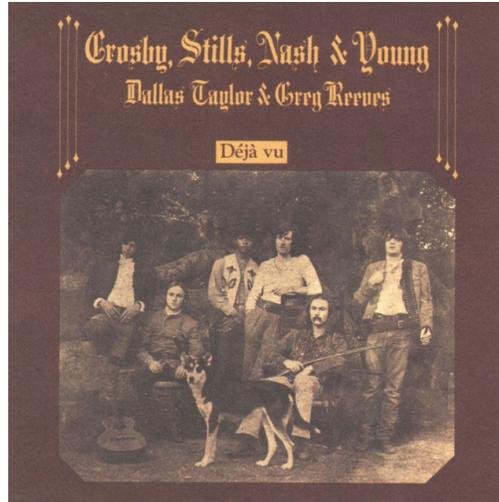


“Déjà vu” – Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (1970)

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Essay by Dave Zimmer (guest post)*



Album cover

Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young’s “Déjà vu” album was imbued with romance, heartbreak, melody, harmony, rebellion and hope. Much more than just a merging of folk and rock, new musical frontiers opened up across the roll-call of songs: “Carry On,” “Teach Your Children,” “Almost Cut My Hair,” “Helpless,” “Woodstock,” “Déjà vu,” “Our House,” “4 +20,” “Country Girl,” and “Everybody I Love You.” They were hatched during tumultuous times and shared personal perspectives, capturing real life in motion.

The singer-songwriter era was blossoming, with David Crosby, Stephen Stills, Graham Nash and Neil Young forging fresh ground. Like a band of brothers, CSNY crested the top tier of popular music royalty, able to deliver soaring electric anthems as well as intimate acoustic ballads on “Déjà vu.” Other singer-songwriters with exemplary 1970 albums, including James Taylor (“Sweet Baby James”) and Joni Mitchell (“Ladies of the Canyon”), did not possess this potent dual prowess.



David Crosby

CSNY was hailed as America's first super group in 1969, the individual members having achieved considerable notoriety in prior bands: Crosby, adventurous songwriter and vocalist first gaining fame in the Byrds, always found the sweet spot in the harmony stacks within such songs as "Eight Miles High"; Stills, pioneering guitarist, singer, and writer, penned the enduring protest song, "For What It's Worth (Stop, Hey What's That Sound)," in Buffalo Springfield, which also featured Young, who unleashed his high-pitched voice and stinging guitar style, while composing wildly evocative tunes, "Mr. Soul" among them; and Nash, top harmony singer and key songwriter in the Hollies, was an important contributor to the British Invasion band's hit-making machine (punch up "On a Carousel" on the juke box).

Nash was in search of more creative freedom when he first sang with Crosby and Stills during the summer of 1968 in Southern California's Laurel Canyon. Together, they discovered the CSN honey mixed with gravel and diamonds vocal blend. "It was scary," Crosby said. "We knew we'd lucked into something so special, man. We could hear it plain as day." The trio's eponymous, acoustic guitar-driven, three-part harmony-laden debut LP sparked a sensation when it was released in mid 1969. But Stephen Stills, who earned the nickname "Captain Manyhands" during the first CSN recording sessions, playing bass and keyboards in addition to acoustic and electric guitars, wanted another musician on board to allow them to be more than an acoustic act when they played live. Atlantic Records President Ahmet Ertegun suggested Neil Young. What would Young bring to CSN's beautifully crafted sound? His often bold playing style, which he exhibited in the Springfield and with his band Crazy Horse, could up the rock and roll ante. That proved to be the case when CSN ultimately added Y as a full partner and they went on the road, where Young and Stills rekindled their Buffalo Springfield guitar fireworks on stage.



Stephen Stills

Excitement for the first CSNY album had been building since the group's widely-heralded performance (their second-ever live gig) at the Woodstock Music & Art Fair on Max Yasgur's farm in upstate New York during the early morning hours of August 18, 1969. This was years before the Internet, social media and cable TV, so the buzz was fueled organically by literal word-of-mouth and news reports following Woodstock and subsequent CSNY live shows.

With the dawn of a new decade, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young were crowned America's Beatles. The "Déjà vu" album was released by Atlantic Records on March 11, 1970, with two million copies already pre-ordered by retailers. As this new LP was landing on turntables across America and becoming the go-to music on college campuses filled with students exercising their freedom of speech, protesting the Viet Nam war, and exploring new avenues of expression, CSNY delivered meaningful messages, a multi-layered sound, and an engaging aura that connected with the counterculture. When the Woodstock movie opened in theaters on March 26, 1970, CSNY was positioned as the purveyors of Woodstock Nation's peace, love and harmony vibe.



Nash, Crosby, Young and Stills

However, all was not so rosy during the making of the album that would become “Déjà vu.” Recording sessions in Los Angeles and San Francisco were scheduled around CSNY concerts and amidst personal turmoil. Graham Nash described the scene: “We were going through incredible emotional experiences individually. That was a difficult time. It was very uncomfortable for everybody. You must realize that when the first CSN album was made, we were all in love. We all had ongoing relationships. I was with Joni [Mitchell]. Stephen was with Judy Collins. David was with [his girlfriend] Christine [Gail Hinton]. When we got to ‘Déjà vu,’ Joni and I were no longer together, Stephen had broken up with Judy, Christine had been killed, Neil and his first wife were no longer an item. As a result, ‘Déjà vu’ was a darker, much deeper, emotional album. It was not the greatest of times. The feeling of the music reflects that, I think.”

Listen to Young’s “Helpless,” a nostalgic homage to his Canadian roots, the song’s refrain enveloped by CSN’s soul-stirring vocals. Listen to “4 + 20,” recorded solo by Stills, his finger-picked acoustic guitar resonating as he softly sang a tale of loneliness and desperation with emotional intensity.

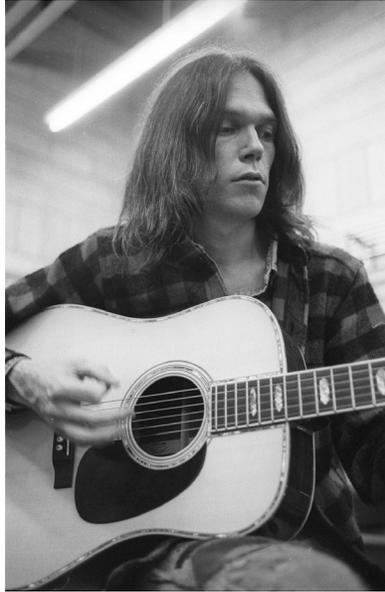


Graham Nash

“Teach Your Children,” the first single from the album, “was as up and communicative as we could get,” Nash said. “It started out as a slightly funky English folk song. Stephen put a country beat to it and turned it into a hit record.” The finishing touch was a spiraling steel guitar intro added by the Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia. Nash’s tender “Our House” commemorated his time with Joni Mitchell while the two were living together in her Laurel Canyon home in 1969.

With the progression of the “Déjà vu” album recording sessions (often multi-hour marathons that lasted well past midnight), no track was emerging as a true opening number, like Stills’ “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes” had led off and instantly ignited CSN’s debut LP. So Stills stepped up and created “Carry On,” beginning with a churning acoustic guitar intro and closing with a cascading variation on his Buffalo Springfield tune, “Questions.” CSN harmonies shined gloriously on these lines: *“Carry on ... love is coming/ Love is coming to us all.”*

For his grand “Country Girl” suite, Young wove together parts of three songs: “Whiskey Boot Hill,” “Down, Down, Down” and “Country Girl (I Think You’re Pretty).” Stills and Young’s “Everybody I Love You,” the only co-written composition on “Déjà vu,” took flight with a flurry of electric guitar interplay that melded with layers of vocals, Stills’ falsetto a triumphant exclamation point.



Neil Young

Joni Mitchell wrote the song “Woodstock” but she was not at the festival. Her managers (David Geffen and Elliot Roberts) did not want to take the chance that Mitchell might not be able to make it back from Woodstock to appear on “The Dick Cavett Show” television program; so she was holed up in a New York City hotel room that weekend. Mitchell shared the back story:

The deprivation of not being able to go provided me with an intense angle on Woodstock. I was one of the fans. I was put in the position of being a kid who couldn’t make it. So I was glued to the media. And at the time I was going through a kind of born-again Christian trip--not that I went to any church, I’d given up Christianity at very early age in Sunday school. But suddenly, as performers, we were in the position of having so many people look to us for leadership, and for some unknown reason, I took it seriously and decided I needed a guide, and leaned on God. So I was a little “God Mad” at the time, for lack of a better term, and I had been saying to myself, “Where are the modern miracles?” Woodstock, for some reason, impressed me as being a modern miracle, like a modernday fishes-and-loves story. For a herd of people that large to cooperate so well, it was pretty remarkable, and there was tremendous optimism. So I wrote the song “Woodstock” out of these feelings.

Nash was in awe of how Mitchell worked her magic: “She was able to write a song about Woodstock and she wasn't even there! As soon as I saw her writing it, I said, ‘Oh, God, what's this?’ And it was such a great song, the whole feeling of the song...it pinned exactly what had happened, in terms of being a wheel in something turning. As soon as the four of us heard it, we wanted to do that record so bad. And we did.” Stills handled the lead vocal, Crosby and Nash added harmonies, and Young uncorked the blistering, strings-on-fire electric guitar riff that kicks off CSNY’s version of “Woodstock.” The whole band played the song together live in the recording studio, as they did when cutting Crosby’s “Almost Cut My Hair,” which anti-

establishment listeners embraced (*"I feel like letting my freak flag fly!"*). David Crosby--with his Wild Bill Hickok-style mustache, hair flowing onto his shoulders, and fringed leather jacket--was the face of the hippie generation.

The "Déjà vu" album cover, the concept envisioned by Stills, mirrored Crosby's title song and its central lyric ("We have all been here before"). For the photo, all of the band members, including bassist Greg Reeves and drummer Dallas Taylor, were outfitted in post-Civil War garb, looking as if they had been transported back in time more than 100 years. A gnarled oak tree outside Crosby's Northern California home in Novato was the setting for Tom Gundelfinger's black and white group shot, printed in sepia tones, and pasted onto dark brown colored cardboard, textured to have the leatherette-like feel of an old hymnal, with gilded foil lettering completing the elaborate package designed by art director Gary Burden.

As "Déjà vu" hit #1 on the "Billboard" album chart and continued to rack up sales (going on to sell more than eight million units and counting), CSNY was already employing the "mother ship" model, devised by Crosby and Stills, affording the musicians the freedom to pursue solo and duo projects while still keeping the core group alive. Stills' first solo album and Young's "After the Gold Rush" were released in 1970, with solo LPs from Crosby ("If I Could Only Remember My Name") and Nash ("Songs for Beginners") coming out in 1971. Neil Young would establish a towering Rock and Roll Hall of Fame career as a solo artist, releasing more than 40 albums, while Stills, Crosby, and Nash did not reach that level of individual success away from the group.

Neither CSNY nor CSN were ever able to approach the collective power of the "Déjà vu" album, which is now categorized as "classic rock" but in 1970 represented a revolutionary mélange of vocal, lyrical and instrumental splendor. Over the years, despite periodic creative and personal differences, the musicians would reunite, tour, and record more songs and albums, including the single "Ohio," written by Young and recorded by CSNY two weeks after the May 4, 1970 Kent State shootings; a CSNY live album, "4 Way Street" (1971); a CSNY stadium tour (1974); the album "CSN" (1977); the CSNY albums "American Dream" (1988) and "Looking Forward" (1999); and the Freedom of Speech CSNY tour (2006), chronicled in the 2008 "CSNY Déjà vu" album and film directed by Young. The influence CSNY had on other artists was manifested most significantly in the formation of such popular bands as the Eagles and America.

The 50th anniversary "Déjà vu" special edition box set, issued in 2021, featured a number of demos, outtakes and alternate mixes of songs. While historically interesting and making for a fascinating deep dive into the music of CSNY, circa 1969/1970, none of the extra tracks felt essential. Upon objective reflection, the songs and versions chosen by the artists for the original "Déjà vu" album were the right selections.

The possibility of any new CSNY music ended with the death of David Crosby on January 18, 2023. His musical legacy and that of his CSNY colleagues live on through their recordings, particularly the landmark “Déjà vu” album.

Dave Zimmer is a writer, editor, music journalist, and Crosby, Stills & Nash biographer. Among his book credits, Zimmer wrote “Crosby, Stills & Nash: The Authorized Biography” (1984, St. Martin’s Press, with updated editions published by Da Capo Press in 2000 and 2008) and he edited “4 Way Street: The Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young Reader” (2004, Da Capo Press). Zimmer also enjoyed long tenures at “BAM: The California Music Magazine,” Universal Studios, and Penguin Random House.

All photos, except for album cover photo, by Henry Diltz

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.