

who wrote i was only 19

I Was Only 19 is a poignant song that reflects the experiences of Australian soldiers during the Vietnam War. Written by the renowned Australian singer-songwriter John Schumann, the song tells the story of a young soldier's trauma and the lasting effects of war. The narrative within the song captures the emotional and psychological struggles faced by veterans, making it a powerful anthem that resonates with many. This article delves into the background of the song, its impact, the artist behind it, and the broader context of war narratives in music.

Background of the Song

I Was Only 19 was released in 1983 by the Australian band Redgum, with John Schumann as the frontman. The song is notable for its vivid storytelling and emotional depth, encapsulating the experiences of Australian soldiers who served in Vietnam from 1962 to 1972.

The Personal Story Behind the Song

The inspiration for I Was Only 19 came from interviews and conversations Schumann had with veterans after the Vietnam War. The song's lyrics are a composite of various stories, capturing the essence of what many young men experienced during their service.

1. Interviews with Veterans: Schumann spoke to numerous veterans who shared their personal stories, detailing their experiences in combat and the aftermath of returning home.
2. Depiction of Trauma: The song addresses the psychological impact of war, emphasizing themes of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), survivor's guilt, and the challenge of reintegration into civilian life.
3. Historical Context: The Vietnam War was a controversial conflict that divided public opinion in Australia, leading to protests and significant social changes. The song serves as a reminder of the human cost of war.

Structure and Lyrics of the Song

The song is structured in a way that takes the listener on a journey through the soldier's experiences. The lyrics are rich with imagery and emotion, making it relatable to anyone who has faced trauma.

- Verse Analysis: Each verse paints a vivid picture of the soldier's experiences, from the initial enlistment to the harrowing moments in combat.

- Chorus Impact: The repeated refrain, "And I was only nineteen," serves as a haunting reminder of the youth of the soldiers and the abrupt transition from innocence to the harsh realities of war.

John Schumann: The Artist Behind the Song

John Schumann is an influential figure in Australian music, known for his storytelling ability and commitment to social issues. His work extends beyond *I Was Only 19*, as he has been involved in various projects that advocate for veterans and raise awareness about the impacts of war.

Early Life and Career

- Background: John Schumann was born on May 8, 1953, in Adelaide, South Australia. He developed an interest in music and storytelling from a young age.
- Formation of Redgum: In 1975, Schumann formed the band Redgum, which became known for its politically charged lyrics and folk-rock sound. The band gained popularity in the 1980s, particularly with the release of *I Was Only 19*.

Impact of the Song on Schumann's Career

- Rise to Fame: The success of *I Was Only 19* catapulted Schumann into the national spotlight. The song became an anthem for Vietnam veterans and was embraced by the Australian public.
- Legacy: Schumann's work continues to influence new generations of musicians. He has received various accolades for his contributions to music and veterans' advocacy.

The Cultural Impact of *I Was Only 19*

I Was Only 19 has become one of Australia's most enduring songs, often played at commemorative events, ANZAC Day services, and veteran gatherings. Its cultural significance transcends its musical composition, serving as a vehicle for discussion about war and its consequences.

Recognition and Awards

The song has received numerous accolades and recognition, solidifying its place in Australian music history.

- Chart Success: Upon its release, I Was Only 19 reached No. 1 on the Australian singles chart, showcasing its widespread popularity.
- Awards: The song has been nominated for various music awards and is often included in lists of the greatest Australian songs of all time.

Influence on Music and Society

- Vietnam War Narratives: I Was Only 19 is part of a broader genre of music that addresses the experiences of soldiers. It aligns with other notable songs about war, such as Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son."
- Veterans' Advocacy: The song has played a critical role in raising awareness about the challenges faced by veterans, contributing to discussions about mental health and support systems for returning soldiers.

The Song's Continued Relevance

As time passes, the themes of I Was Only 19 remain relevant, particularly as new generations grapple with the consequences of war. The song has been covered by various artists and remains a staple in Australian music.

Modern Interpretations and Covers

- Contemporary Artists: Various musicians have covered I Was Only 19, bringing the song to new audiences and keeping its message alive.
- Cultural Events: The song is frequently performed at ANZAC Day ceremonies and military commemorations, serving as a tribute to those who served and suffered.

Educational Use of the Song

- In Schools: The song is often used in educational settings to discuss the Vietnam War, its impact on soldiers, and the meaning of sacrifice.
- Workshops and Discussions: Organizations that support veterans utilize the song in workshops to help veterans share their stories and connect with others who have similar experiences.

Conclusion

I Was Only 19 is more than just a song; it is a powerful narrative that encapsulates the experiences of young soldiers during the Vietnam War. Written by John Schumann, the song has left an indelible mark on Australian culture, serving as both a tribute to veterans and a reminder of the human cost of conflict. Its emotional depth, historical significance, and advocacy for mental health continue to resonate today, ensuring that the stories of those who served are not forgotten. Through its haunting lyrics and compelling storytelling, I Was Only 19 stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable hardship.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who wrote the song 'I Was Only 19'?

The song 'I Was Only 19' was written by John Schumann.

What is the main theme of 'I Was Only 19'?

The main theme of 'I Was Only 19' revolves around the experiences of Australian soldiers during the Vietnam War, particularly focusing on the psychological impact and trauma they faced.

When was 'I Was Only 19' released?

'I Was Only 19' was released in 1983.

What inspired John Schumann to write 'I Was Only 19'?

John Schumann was inspired to write 'I Was Only 19' based on the stories and experiences of veterans he met, particularly regarding the effects of war and the return to civilian life.

Has 'I Was Only 19' received any awards?

'I Was Only 19' has received critical acclaim and is considered one of Australia's most iconic war songs, though it may not have won specific awards.

Which band performed 'I Was Only 19'?

'I Was Only 19' was performed by the band Redgum, of which John Schumann was a member.

Why is 'I Was Only 19' significant in Australian music

history?

'I Was Only 19' is significant in Australian music history as it addresses the Vietnam War and its aftermath, resonating with many Australians and contributing to discussions around veterans' mental health and war experiences.

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