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CSNY rediscovering a four-part harmony

By Edna Gundersen, USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO - The Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young reunion could screech to a four-way stop at any moment, judging from the lively squabble taking place around a hotel-suite coffee table. What's the beef?

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"The menu," David Crosby says. "I hate what Stephen eats."

Stephen Stills stiffens. "What?"

Crosby elaborates: "I can't stand the way you eat. I love how you dress, but I can't stand the food you eat."

Graham Nash, alluding to the foursome's forthcoming tour, cheerfully inserts, "We're all taking our individual caterers, and I'm taking a hairdresser."

And Neil Young diplomatically offers, "We'll have really good organic food of every type for

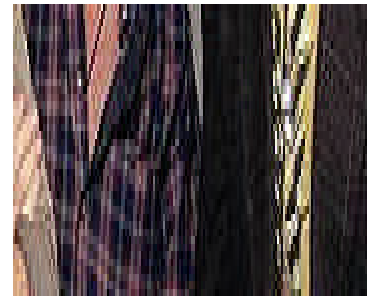




everybody. A healthy variety."

A placated Crosby decrees, "No mystery meat. No local caterers."

OK, so it's not the brawl you'd expect, given the quartet's combative history. These days, the four members of CSNY are as harmonious as their legendary harmonies, displayed on *Looking Forward*, out today from Reprise.



Refreshing the old chemistry: *CSNY today* - Neil Young, Graham Nash, David Crosby and Stephen Stills (USA TODAY).

Their first tour in 25 years kicks off Jan. 24 in Detroit.

Delighted retailers and promoters are hailing the comeback as a lucrative baby-boomer magnet. The group unanimously credits a love of music, not money, for rekindling the partnership. Is that shared passion enough to prevent friction among four willful, guitar-playing singer/songwriters?

"You have to be careful," says Nash, 57. "Everybody has to be superaware of everybody else's feelings. In the past, there were times we didn't care what anybody else thought."

Conflict is inevitable, he says. Young, 53, summarizes the dynamic: "Brothers fight."

Stills, 54, likens the arrangement to having children: "Two is twice as hard as one, three is six times as hard as two, and four is eight times as hard as three. It's not easy. But there was a lot more listening going on than ever before."

Young, historically the holdout, was the catalyst for the group's return. CSN was recording a self-financed album when Young dropped by at Stills' invitation. Impressed that the unsigned trio was creating music for pleasure, not profit, he offered to contribute.

In an instantly cozy atmosphere, the four collaborated on eight songs over four days. Has the chemistry altered over

time?

"Well, *my* chemistry has changed drastically," cracks Crosby, referring to his past substance abuse. "But seriously, there was less tension and more respect."

Young encouraged the four to sing live at one mike rather than tape vocals separately.

"Remember that trick, that blend?" Stills says. "We hadn't done that in a while, all of us standing in a circle around one mike."

Crosby, 58, says, "There's something magical that happens in an air blend, when the voices are actually working with each other before they go into the microphone."

"Introducing me back into the mix shook it all up, and a lot of their previous balances went away," Young says. "It was just the four of us making the best record we could, a record without a record company. That kept it pretty simple."

Reveling in the organic process, the four avoided discussing contracts, labels, finances or itineraries.

"I don't want to get poetic here, but it was like a beautiful flower unfolding," Nash says.

Crosby says: "We just followed the songs. Nobody issued agendas or ultimatums. Nobody set down any rules. Nobody said, 'Are we going to tour? How much do I get?' "

After recording in Los Angeles and at Young's studio on his Woodside, Calif., ranch, they convened to pare the list and were stunned to discover a consensus on nine songs. The remaining three were peacefully, if laboriously, negotiated, as was the sequence of tracks.

When differences surfaced, "we talked until we worked it out," Crosby says. "The truth comes right out of the speakers. If you can't hear it at first, you sit down, pay respect to your pals, and sooner or later it becomes very clear."

But even a no-brainer entails friendly debate. A drummer initially recommended the tour banner CSNY2K, a proposal echoed by countless friends and strangers.

"We had a meeting, and we talked it over, and each one of us brought in the same name suggested by 6 million people," Young recalls.

"Then we had a knockdown, drag-out fight for three hours, and we agreed on it."

They laugh heartily. Clearly, camaraderie and loyalty have replaced rivalry and insecurities. Praise, self-deprecating humor and reverence flood their chatter. Crosby, who underwent a liver transplant in 1994, theorizes that hardship and an acute awareness of mortality have softened their edges. "Every day I'm still here is Christmas," he says.

Nash, on the mend after a boating accident left him in a wheelchair with two broken legs, says: "We all know how fragile life is. We've all lost a lot of friends. In my case, I could have snapped my spine and never walked again. I could have been thrown over the boat and sank before anybody could get to me. You have to grab life and absorb it with humor and dignity."

Looking Forward, only their fourth album and their first since 1988's *American Dream*, contrasts young, rage-saturated rock with genial, midtempo tunes about hope, morality and midlife wisdom (or sermonizing - Stills' *Seen Enough* denounces alienation in the cyber age, and Nash's patriotic *Heartland* extols values of work and family). Strong harmonies and the guitar interplay of Young and Stills evoke the familiar folk-rock of early CSNY.

It adds to a rich legacy. Stills and Young sprang from Buffalo Springfield, Nash hailed from The Hollies, and Crosby migrated from The Byrds. CSNY's amalgam of choirboy harmonies, folk-rock fusion and socially conscious lyrics emerged on 1970's *Déjà Vu* and solidified with 1971's live 4

Way Street. Despite the proliferation of teen acts and rappers on the charts, these vets aren't worried about today's climate.

"Nah, we'll be playing indoors," Nash jokes.

"The musical climate is very ripe for us," Crosby says. "There has never been anything else like us. It makes no difference at all what's happening now. Tons of fans love good songs and the people who craft them."

The four don't feel burdened by the weight of the CSNY myth.

"My son is heavier, and he's only 3," Stills says.

And while they can be nudged to share war stories about playing Altamont, the original Woodstock or Live Aid, they resist dwelling on the past.

"My day starts off with this combination fashion show and wrestling match I do with my kid to get him dressed and off to school," Crosby says. "I don't think about yesterday."

Musically, while outside projects beckon - Crosby is recording with side band CPR, Stills is tinkering on a solo album, and Young is assembling a long-awaited retrospective - CSNY "is the mother ship," Young says.

Adds Crosby: "There is no such thing as too much music. That's like too much sex. I'll make the time."

Will CSNY carry on? All agree that another album seems likely.

"We have a damn fine start," Nash says.

Looking forward, the quartet changes key

Will they take the *Marrakesh Express* to Ohio? A *Southbound Train* to Chicago? Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young have mapped the geographic stops on their CSNY2K tour early next year but have yet to determine where they'll go musically. Don't expect *Déjà Vu* all over again. CSNY's unearthed classics may bear alterations.

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"I'm afraid I can't go back to the key in *Love the One You're With*," Stephen Stills says. "I can't sing it there anymore."

Neil Young says: "In some cases, it's physically impossible to do the same keys. We'll adjust. We really want to do the old songs that people associate with us. And we'll go back to the beginning and pick songs that are meaningful to us."

Graham Nash proposes *Southern Man*. "It's still relevant today. Look at the black guy they dragged down the road till he was decapitated."

When Young suggests dipping into Buffalo Springfield's songbook, his bandmates identify favorites: *Bluebird*, *For What It's Worth*.

They'll also draw from the new *Looking Forward*, a harmony-packed collection marked by a sprawling diversity Stills calls "the Sybil effect."

"The thing that happens when bands redo their hits is that pretty soon it's a Las Vegas thing," Young says. "We won't be doing medleys. And we've got new material, newer than what's on the album. So we're not going to rest on the past, though we'll give it a healthy nod."

There may even be room for a cover or two.

"I want to do *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*," David Crosby deadpans.

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