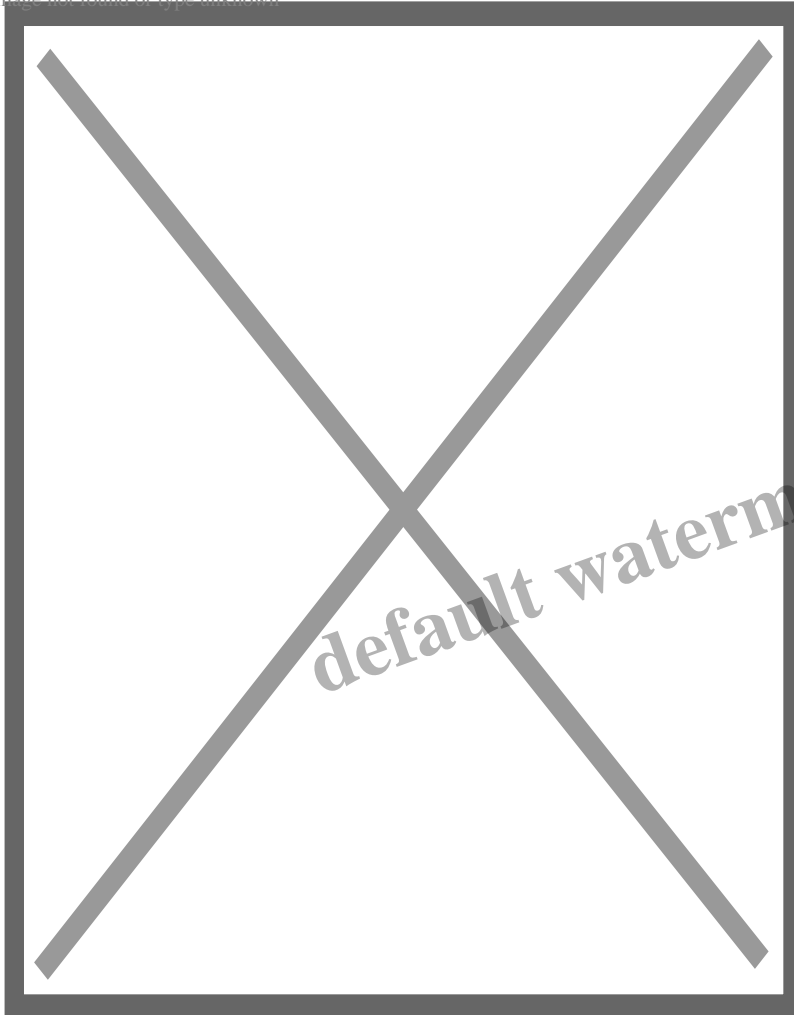


War and peace: hanging on to hope

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A Luna "Peace" guitar, featuring the peace symbol and the word "peace" in multiple languages

The news is full of heatwaves and forest fires and the grinding war in Ukraine. Here I reflect on living through the Cold War and risk of nuclear annihilation and then confronting the reality of 8 billion people on Earth and what that means for the planet. Despite all the problems, hope for the future remains, and it's important to hang on to and celebrate that. And we need a living planet to be able to continue to make guitars.

A memorable July

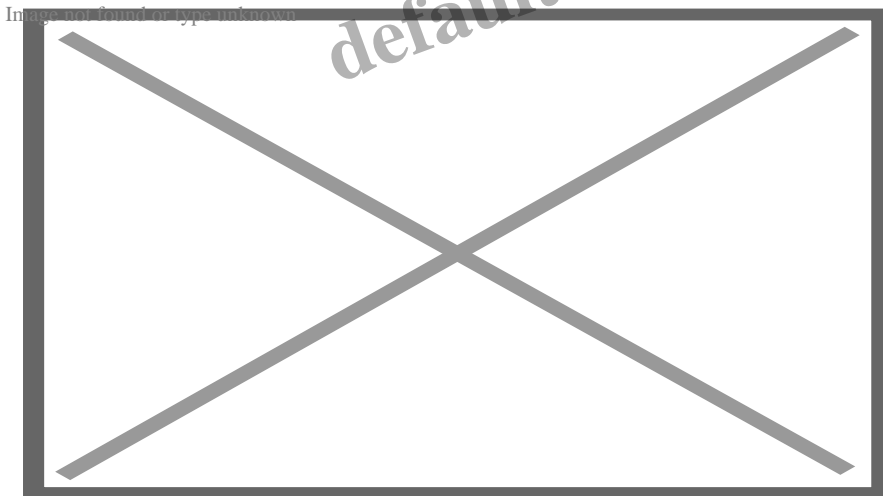
July 2023's been quite a month in many ways – here are a few things that have been in the news and caught my eye.

It's being called the hottest month ever recorded on Earth. The news has been full of [soaring temperatures and wildfires](#) across North America and many parts of Europe. Even with the absurdly high temperatures, though, tourist numbers at sites like the [Acropolis](#) in Athens have skyrocketed to the point where long waits and overcrowding have become the norm.

Why July is set to be Earth's hottest month on record | ABC News July 2023

Also in July, perhaps fittingly, a group of scientists [claim to have found a geological site](#) that unequivocally marks the Earth's move into the Anthropocene – a new human-dominated epoch for the Earth. Sediments at Crawford Lake in Ontario, Canada, have been inundated by the by-products of human activity since 1950: [radioactive isotopes from nuclear bombs and tests](#), ash from the fossil fuels, and nitrogen from fertilizer run-off. This, claims the Anthropocene Working Group, provides a clear marker (a [Golden Spike](#)) for the start of the Anthropocene.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, the Taliban have been [burning guitars](#) and other musical instruments. According to Aziz al-Rahman al-Muhajir, the head of the Herat Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, "Promoting music causes moral corruption and playing it will cause the youth to go astray."



A guitar, amplifiers and speakers were among the items burnt. (AFP: Afghanistan's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice) [ABC](#)

And finally, two new blockbuster movies were released almost simultaneously: [Barbie](#) and [Oppenheimer](#). Two highly contrasting topics – both relevant to today's world in very different ways. One asks questions about feminism and the patriarchy in the context of a well-known children's toy, while the other traces the story of the guy who invented the atom bomb.

So, a bunch of disparate unrelated stuff, right? And not much on guitars, apart from that poor instrument that got burned by the Taliban. But those things are not quite as scattered as it might first appear. And I hope by the end of this post that you'll agree that they all feed into the underlying themes of The Nature of Music.

Witnessing the Anthropocene

First a word about [David Attenborough](#). I feel like I've been watching David Attenborough's nature documentaries for most of my life. Now 97, he started making documentaries in the 1950s and has had a lifetime in broadcasting, producing an array of iconic series such as Life on Earth and The Living Planet. He's still at it, and his documentaries have gradually included not just amazing footage of the natural wonders of the world but also reflections on what humans have done to that world.

I recently watched "[David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet](#)" released in 2020. In this he reflects on his career as a naturalist, his concerns for the damage humans are doing to the planet and its living systems, and his hopes for the future. After cataloguing the many ways in which nature has been harmed by human activities, he points to clear and achievable ways in which things can change for the better. He called it his "[Witness Statement](#)".

David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet | Official Trailer | 2020

That made me think about the changes I have witnessed during my lifetime. I haven't lived as long as David Attenborough or seen half the things he's seen, or done nearly as much as him in terms of researching, understanding and communicating about our planet. However, as an ecologist, I have been lucky to see and experience many amazing places, ecosystems and species. With many wonderful colleagues and students, I have worked for several decades in the arena of better understanding, managing and conserving the world's ecosystems. And that inevitably involves considering the changes underway in these systems.

We'll all go together when we go

Climate change and extreme climate events are all over the news at the moment. However, for the first few decades of my life, few people had even heard of climate change – indeed, the first time I encountered it from a scientific perspective was at a conference in 1988, at about the same time that my daughter was born. Prior to that, the biggest existential threat to humanity was the possibility of large-scale nuclear war.

[Tom Lehrer](#) wrote a song about this in 1959. Now 95, Lehrer is an American musician, singer-songwriter, satirist, and mathematician, who worked at Harvard and MIT amongst other places. In the 1950s and 60s, he recorded pithy and humorous songs with titles like "Poisoning pigeons in the park" and satirizing many aspects of modern life.

I was introduced to his work by a fellow graduate student while I was doing my PhD in Aberdeen in the late 1970s, and I was instantly hooked. Lehrer's lyrics were hilarious but also extremely pertinent – indeed his songs remain relevant to this day. Lehrer explained the reason for his work's timelessness with a quote from a friend: "Always predict the worst and you'll be hailed as a prophet."

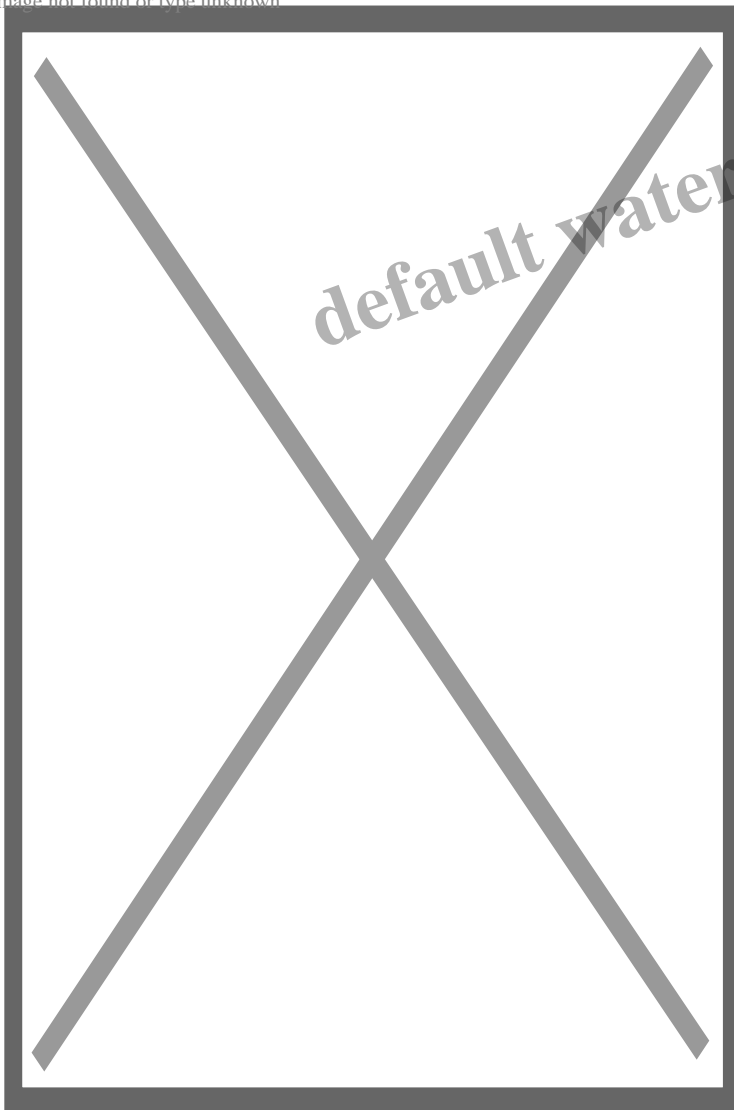
Tom Lehrer – We Will All Go Together When We Go. From the album “An Evening Wasted With Tom Lehrer” released In 1959.

“We’ll all go together when we go” captured the insanity of global nuclear war, suggesting that the entire world population would likely die if such a war broke out – which was a clear possibility during the [nuclear arms race](#) and [Cold War](#) years.

Trinity and beyond

[Nuclear weapons](#) had been researched and developed during World War II, leading to the first [nuclear test](#), codenamed Trinity, in New Mexico in 1945 – as recently depicted in the movie “Oppenheimer”. This was followed by the dropping of [two nuclear bombs](#) on Japan which forced the Japanese to surrender and ended the war.

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The Trinity atomic test. Source: [New York Times](#)

Thereafter, nuclear weapons continued to be developed and tested. Nuclear tests were mostly carried

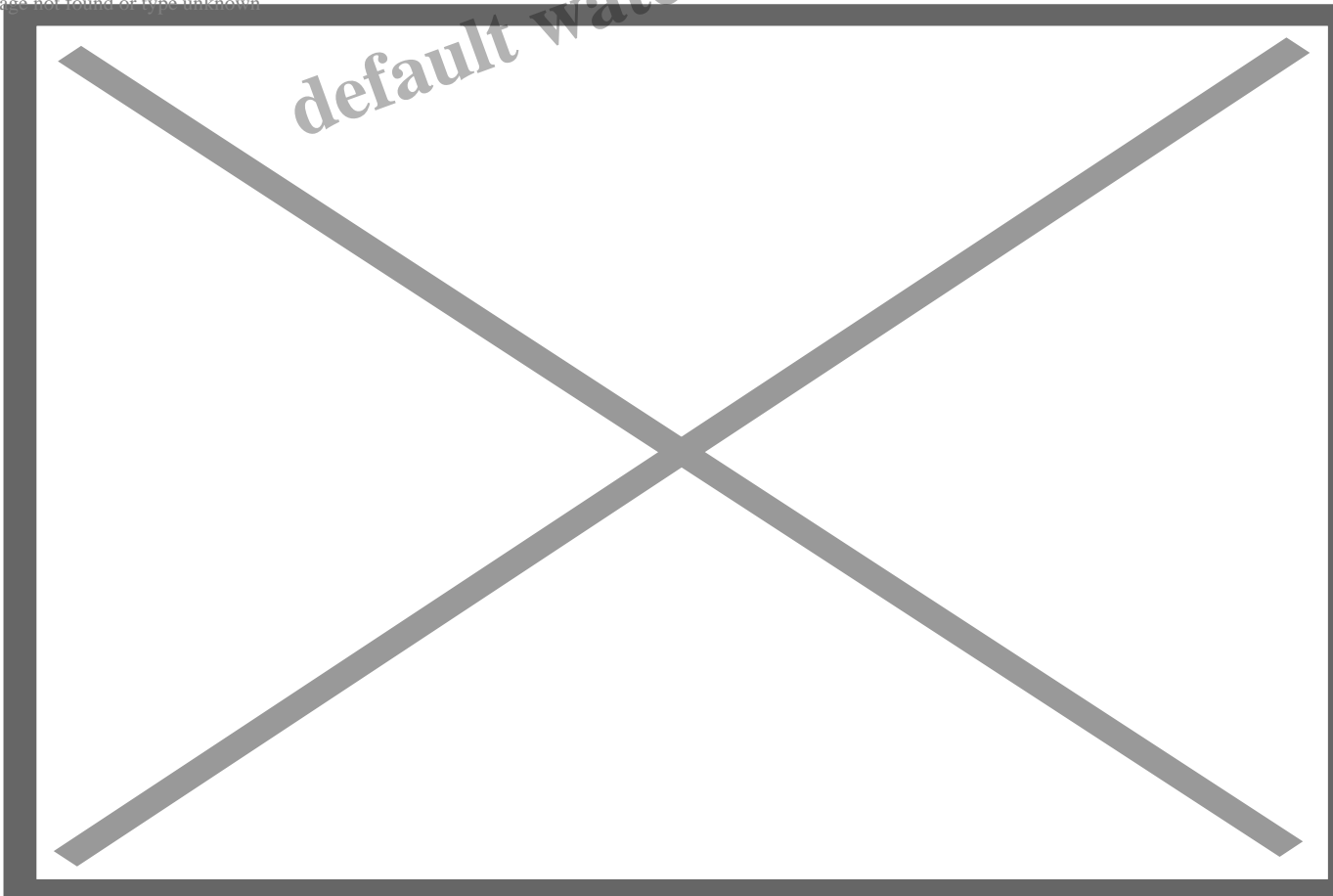
out in sparsely populated desert areas or islands. Of course, you can't explode a nuclear device without causing severe damage to the surrounding environment, long-lasting radiation contamination, and fallout that spread considerable distances. The Oppenheimer movie does not portray the [long-term adverse effects](#) of the Trinity test on the [Native American populations](#) of the area and [people living downwind](#) who experienced the fallout. Here in Australia, tests at [Maralinga](#) in South Australia involved the forced removal of Aboriginal people and irreversible contamination of their homelands. At the same time, the tests used military personnel as guinea-pigs to assess the effects of nuclear blasts on humans.

Thousands of nuclear weapons tests were carried out from the 1950s onwards, although atmospheric tests like Trinity and Maralinga were [banned](#) from 1963 onwards, and a total ban on testing of any kind was established in 1996.

MAD

By the mid-1960s both the United States and the Soviet Union had enough nuclear weapons to completely destroy their opponent. Any initiation of nuclear attack by one side could be responded to rapidly by an equivalent attack by the other. This policy became known as "[Mutual Assured Destruction](#)" – MAD, for short. Both sides knew that any attack upon the other would lead to their own destruction too – theoretically meaning that both sides would be reluctant to start such an attack.

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"The European Nuclear Balance", from the Guardian around 1979

MAD indeed. I remember seeing a map in the Guardian newspaper around 1979 titled the “European Nuclear Balance” showing the ranges of all the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine and plane-based nuclear arms held by both sides. [Although it turns out that this analysis [deliberately over-stated](#) the Soviet capability in order to justify more spending on arms in the West]. Regardless, my home-town in Scotland was well and truly covered by all sorts opportunities for nuclear annihilation. In fact, it didn’t really matter where you lived – chances are that a nuclear war would affect the entire world, either directly or through drastic alteration of the climate (dubbed “[nuclear winter](#)”). The threat of nuclear war was ever present and permeated political and social discourse in waves as various crises and flashpoints happened.

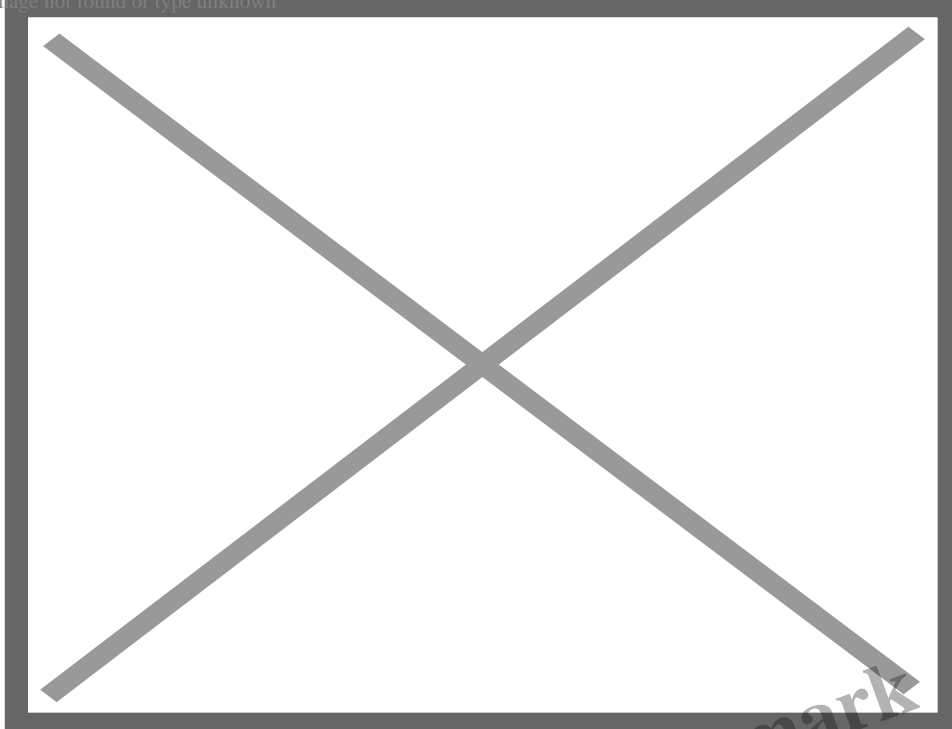
Books and movies

It also seeped into popular culture in books and movies. Nevil Shute’s 1957 novel “[On the Beach](#)” depicted Australia in the aftermath of a nuclear war that had wiped out the northern hemisphere. Made into a movie in 1959, the story centred around people dealing with the inevitable arrival of the fallout from the war.

Peter Sellers’ black comedy [Dr Strangelove](#) was released in 1965 and portrayed how a nuclear war could start relatively easily despite diplomatic and military checks and balances. Still unnerving to this day, the film emphasises how the actions of crazy people in situations of power can lead to unthinkable outcomes.

On the Beach and Dr Strangelove both offered different, but equally stark, views of the nuclear future. Another film made such a stark view that it was effectively banned for 20 years. When I was studying Ecological Science at Edinburgh University in the early 1970s, our “EcolSoc” screened the 1966 British pseudo-documentary “[The War Game](#)”. This was written for the BBC and depicts a nuclear war and its aftermath. The realistic portrayal of the consequences of nuclear bombs falling on England caused dismay within the BBC and government and was subsequently withdrawn before the provisional screening date of 6 October 1965. The corporation said that “the effect of the film has been judged by the BBC to be too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting”. It was shown in various theatres and privately to groups like our EcolSoc, but not aired on television until 1985.

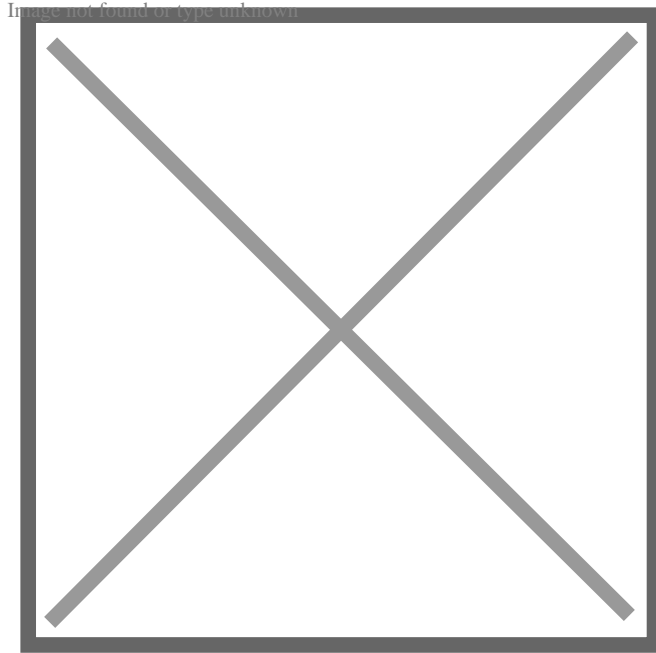
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Source: [TVTropes](#)

Peace is our profession

Of course, you could only focus on likely annihilation for so long before either going completely off the rails or simply tuning out. It did lead some people to anxiety and depression – I'd wake up in the middle of the night to find my first wife sobbing uncontrollably because she was worrying about nuclear war. There were extensive community-based campaigns protesting about nuclear arms, starting with the [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament](#), formed in 1957. But generally, everyday life had plenty to keep people occupied without worrying about whether it might all end tomorrow.

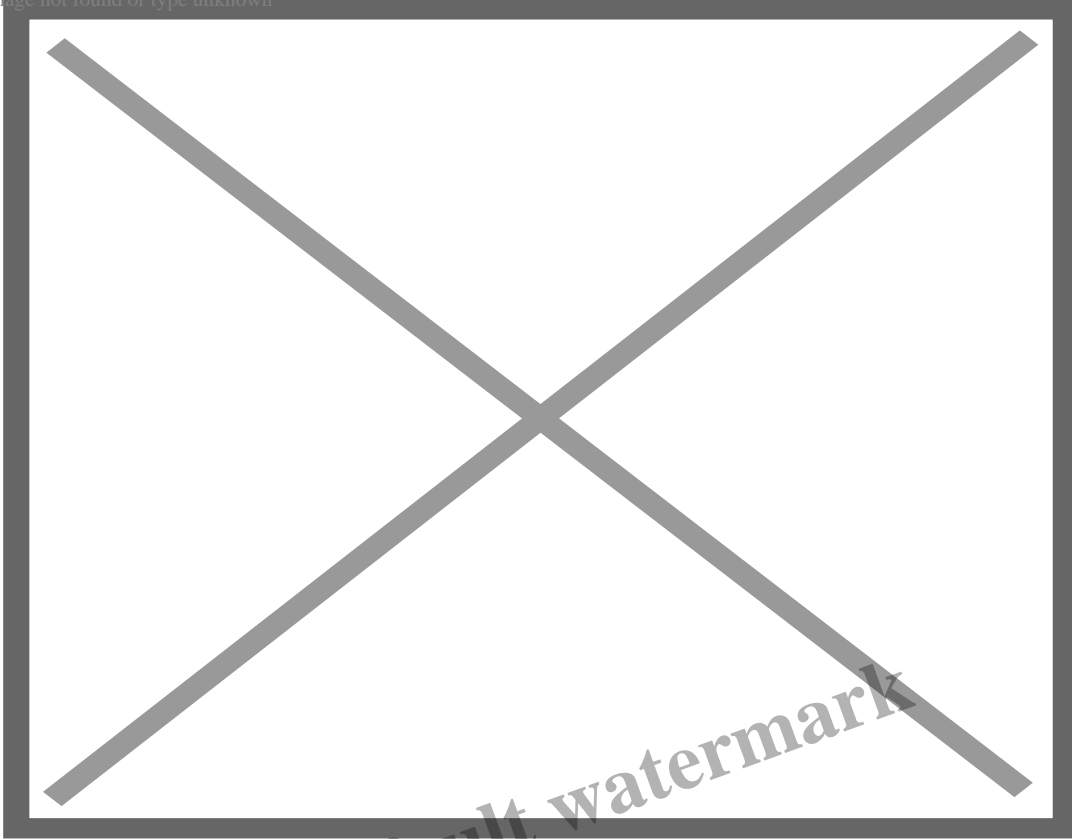


The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) Symbol – now universally recognised as the Peace symbol. To read the history of the symbol go to: [CND](#)

A main plank of logic behind the nuclear arms race was that the presence of large numbers of armaments that could effectively obliterate the human race meant that the risk of a broadscale war was lessened.

I spent a year in Santa Barbara, California in the mid-1970s and passed [Vandenberg Air Force Base](#), north of Santa Barbara on several occasions. I was bemused to see the sign outside the base which proudly proclaimed “Peace is our Profession”. Vandenberg was one of the centres for development of missiles that would carry nuclear warheads. It seemed odd that peace was the goal behind the creation of even more and even better means of wiping millions of people out.

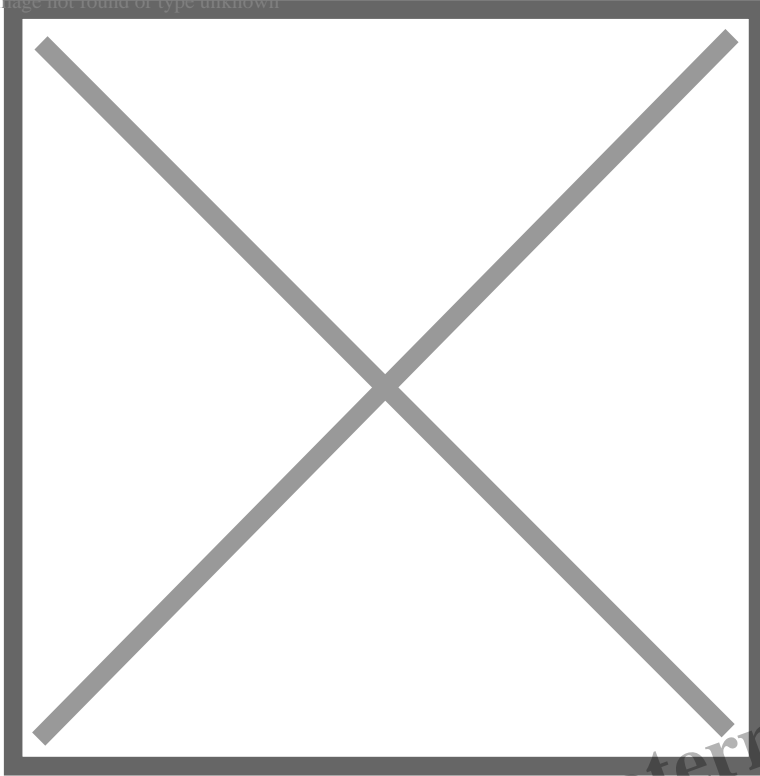
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1960 photo of peace protesters at the sign outside Vandenberg. Source: [Davidnrich](#)

It could be argued that the maintenance of a nuclear balance during the Cold War years did reduce the incidence of major conventional warfare. The band the Groundhogs released an album in 1970 titled “[Thank Christ for the Bomb](#)”. The title song, written by guitarist and singer [Tony McPhee](#) (who sadly died a few months ago), reflected on the horrors of war and reflected on nuclear arms’ role in reducing those horrors. You can listen to the song [here](#).

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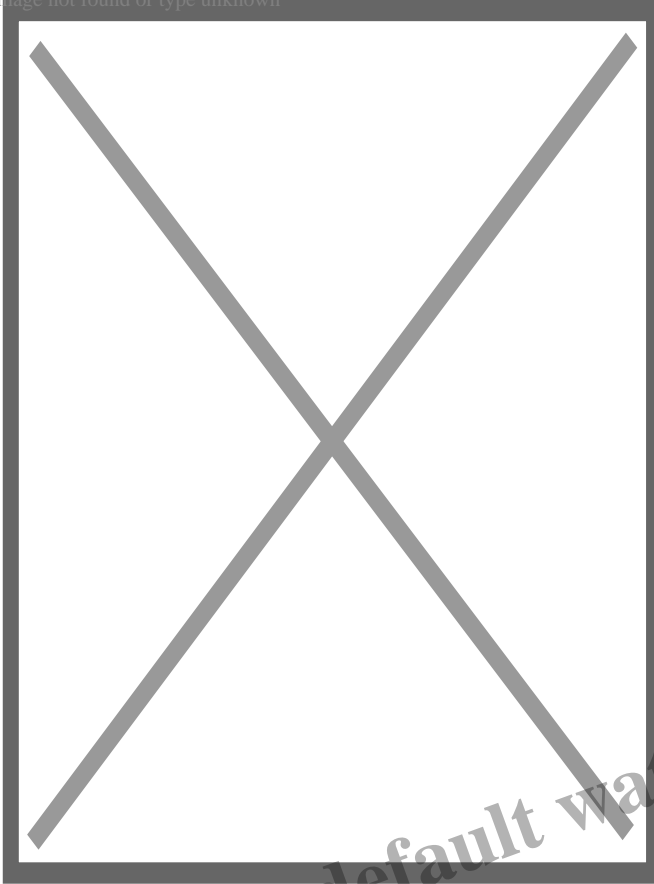


War happens anyway

Samantha Fish – War Pigs 2014

Despite Tony's optimism, nuclear stockpiles have not really stopped war happening. Although there have been no more "world wars" there have been a series of nasty and costly – and some would say pointless – conflicts that have played out even in the shadow of the bomb – Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and now the Ukraine and numerous other "minor" wars, such as "the [Cyprus Emergency](#)" in 1955-59, (during which my father was killed on active service). And Afghanistan, where, after [two decades of war](#), the Taliban are back and burning guitars.

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War of any size or shape sucks for those affected. My wife, daughter and I at my father's gravesite in [Wayne's Keep](#), Cyprus where he was buried in 1956. Wayne's Keep lies within the [UN Buffer Zone](#) separating the Greek and Turkish zones: Cyprus remains a divided country.

Although the number of nuclear weapons has reduced dramatically since the insane highs of the Cold War, there are still more than enough [stockpiled](#) to blow up the Earth several times over. As we've seen recently in Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, a war of any kind still increases the risk of the use of nuclear weapons. Putin's announcement of deployment of [nuclear weapons in Belarus](#) is a modern-day reality check. Dr Strangelove remains only a button away.

Sting's 1985 song "[Russians](#)" remains just as relevant now.

*"We share the same biology, regardless of ideology
But what might save us, me and you
Is if the Russians love their children too"*

Back to Tom Lehrer

Around 2011 or so, and I was introducing Tom Lehrer's songs to a grad student while we were driving to a field site. As we listened through "An evening wasted with Tom Lehrer", an album initially released in 1959, the song "We will all go together when we go" came on.

My grad student listened intently to this window into the Cold War era. But when the line “*Nearly three billion hunks of well-done steak*” came round, I saw a look of puzzlement on her face that slowly changed to one of amazement. Not the metaphor itself, but the number involved. When Tom Lehrer wrote that song, there were less than half the number of people on the planet as there were in 2011.

It’s estimated that the [world population](#) reached one billion for the first time in 1804, after over 200,000 years of human history. It then took another 123 years before it reached two billion in 1927, but only 33 years to reach three billion in 1960. Thereafter, it took 14 years to reach four billion in 1974, 13 years to reach five billion in 1987, 12 years to reach six billion in 1999 and 12 years to reach seven billion in 2011. It was estimated to reach 8 billion in 2022.

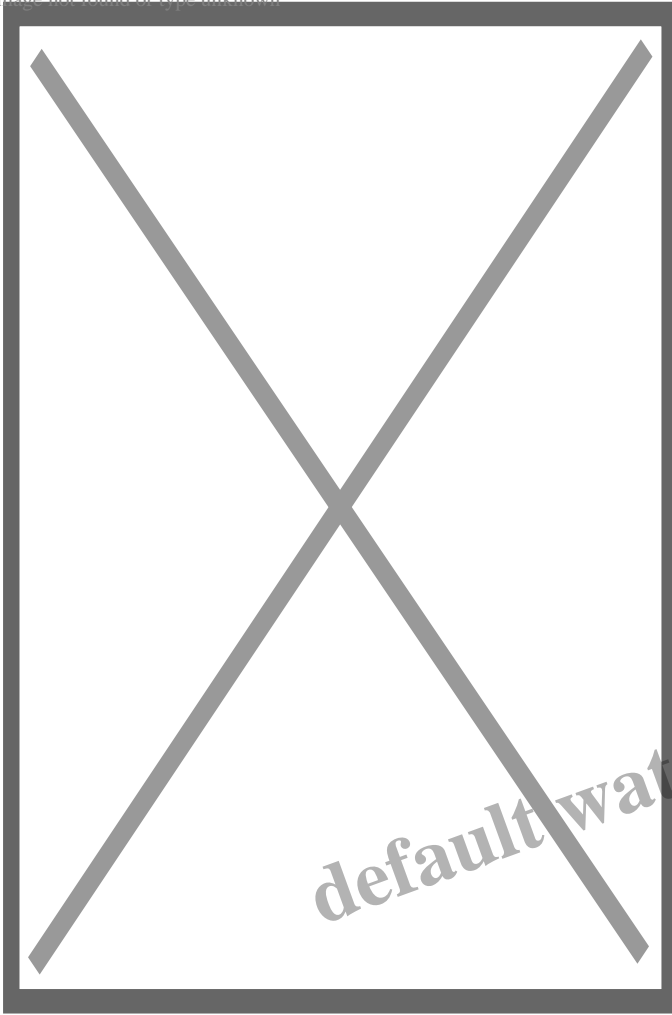
Looked at another way, the human population of the world doubled from 1 to 2 billion in 127 years, from 2 to 4 billion in 47 years, and from 4 to 8 billion in 48 years. There are over 5 billion more people on the planet than when I was born.

The Population Bomb

The consequences of a rapidly rising human population were first brought to public attention in a 1968 book by Paul and Anne Ehrlich called “[The Population Bomb](#)”. It was hearing Paul Ehrlich talk on TV in the late ‘60s that got me interested in “saving the planet” and set me on my career as an ecologist.

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Source: [Hoover Digest](#)

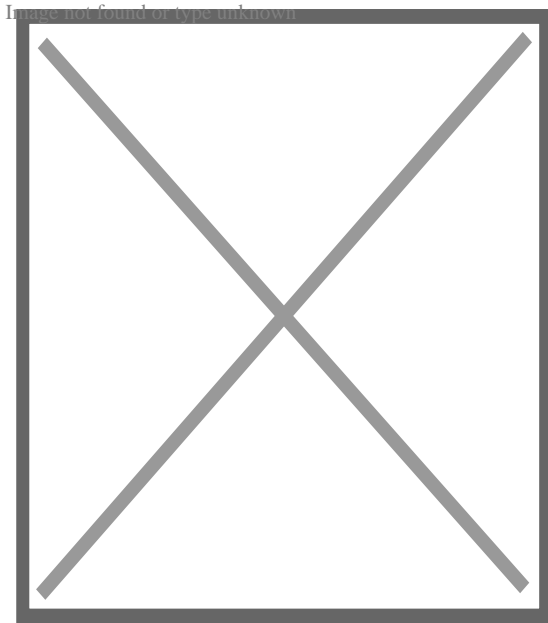
The basic question arising is how many people the Earth can sustainably support. This is not a straightforward question because human impacts depend not only on the number of humans but also the amounts of resources each individual uses. But there can be little doubt that 8 billion people have a lot more impact than 3 billion.

Today's world

That takes us back to the issues being faced today – as mentioned at the start of this post. It is generally accepted that increased human numbers are putting increasing strain on the planet by altering all aspects of the environment in the quest to provide enough fuel, food and fiber for everyone. Natural ecosystems are converted to agricultural or grazing systems, fossil fuels are extracted and burned to heat, cool and produce materials for our humanized world, and that process is changing the climate in ways we may not like. It's not just that climate extremes are happening – they're also affecting a lot more people. The Anthropocene is here, whether it started in 1950 or much earlier with the advent of [colonial resource exploitation](#).

As in the case of the threat of nuclear war, most people can only engage with ongoing climate crises for a limited time. Day to day life beckons and we only have so much band width available for big scary

issues that we apparently can do little about anyway. And it's OK to be concerned about the planet and still enjoy good fun escapism watching the Barbie movie.



Barbie plays guitar

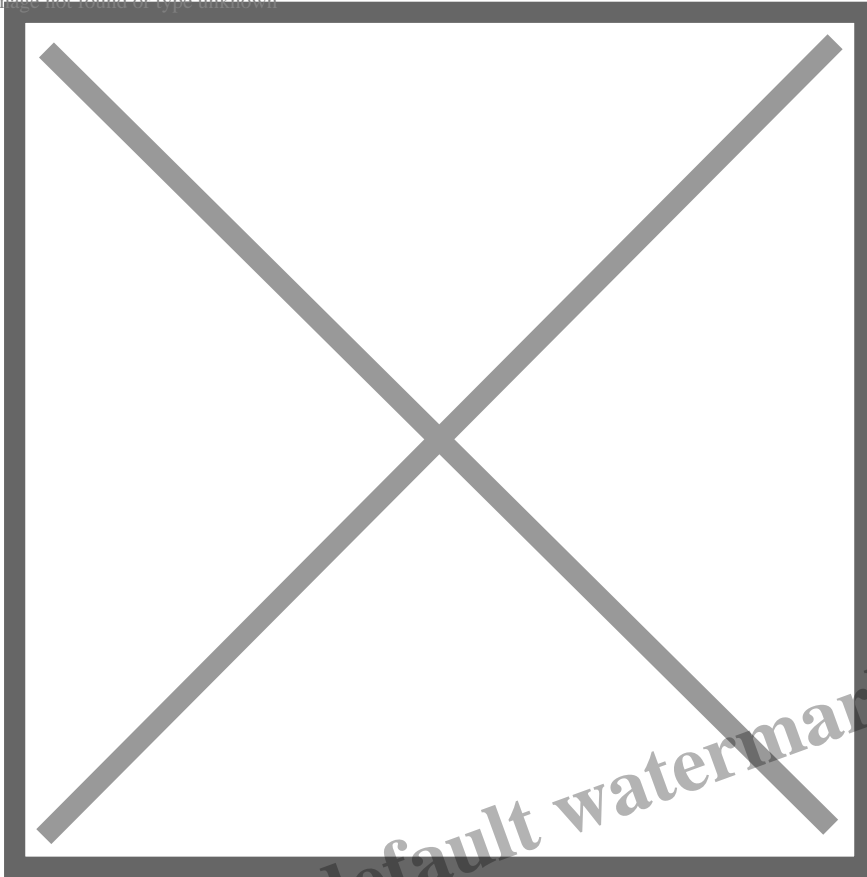
Who to believe?

Of course, the picture of what's actually happening gets muddled by both deniers and vested interests who stand to benefit from maintaining the status quo. [A handful of media commentators](#) (mostly in the conservative press) are determined to provide an alternative perspective that explains away or downplays the current climate trends. With something as complex as the global climate and with patchy data, it's easy to point to anomalies and cherry-pick the information. Some people are simply determined to ignore or challenge evidence and advice that the events we are seeing around the world are in any way linked to human-caused climate alteration. Not only that, but they're determined to push their point of view on any platform.

As one comment on a Facebook thread suggested:

"Unequivocal scientific evidence from thousands of climate scientists from around the world, agreed upon by hundreds of scientific organisations from around the world, yet some bloke on Facebook knows better."

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Source: [Spreadshirt](#)

Hope remains

Perhaps worse than the deniers are the “doomsayers” – people who spread discouragement by spruiking the inevitability of bad things happening regardless of what we do. Rebecca Solnit recently summarised this nicely:

“I don’t know why so many people seem to think it’s their job to spread discouragement, but it seems to be a muddle about the relationship between facts and feelings. I keep saying I respect despair as an emotion, but not as an analysis. You can feel absolutely devastated about the situation and not assume this predicts outcome; you can have your feelings and can still chase down facts from reliable sources, and the facts tell us that the general public is not the problem; the fossil fuel industry and other vested interests are; that we have the solutions, that we know what to do, and that the obstacles are political; that when we fight we sometimes win; and that we are deciding the future now.”

I wonder sometimes if it's because people assume you can't be hopeful and heartbroken at the same time, and of course you can. In times when everything is fine hope is unnecessary. Hope is not happiness or confidence or inner peace; it's a commitment to search for possibilities. Feelings deserve full respect as feelings, but all they inform you about is you. History is full of people who continued to struggle in desperate and grim circumstances, and so is the news from Ukraine to the Philippines."

[We can't afford to be climate doomers](#) – Rebecca Solnit

And there's the rub. We can't give up hope just because things get a bit overwhelming at times. Every generation has its threats and challenges to live with. My grandmother, born in 1889, lived through 2 world wars as well as the Cold War before she died at 97 years old in 1986. My father survived the Second World War, including the D-Day landings, only to be killed in a local conflict in Cyprus in which the British Army should probably not have been involved. I've experienced the nuclear age and the advent of global environmental issues. My children will inherit these issues and, hopefully, watch humanity find solutions.

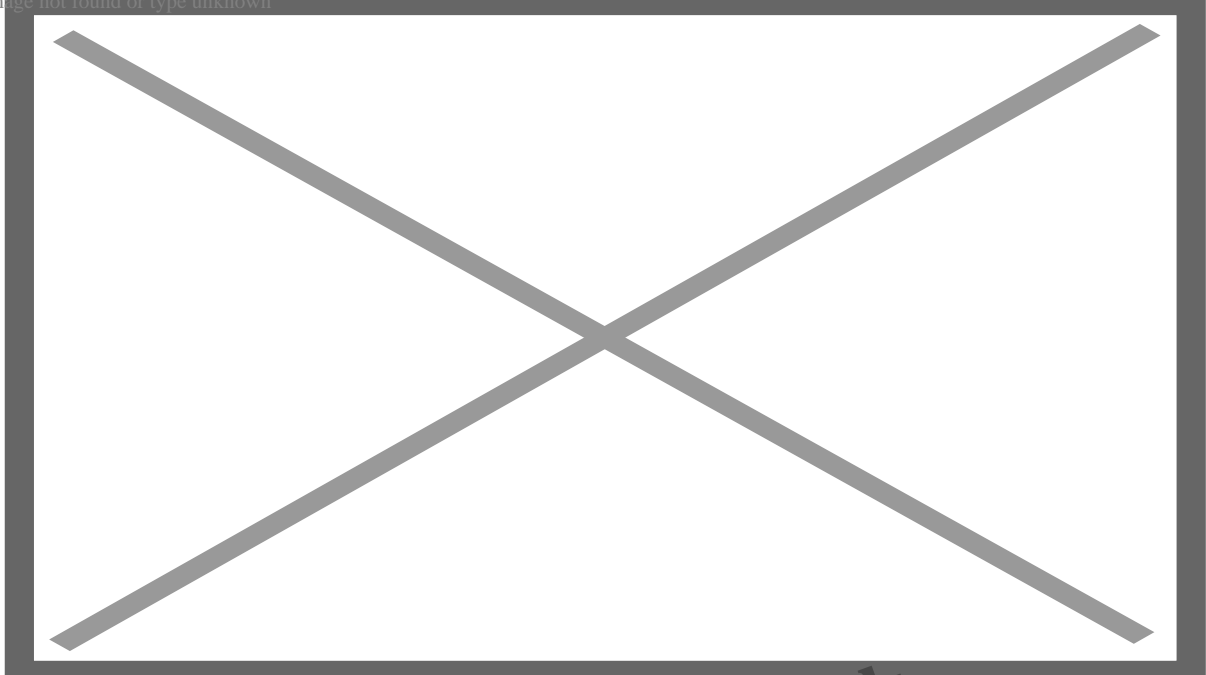
Accompanying the problems are wonderful achievements and ingenious solutions to previously insoluble problems. And nature – including trees to make guitars – seems to have a knack of persisting through everything. As soon as humanity takes its foot off nature's neck, it begins to rebound.

Post-nuclear life

David Attenborough's "A Life on Our Planet" starts with him walking through the deserted ruins of Chernobyl, the site of probably the world's worst nuclear disaster in 1986. The meltdown and explosion in the nuclear reactor there released large amounts of radiation, causing extensive environmental damage and deleterious human health impacts. People were evacuated from the surrounding area which was made into an exclusion zone with no human occupation.

Attenborough's documentary also ends in Chernobyl, but this time it portrays what's happened in the exclusion zone. The area surrounding Chernobyl was [reclaimed by forest](#) and has now become Europe's largest wildlife sanctuary, flourishing in the absence of humans and teeming with [large animals and a variety of birds](#), including rare and endangered species.

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Trees reclaimed Chernobyl. Source: [BBC](#)

I experienced something similar when we had the good fortune to visit the [Montebello Islands](#) off the Western Australian coast. These islands were the site of [early atomic bomb tests](#) by the British in the 1950s. Three nuclear explosions had devastating impacts on the islands and surrounding ocean. However, the islands and their marine surrounds are also now also a conservation area, an important turtle nesting site, and home to endangered mala (rufous hare-wallabies) that were translocated there to enhance the probability of their survival.

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Guitars not guns

There are numerous other good news stories that we tend not to see in the news, which focuses heavily on the bad news and day-to-day ephemera. The good news stories come about because of people not giving up but instead carrying on doing good things. That to me is something worth celebrating. It may sometimes not be easy, but hope is worth hanging on to. And singing about.

Of course, it would be much better if Nature didn't have to rebound from the damage humanity inflicts on it. And it would be much better if wars didn't start in the first place. We can hope for a time when people with guitars – made from sustainably sourced materials, of course – outnumber people with guns.

There have been many songs written and sung by people with guitars about ending war and seeking peace. My generation were inspired by the likes of Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and many others. Perhaps my favourite anti-war song is "[Alice's Restaurant](#)" by Arlo Guthrie. You can listen to it in this video – worth it even though it is quite long! The key line for me, though, is:

"If you want to end war and stuff you got to sing loud."

Written in 1967, Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant" remains just as relevant today. Here, it's sung live at Farm Aid 2005.

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1. Uncategorized

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