love, an enraged love, a criminal love, a violent love, militant love, and a love of passionately enthralled intimacy, one whose physical expression is inseparable from the blood-letting rituals of war. Also like Cockburn, they believe in rock and roll as a viable weapon in these strange wars, as their playful line "roll the rock around" suggests. But unlike Cockburn, they refused to stay locked either in a passionate embrace or in a bedroom. Yes, they want "Somebody to Love," as they sang on *Surrealistic Pillow*, but even that song is situated ethically and socially. It's "when the truth is found to be lies" that you most "need somebody to love." Both musically and lyrically, then, "We Can Be Together" straddles the complex poles of strange love during the Cold War.

I offer these visions by the Jefferson Airplane as my concluding examples because it is they who most thoroughly realize that even the most intimate of human contacts is rarely merely a personal and solitary, but potentially a political matter, and that forces like insane generals and nuclear stockpiles threaten its very existence. Also, these more radical versions of militant love strike me as more interesting, perhaps even more viable. Bruce Cockburn's lovers might "kick at the darkness," but they remain homeward bound, their satin sheets surrounded by iron curtains. Jefferson Airplane, instead, imagined love as a communal affair, and they struggled to get it out of the bedroom and onto the streets. Of course, once you get both love and resistance to domestic and political containment out of the fallout shelter and out of the closet, you have to hope that Jesus doesn't hit like an atom bomb. But, if as Billy Graham has been insisting for over fifty years, Capitalism and Democracy team up with Christianity in a newly sanctified holy trinity of institutions and systems, Jesus might choose to hit like a neutron bomb, one capable of killing all the people, but leaving the constant capital, the factories and buildings, intact.

### Endnotes

1 I want to acknowledge and thank Bill Geerhart and his excellent website, "Atomic Platters," for many of these examples. Bill provided me with a disc of some very hard to find songs referenced here and came up with the lyrics for some obscure vocal performances.

2 See Geerheats's commentary on the song on his "Atomic Platters" website <[http://www.conelrad.com/media/atomicmusic/sh\\_boom.html](http://www.conelrad.com/media/atomicmusic/sh_boom.html)>.

3 *The Writing on the Cloud: American Culture Confronts the Atomic Bomb* (University Press of America, 1997: 106.

4 See: <<http://exo.com/~noid/ConspiracyNet/satan.html>> for more coverage of this "story."

5 Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996, p. 81.

6 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, xxv.