

For What It's Worth

One of the most subtly powerful and profound songs ever known was written in a matter of minutes. I think many of the great ones are.

Legend goes that Stephen Stills of *Buffalo Springfield* wrote the song "For What it's Worth" in about fifteen minutes. He came face-to-face with a violent riot between young folks and police officers, a common occurrence in the turbulent environment that met Los Angeles (and the rest of the country) in the late 1960's. Disheartened by the hate and anger he saw, he went home and wrote down his feelings. The rest is history.

If you're unfamiliar with the song "For What it's Worth", I encourage you to give it a listen. You've probably heard it before without realizing. Its title is not very forthcoming (the words "for what it's worth" aren't mentioned once in the song), but if you ask me, it's quite fitting when you look at the subtle ambiguity that surrounds the piece as a whole. Still, the words are simple, perhaps even a bit elementary. There isn't any symbolism; Stills comes right out and says exactly what he wants to. Stills is making a futile attempt to understand when, how, and why our world has become so hateful.

This song may mean something different to you than it does to me, and that's okay. I think that's the point. For many at the time of the song's release, it was a ballad to rally against the Vietnam War. For others, it was a requiem of the free-love hippie lifestyle that was beginning to sour. But there is a reason we are still talking about this song 52 years after its release.

Imagine writing something transcendent of time, generations, and political atmospheres. Imagine sharing words written in the midst of raw, unfiltered emotion. I have no qualifications that would deem me a lyrical genius, but I do understand how difficult it is to write a song. What, you have to put together something semi-poetic that flows well and then accompany music to it? And you have to do so in a way that will be appealing to many the tuned and un-tuned ear alike? Gosh, writing this article is hard enough.

Songwriting, like any type of writing, involves us in a never-ending attempt to better understand the human condition. I can't speak on behalf of Stephen Stills, but I would imagine his question was "*why can't we just get along?*".

I didn't write this as a passive-aggressive declaration of my political stance. Quite the opposite actually. I suppose I'm just trying to contextualize the environment in which I have found myself; a place where people hold deep hatred for others who feel differently than they do. An environment where we outwardly encourage "open-mindedness" yet foster a harsh, relentless opposition to those who may feel differently about the world based on their experience.

That said, I don't aim to change anyone's mind; I haven't once walked in anyone's shoes but my own. I just suppose that like Stills, I'm simply saddened by what I see when I "look what's going down".

While the information in this article was taken heavily from prior knowledge, I did fact-check myself with an article written for Rolling Stone by David Browne titled "'For What It's Worth': Inside Buffalo Springfield's Classic Protest Song".