

Folk-rock pioneer and social critic David Crosby dead at 81

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David Crosby, the influential pioneer of folk-rock music, died January 18 at the age of 81. A statement shared with media the next day by Jan Dance, his wife of 35 years, explained that Crosby died surrounded by family members after a “long illness.”

The statement went on to say, “Although he is no longer here with us, his humanity and kind soul will continue to guide and inspire us. His legacy will continue to live on through his legendary music.”

Former bandmate Neil Young (with whom Crosby had a falling out decades ago) commented, “David is gone, but his music lives on. The soul of CSNY [Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young] David’s voice and energy were at the heart of our band. His great songs stood for what we believed in and it was always fun and exciting when we got to play together.”

The singer, guitarist, songwriter and founding member of two iconic American rock bands—the Byrds and CSNY, or the earlier group without Young, Crosby, Stills & Nash—was an active musician until the end. Crosby had recently released a live record, was working on a new studio album and announced one week before his death an upcoming concert in Santa Barbara, California.

“Croz,” as he became known to fellow musicians and fans, came of age during the politically tumultuous period of the 1960s and early 1970s, and his outlook was shaped in large measure by the events of the civil rights and antiwar movements of that era.

Some of the best sentiments of his generation, such as opposition to war, political repression and nationalism, were present in Crosby’s music, as well as in his many interviews and statements over the last six decades.

As a musician, Crosby is known for his soulful tenor voice, exceptional vocal harmonies, novel guitar tunings and hypnotic picking patterns. His songwriting featured unusual melodies with lyrics that alternated between love songs with introspective imagery and radical commentary on social and political topics.

He was one of a group of musicians—including other members of the Byrds, the Mamas and the Papas, Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, Joni Mitchell and later, Jackson Browne and Warren Zevon—who congregated in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Laurel Canyon where the folk-rock genre was born in the mid-1960s.

Crosby was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame twice, with the Byrds in 1991 and CSN in 1997, one of the two dozen artists out of 365 inductees to have done so.

David Van Cortlandt Crosby was born into a middle class family in Los Angeles. His family background is intriguing. Both his mother and father were descended from early New York Dutch “aristocracy,” the Van Cortlandts and the Van Rensselaers, respectively. His father, Floyd Crosby, was an Academy Award-winning cinematographer, who, remarkably, worked on F.W. Murnau’s legendary *Tabu* (1931), Pare Lorentz’s famed New Deal documentary *The River* (1938), Orson Welles’ unfinished *It’s All True* (1943), Fred Zinnemann’s *High Noon* (1952), Roger Corman’s *The House of Usher* (1960) and many other films and television series.

David Crosby attended a selective co-ed prep high school from which he never graduated before embarking on a career in music.

In early 1964, as part of a folk trio enamored of the Beatles in particular, Crosby joined with then-Jim (now Roger) McGuinn and Gene Clark to found the Byrds. Crosby had previously introduced himself to the duo at the Troubadour nightclub in West Hollywood by joining them on stage and singing harmonies.

The Byrds eclectically incorporated a variety of influences—the Everly Brothers, John Coltrane, jazz, traditional Indian music and others—and blended the pop themes of the early Beatles and the folk music of Bob Dylan to help ultimately create several emerging genres, including folk-rock, psychedelia and baroque pop.

In late 1965, George Harrison acknowledged the Byrds’ influence on the Beatles when he sent a copy of the album *Rubber Soul*, along with a message, to McGuinn and Crosby.

Crosby featured on six (and the best) of the Byrds’ twelve studio albums, *Mr. Tambourine Man* (1965), *Turn! Turn! Turn!* (1965), *5th Dimension* (1966), *Younger than Yesterday* (1967), *The Notorious Byrd Brothers* (1968) and *Byrds* (1973).

Crosby’s songwriting influence is evident on *Younger than Yesterday* with “Mind Gardens,” “Everybody’s Been Burned,” “Lady Friend” and “It Happens Each Day.” On *The Notorious Byrd Brothers*, Crosby penned, with help from McGuinn and Chris Hillman, a politically conscious anti-war song in the midst of the US occupation of Vietnam called “Draft Morning.” The lyrics follow the swirling thoughts of a draftee sent off to murder:

*Sun warm on my face, I hear you
Down below movin’ slow
And it’s morning
Take my time this morning, no hurry
To learn to kill and take the will
From unknown faces
Today was the day for action
Leave my bed to kill instead
Why should it happen?*

After clashing over the refusal of the band to include his song “Triad”—about a ménage à trois—on *The Notorious Byrd Brothers* as well as opposition to his political speeches on stage between songs, Crosby was fired from the Byrds in 1967. As he would later admit, he had also become very difficult to work with due to both his outsized self-importance and increasing substance abuse.

At the time of his departure from the Byrds, Crosby had already been working with guitarist and singer Stephen Stills, who had himself recently seen the breakup of his band, Buffalo Springfield. In July 1968, Crosby

teamed up in Laurel Canyon with Stills and former co-founder of the English pop group The Hollies, Graham Nash, to create a folk-rock supergroup. According to Nash, CSN discovered their remarkable, if complex, vocal harmonizing after 40 seconds and without rehearsal. Signed by Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic Records, the self-titled first album from CSN in 1969 went to number 6 on the US charts.

Although the songs written by Crosby on the debut album like “Guinevere” and “Wooden Ships” were not hit singles, they became staples of the live performances of the band. Also, Crosby’s song, “Long Time Gone,” which was written on the night of the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in June 1968, contained something of a call to action:

*Speak out, you got to speak out against
The madness, you got to speak your mind,
If you dare.
But don't try to get yourself elected.
If you do, you had better cut your hair.
'Cause it appears to be a long time,
Before the dawn.*

With the addition of Neil Young to the group and the creation of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young (CSNY), the band continued to reflect the generally antiwar and pro-equality views of the radicalized youth going into the 1970s. Crosby wrote the title track of the album *Déjà Vu*, which went on to sell nearly eight million copies worldwide, along with the iconic song, “Almost Cut My Hair,” about long hair as a symbol of opposition to the establishment.

Crosby was present when, after the National Guard killings of four students protesting the US invasion of Cambodia at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, Young wrote the song “Ohio.” After Crosby heard Young’s song for the first time, he called Stills and Nash and insisted the band record the track immediately, which they did, and the hit single was released within a month.

Creative differences and the pursuit of solo careers by band members—along no doubt with a myriad of financial, social and personal pressures, ranging from the significant to the very petty—disrupted ongoing group collaboration. As with others of his generation, Crosby was by then suffering from the adverse impact of fame and fortune in the music business. He became the target of a hypocritical corporate media campaign identifying him with the negative effects of the hedonism, “free spirits” and self-indulgence of rock-and-roll star lifestyle.

However, any honest assessment of Crosby’s life and career would have to acknowledge his descent into drug and alcohol addiction was the product, above all, of the toxic music industry environment and the confusion and demoralization associated with the receding of the radical wave from the mid-1970s onward. It was not principally a matter of Crosby’s “personal decisions.”

Crosby, who had been fantastically successful as a musician in the era of 33rpm LPs and FM radio, was unquestionably struggling with his career by this point. As we noted in the WSWs review of the film *Echo in the Canyon* in 2020, Crosby was one of the more acerbic interviewees for the documentary. “Bands tend to devolve,” he commented. “They evolve up the point where they’re exciting and they’re new and they’re good, and then after that they work their way slowly downhill until it’s turn on the smoke machine and play your hits. And that’s not good enough for me. It’s just not.”

Things reached a nadir in 1985, when Crosby spent nine months in a Texas state prison after conviction on multiple drug and weapons charges. He was also arrested several times in California and charged in New York for various similar offenses. His health deteriorated drastically, and he

was forced to undergo a liver transplant in 1994 after a long battle with hepatitis.

As Crosby explained in the biographical film, *Remember My Name*, “I’ve been trying to earn my way back. I was a junkie, and it doesn’t get lower than that. It took prison and 14 years of going to AA meetings. ... If you spend your life looking over your shoulder at your mistakes, you’ll walk into a telephone pole.”

Still, Crosby was able to remain steadfast in his critical attitude toward the US government and American society in general. In 2004, he wrote a song called “They Want It All” that was recorded for the album *Crosby & Nash*. It was, in part, a response to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and included the lyrics:

*They want it all, they want it now
They want to get it and they don't care how
They want that mansion and they want it full
Of wine and women and political pull
They always have a President or two
That's how they get away with what they do
That's how they do it*

In 1997, Crosby formed a jazz-rock band called CPR with his son James Raymond—who had been put up for adoption and had independently become an accomplished pianist and composer—and session guitarist Jeff Pevar. The group released two studio albums and two live albums through 2001 that showcased Crosby’s strengths as a songwriter, including a track called “Morrison” which expressed his disgust with what he considered a false portrayal of Jim Morrison in Oliver Stone’s 1991 movie *The Doors*.

The collaboration with Raymond continued into the final two decades of Crosby’s life, which proved to be one of the most prolific periods of his career. He released five solo albums between 2014 and 2021, the last of which was entitled *For Free* and included a moving duet with Sarah Jorasz of the title track written by Joni Mitchell in 1970.

Commenting on the surge of creativity and live performances in his late 70s, Crosby said, “at this stage, you don’t know if you’ve got two weeks or 10 years,” adding, “Really what matters is what you do with whatever time you have.”



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