

Blind Faith: Crossing the Gulf Between Sport and Rock and Roll

David Zang

University of Maryland, College Park

On October 7, 1968, Jose Feliciano—blind, Puerto Rican, and courageous—took guitar in hand, faced a capacity World Series crowd in Detroit, and, with a few twisted bars of the national anthem, set off on the first attempt at a direct crossing of the gulf that separated sport from rock and roll. Within minutes of completion, storms of protest swirled around Feliciano’s anthem rendition. The story was front page news on both coasts.

The reaction to the singer’s voyage underscored the Vietnam Era battle of two powerful social institutions for the hearts and minds of American youth. Conflicting notions toward fun, effort, ethics, sensual experience, and tradition had, by the 1960s, erected oppositional barriers between sport and rock and roll. Viewed politically, the situation was self-evident and tied to American reactions toward Communism, fear of which was part of an “ideology of liberal consensus.” Many complainants labeled Feliciano a Communist. But turmoil surrounding the anthem stemmed from a consensus more widespread than political, one based upon a perception of a single America that also encompassed social, intellectual, and moral dispositions. Reactions give evidence that Americans perceived Feliciano as having defied and devalued this AMERICAN ONE WAY.

Rock and roll was by its very nature about an alternative. Sport was not, and could in fact be likened to country music in its “no surprises” approach. In crossing the gulf, Feliciano was symbolically preparing Americans to accept and tolerate (though not without hostility) segmentation, specialized interests, discord, and acceptance of a broader range of values across a broader range of life—he was singing away consensus.