

# Louder Than Words: Rock, Power & Politics

BY BRI KILROY | PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ROCK & ROLL HALLOF FAME



BONO'S SUPERBOWL JACKET



DEE SNYDERS' JACKET AND T-SHIRT



BOB MARLEY'S SHIRT

The moment we hear Stephen Stills sing “There’s something happening

here...” building to the chorus “...Stop, children, what’s that sound? Everybody look what’s going down,” we hear a catchy protest song. Would you believe that its prominence as an anti-war anthem was unintended? And the proud words of “Sweet Home Alabama” were a comeback to two of Neil Young’s ballads, themed around racism and slavery. Even Martha and the Vandellas’ signature 1964 song “Dancing in the Street” (later brilliantly covered by David Bowie and Mick Jagger to raise funds for Live Aid) evolved into a civil rights anthem for young demonstrators. Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum’s newest exhibit, *Louder Than Words: Rock, Power & Politics*, reveals how the music that molded America’s playlist communicated strong messages throughout the decades, and how it was sometimes misinterpreted to take on a whole new meaning.

Visiting from Ohio’s Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, *Louder Than Words* sparks a new way to view and discuss history. Visitors find themselves weaving through a fascinating historical timeline starting with posters and flyers of Elvis’ military draft and ending with a larger than life photo of a handshake between Bret Michaels and Donald Trump. The decades in-between are filled with artifacts, film clips and detailed descriptions of how the music of that time and the boldness of musicians expressed political, social and cultural events to the world when it couldn’t be reached through a quick Twitter status.

“Musicians have the ability to flow between politics and pop culture,” Kristin Mooney, Ford Museum’s Public Affairs Specialist, said. “It provides a fascinating way for families to connect and talk about history in a different manner.”

For example, most of us born well after the Vietnam War ended know the words to Stills’ “For What It’s Worth” (There’s Something Happening Here) song thanks to its usage in the majority of war films. If you’re exploring the exhibit with someone who was around when it was written, they may remember Stills writing it as a follow-up to 1966’s Sunset Strip Riots where several demonstrators protested against a strict curfew law that violated their civil rights.

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Although both events the song is equated with differ in place and time, listeners drew commonalities in the lyrics that related to the riots and the Vietnam War. Even now, you may be able to relate it to a current happening.

The song and 1976 music video for “Macho Man” yields a more frivolous and upbeat setting to the serious issue and perceived taboo of gay culture. The exhibit reveals the song’s daring promotion of gay tolerance and powerful message through replicates of the music video’s wardrobe worn by life-sized

mannequins. The level of interaction you can have with the exhibit’s artifacts and information guides you to experience the music on an intimate level, matching songs with history.

*Louder Than Words* does not play coy when it comes to instances where music was misinterpreted and how artists felt when it happened. A short film documenting a number of campaign songs throughout decades of presidential history gives an in-depth look on how some songs, seemingly achieving a message of freedom and pride, ended up achieving comical irony more than anything else.

The development of music is as remarkable and progressive as the journey from the Walkman to the iPod. Commentaries by famous musicians, historic film clips, preserved wardrobes and more show music is just as prominent throughout time as the events that made it into the history books.

*Louder Than Words* is open now and runs until February 11, 2018 at the Ford Museum. Make a festive day of it with your friends and family by pairing your visit to the Ford Museum with the annual Holiday Open House December 3, 1-4 p.m. where the Claus family, their reindeer and live choir performances fill the interior with holiday cheer. Museum hours and rates can be found at [Fordlibrarymuseum.gov](http://Fordlibrarymuseum.gov).

**What:** Louder Than Words: Rock, Power & Politics

**Where:** Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum

**When:** Runs until February 11, 2018.

**Cost:** \$8 for adults. \$7 for seniors and military service members. \$6 for students with valid I.D. \$4 for ages 6-18.