

# **“For What It’s Worth”: How a Protest Anthem from the 1960s Impacted Activists over the Past Half-Century**

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**ABSTRACT:** In the Summer of 1966, older Los Angeles residents grew angry over the crowds of teens and young adults in the downtown area. Despite the fact that few services were offered to these young people who faced the possibility of being drafted in the Vietnam War, the older population decided that the first response to the overcrowding issue should be police intervention. In what is now regarded as a complete overreaction, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) violently challenged, attacked, arrested, and dispersed thousands of young people who otherwise were not acting in a harmful manner. Where these young people would wind up, where they would go to deal with their issues, and their need for socialization was irrelevant. They were treated as if they had invaded the community and that their lives mattered little. In reaction to these violent clashes, singer/songwriter Stephen Stills penned what would be one of the most influential protest anthems of the Modern Era: “For What It’s Worth”. The purpose of this study is to show how this 1966 song was not only an instant hit, but also impacted activists over the past half-century, as it was covered by famous artists in diverse social reform movements, in protests, and even in a political party convention. This study will explore how this one protest song represents the overall impact of music on activist culture, and strives to inspire and inform readers about the power of music in activism.

**KEYWORDS:** Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), young people, disenfranchisement, draft, “For What It’s Worth”, cover, public demonstration

## **The Riot and the Song**

In the mid-1960s, Los Angeles, much like the rest of the nation, was going through dramatic social changes. One of the largest generations in American history, now known as the ‘Baby Boomers,’ were reaching their teens and young adulthood. In communities all over the nation, downtowns and other common public areas were frequently overwhelmed by the numbers of young people. They seemed to be everywhere, especially on weekends and holidays, like Times Square on New Year’s Eve (Russell 2015, 1-3)

This generation was different from the others, and not only because of its size. Its members were at the forefront of a cultural and music revolution, constantly challenging their elders with new ideas, styles and fashions. By the mid-1960s millions of young adults were joining various elements of a ‘counter culture’ that embraced experimentation with intoxicants (old and new), different versions of rock and roll (sometimes mixed with folk) and pacifism. Young men grew their hair long while young women took to revealing miniskirts while embracing feminism. In many parts of the U.S. older Americans did little to connect with or understand these new ideas and young people. Instead, they labelled them, mocked them and ultimately feared them (Gitlin 2013, 3-4). But this new generation was also under an unprecedented stress: The Vietnam Draft. While earlier generations of Americans did deal with periods of conscription, by the mid-60s the war in Southeast Asia was becoming increasingly unpopular, especially on the nation’s dynamic university and college campuses. While Older Americans saw the war as a just struggle against

Global Communism, millions of young people viewed it as another stage in American overseas imperialism and a violation of national self-determination as once defined by Woodrow Wilson himself (BBC Bitesize).

All of these ideas and forces came to a head in the Fall of 1966, on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. During that year more and more teens and young adults were descending on that neighborhood in vast numbers, sometimes numbering in the thousands, on weekend and holiday evenings. There they would socialize, mingle, network, listen to live music (much of it experimental) and talk all things politics. This large generation was growing increasingly angry at its powerlessness, as the voting age was still 21 (Jackson 2022, 1).

It was in this atmosphere of the political powerlessness of young adults that business owners and older residents of Los Angeles began their anti-youth legislative campaign. Over the course of the past few years the city had adopted several ordinances and zoning rules to make life difficult for young adults and teens, from curfews to the limitation and even revocation of business licenses (Jackson 2022, 1-2).

This was not the age of the Internet. For young people, there were no online forums or chat rooms or downloadable music. If a person wanted any kind of social life, he or she had to literally relocate to a place where young people gathered. And that place was, in L.A., the Sunset Strip (Bart 1966).

In fairness, older residents had some reason to be concerned. While the vast majority of young adults and teens were peaceful (though loud), a sizable minority openly took drugs and overdosed in public. Others literally went semi-nude and drank openly in clear violation of the liquor age of 21 (Bart 1966).

It was in this kind of atmosphere that city authorities decided to literally declare war on its young population, at least in this area. Police de-escalation tactics were decades away; rather, on weekend evenings law enforcement simply announced young people to disperse and then charged into crowds. While young people remained defiant, they were met with a hail of clubs, handcuffs and violent arrests. During one of the riots, some observers mistook the scene for urban warfare. Some young adults did react violently, with some hitting arresting officers and engaging in acts of attempted arson (Bart 1966).

One of the witnesses to these events was singer/songwriter Stephen Stills. Stills found the entire scene shocking, and as a result he penned perhaps one of the greatest, most enduring protest anthems in American History: "For What It's Worth" (Kudler 2013, 1-2).

### **Stills Writes a Hit – Or Two**

Musically, Stills composed a song that mixed the rising popular folk music with rock and roll. The tune's foundation was a constantly strumming bass guitar, dramatically echoed in order to impress upon the listener that this was more than a tune, it was an anthem. It was meant to be the musical backdrop to a moment of chaos that also pointed to a rising generation that was tired of old mores and ready to express themselves without fear, and regardless of the consequences (Kudler).

His lyrics belied the confusion of the riots, but at the same time presented the demands of youth in near-perfect clarity. At first, Stills expresses confusion, which was a totally appropriate emotion as many who witnessed the riot could not precisely identify what was actually occurring. Thousands of young people were screaming, falling, fighting with hundreds of heavily armed police officers while smoke billowed all around.

"There's something happening here,  
What it is ain't exactly clear...  
There's a man with a gun over there,  
Telling me, I got to beware..."

Stills expressed the visible intimidation armed officers presented to young people. The contempt of the older community and local businesses was clear as cops and others practically mocked the protesters (Kudler 2013).

The immediate results of the riots were the end of many of the establishments (such as coffeehouses, clubs and bars) that catered to young adults and teens. Part of the city's grid system was reworked within the next few years to radically change the Sunset Blvd. neighborhood. But the vibrancy of the area eventually returned, and the demands of young adults for peace, for the vote, for a measure of social justice would go on. And so would the song, which would continue to inspire many in their quest to effectuate meaningful systemic change (Mearns 2019).

Stills would go on to perform it live in the neighborhood in January of the next year, and his group Buffalo Springfield took to the recording studio. Soon, radios all over America were booming the new anthem "For What It's Worth." Stills had written a hit, and he would go on to write many more (Kudler 2013).

It was during this period that the war in Vietnam was intensifying, as the United States claimed, primarily using the now-dubious "Domino Theory" that the war in Southeast Asia would soon lead to Americans fighting communism in many more nations. Stills did not write the song with the war in mind, but as the 60's rolled on, both his and popular opposition to the war would intensify. "For What It's Worth" was frequently used as inspiration for anti-war activists, and could frequently be heard blasting from radios for the remainder of the conflict from college campuses, to beaches to urban centers (Kudler 2013).

Stills regarded American involvement as altogether infamous. Early on he even went as far as stating that the infamous "Gulf of Tonkin" incident, in which it was alleged North Vietnamese forces attacked the U.S. Navy as a malicious deception. In one interview at the time he clearly stated, "We were lied to about the Gulf of Tonkin. We went to war on a lie. And all those guys died for nothing. It was a goddamn shame" (Rolling Stone Interview 1972). As the war continued into the 1970s, Stills and others grew alarmed at the growing toll of war injured and dead. By this time, under Presidents Johnson and Nixon the physical boundaries of the war dramatically expanded beyond the defensive perimeters of what was South Vietnam.

Combat and aerial bombardments reached deep into Cambodia and North Vietnam. Hanoi, the Capital of North Vietnam, even found itself under American attack with major bridges cut. Stills lamented all of the loss and considered the American Dead to be a tragic mistake. But even though he maintained his opposition to the war, that anger was never oriented to the American fighting man. In fact, Stills praised veterans of every American conflict for their bravery, selflessness and sacrifices. On several occasions, both during the war and later, he stated that American troops had behaved heroically. In 2013, he told a journalist at Rolling Stone, "The people who went to Vietnam, they're the real heroes, because they were sent into an unwinnable situation, and they did their job. They fought for each other, and they fought for their country" (Rolling Stone 2013).

Of course, Still's song writing prowess would continue with many other hits. But one in particular has now been regarded by scholars as almost a 'sequel' to "For What It's Worth," as if the classic song was so powerful it had successfully birthed another.

In the early 70's Stills, along with David Nash, would pen his biggest hit, "Teach," while in the group Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. "Teach" took the confusion, alarm and tension from "What It's Worth" and turned it around. The optimistic, but simultaneously sad ballad returned to the topic of "Young People." But this time, the emphasis was on the older generation loving and educating them, with the full knowledge that life had its mortal limits. Writer David Swanson considered the two songs and wrote, "It's always struck me as interesting that Stephen Stills, having written one of the most famous protest songs in the history of American popular music, followed it up with 'Teach Your Children', which is almost the opposite of a protest song. It's a song about hope and promise and the future." "Teach" would have more in common with the earlier "For What It's Worth" than just the themes of adults, youth and their changing relationships. "Teach" would also heavily utilize

creative guitar rifts and would incorporate a Folk-sound in order to give the ballad a more earthy tone. Some observers would even later stipulate that the song was almost a country tune (Billboard 1970).

### **Aftermath of the Song**

Stills' "For What It's Worth", the revolutionary anthem of the 1960s, has become one of the most-covered protest songs, having been covered by artists including Ozzy Osbourne, Cher, and even The Muppets (WhoSampled). Due to its broad lyrics, this song can be applied to numerous social issues, and therefore has been a staple of much social action over the course of the last six decades. Overall, the anthem represents the cry of this nation's youth for social rights and encourages them to persist in their push for the equality of all social groups.

As an advocate against the apartheid government in South Africa, Miriam Makeba often voiced these issues in her music. The all-white apartheid South African government enforced legislation requiring the segregation of white and black facilities. So, the renowned singer-songwriter pushed for the rights of blacks not only in South Africa, but also across the world. As her international fame rose, her music transformed from upbeat dance songs like "Pata Pata", one of her first releases in the 1960s, to songs with heavier topics like "Soweto Blues", a protest anthem that brought to awareness the injustice Soweto school students had to face when shot by apartheid police after having their native African languages banned from schools (SAHO).

Miriam Makeba released her cover of "For What It's Worth" in 1970. Her nasal-toned yet euphonious vocals coupled with the clash of percussion on the word "stop" emphasized Makeba's efforts to use this form of artistic activism in order to promote her own causes regarding civil rights (WhoSampled). By 2011, the top one percent of income earners saw a 275% increase in household income, but the lower end of this scale only saw an 18% increase (Kim 2011). This practically forced the topic of income inequality into public conversation. In September 2011, hundreds of protesters collected in Zuccotti Park in Manhattan to protest disparities in income and exploitation in the corporate world (History.com, Editors 2021). This movement was publicized by an anti-consumerist journal called *Adbusters*. With the hashtag #OccupyWallStreet tweeted, this was one of the most viral activist movements on social media (Komlik 2014).

Music played a huge role in these protests. From Kanaska Carter to Bruce Springsteen, a number of artists came to perform. Notable were David Crosby and Graham Nash, members of the band Crosby, Stills & Nash. They performed "Long Time Gone", "They Want It All", "Teach Your Children", and "For What It's Worth". Nash told *Rolling Stone*, "People are recognizing the basic truth that the system is loaded against them, and they're looking for equality." Similar to the 1960s Sunset Strip Riots, people were fighting for equal rights, and that is what music helps bring recognition to. Nash said, "It's the people waking up. That's what we do as musicians...I want people that are alive and thinking and trying to do something positively to change their situation" (*Rolling Stone*). This is exactly what the lyrics of "For What It's Worth" brought to the streets of lower Manhattan. The lyrics, "What's that sound, everybody look what's going down," perfectly portrayed the performers' hopes, including Nash and Crosby's, to bring attention to the several issues important in the riots, predominantly income bias and corporate exploitation. By bringing this attention of the riots' causes to the Manhattan crowds with these epochal anthems, musicians hoped to bring the attention of the riots's causes to legislators and income-regulation organizations.

The results of this were phenomenal. Occupy Wall Street resumed the trend of decentralized activist action; only this time, it opened the air for social-media messaging, meme tactics, and live-streaming, giving more attention to this decentralized activism. As Occupy Wall Street Protester Dana Balicki said, "We changed the way that people hear and see and understand and process a narrative of resistance", the protests gave activists a

newfound sense of courage, sparking a series of more decentralized activist movements like Black Lives Matter and the People's Climate March. A few years later, Occupy opened up the 2012 Fight for \$15 Movement in which workers called for a 15-dollar minimum wage. More than half of the states in the US ended up establishing this minimum wage. Nationwide Black Friday protests were organized at Walmart, leading to higher pay for Walmart employees. With all this said, the work of several artists during Occupy Wall Street, including Nash and Crosby's performance of "For What It's Worth", was vital in establishing a new form of activism that would later on help movements in all fields, including workers' rights, climate change, and racial equality, to flourish in their causes (Levitin 2021).

On the opening night of the 2020 Democratic National Convention, Billy Porter and Stephen Stills wowed the audience with a performance of "For What It's Worth". In an interview with *Variety*, Stills said, "Billy and I were first talking about this on the day that George Floyd died - he was throwing furniture around in his apartment, he was so angry" (Aswad 2020).

Porter and Stills performed a satirical version of the anthem and hoped to advocate black rights. Behind them, emblazoned on the quasi-dynamic red and blue background in a large, white font, the word "stop" appeared several times. This was a clever move on the side of the Democratic Party to grab the attention of youngsters and allow them to really think about the situation at hand, and how just like the social rights of young people were stripped from them in LA in the 1960s, rights were now being stripped from blacks. As an Emmy, Tony, and Grammy winner and an avid black rights supporter, Porter said, "I hope our version of 'For What It's Worth' will raise people up and inspire them to take action, use their voice, and vote, vote, vote."

As Porter had hoped, his performance of this song motivated young people and instilled in them a sense of desperation to take political action to fight for equal social rights. Porter's thigh-high boots and dramatic high-collared vest, as well as his incredible vocals and dance moves left the audience wonderstruck and was sure to grab the votes of these youngsters watching (Stephen Stills 2020). Stevie Nicks of Fleetwood Mac fame released her cover of "For What It's Worth" early in 2022 along with producer Greg Kurstin, guitarist Waddy Wachtel, and backing vocalist Sharon Celani. While grasping the nostalgic essence of the song, Nicks' raspy vocals brought her own story-telling to the anthem. She used her rendition of the song to advocate for women's rights, having witnessed the 2017 Women's March, the Iranian protests for the death of Mahsa Amini, and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. "I wanted to interpret it through the eyes of a woman – and in the times that we live in, it has a lot to say," Nicks said. Unlike the original version, Nicks added a twist to the end of the protest song by repeating extended periods of words and phrases including "stop" and "what's that sound". She prolonged these particular words because she wanted to urge women to be aware that their rights were being stripped from them and she hoped to motivate them to take social and political action. Likewise, the singer is known to use her social media platform to advocate women's rights and advise women to be more aware of moments when their birth rights as citizens of the United States are abused (Garcia 2023).

## Conclusion

In the mid-1960s, Stephen Stills and Buffalo Springfield composed and released what would become one of the most influential anthems of social protest in modern history, "For What It's Worth". Having been refashioned by distinguished musicians and even adopted in political campaigns, the song eminently transformed the culture of social activism throughout the course of the last six decades. From the total disrespect youth activists faced in the 1960s on account of the violence of the Los Angeles Police Department to the adaptation of a protest song in the 2020 Democratic National Convention, it is clear that the concept of insistent activism has gained much acclaim. This is significant because it represents how profound of an impact music has on society,

as it has not only motivated activists to persevere in pushing for their causes, but it has also led positions of authority to attend to the activist nature of championing for social rights. As the song states, there is something happening here: the evolution of activist culture backed by a single 1966 protest anthem played and performed in countless acts of political and social crusading throughout the last six decades.

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