

“Stand!”—Sly and the Family Stone (1969)

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Essay by Eddie Santiago (guest post)*



“Stand!” album cover



“Stand” original label



Sly Stone

The testament of any historically important work of art is that its impact transcends time. By this measure, “Stand” by Sly and the Family Stone is one for the ages.

Originating from the San Francisco Bay Area, Sly and the Family Stone was led by Sylvester “Sly Stone” Stewart and featured Rose Stewart (vocal/keyboards), Freddie Stewart (vocals/guitar), Larry Graham (vocals, bass), Greg Errico (drums), Cynthia Robinson (vocals, trumpet), and Jerry Martini (saxophone). The band had already reached the top of the charts in 1967 with the song “Dance to the Music” and although Sly could have taken the sure path to continued commercial success, his consciousness had been awakened by the political environment and social transformation upending the country during the countercultural and civil rights movements.

Being a band of musicians who were black and white, men and women, Sly and the Family Stone embodied the promise and the pain of the country during the Sixties. They encountered racism in many places they performed. They exemplified the youth of the countercultural movement in embracing peace and empowering women. They witnessed the stride toward the New Frontier in 1960 and the lights going out in Camelot in 1963. They watched Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. share his dream with thousands on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 and reeled from the nightmare of his assassination in Memphis in 1968.

“Stand” was a soundtrack for these turbulent times. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended segregation as a matter of law but integrating the county and ensuring everyone’s equal treatment was easier said than done. Riots erupted in dozens of American cities in 1967 and, in 1968, the Kerner Commission (appointed by President Johnson) detailed the sobering reality of what was happening to the country: “We have visited the riot cities; we have heard many witnesses; we have sought the counsel of experts across the country. This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white--separate and unequal.” “Stand,” released in May 1969, was an exhortation to American society to change direction.

The album’s opening salvo, the title track, begins with an attention-grabbing drum roll and calls for people to move from the sidelines to the front lines, from being bystanders to agents of change. “Everyday People” called out the class and color lines that were long overdue to be erased with a shout of “we got to live together.” “Stand” was also a salve for the nation’s shell-shocked psyche with songs like “Sing a Simple Song” and “You Can Make It If You Try” encouraging people to hold on to hope and persevere.

Musically, “Stand” is a blend of infectious dance, swampy blues, and gospel inflections brewed in a potent funk that calls forth ancestors and a new generation alike. Listeners took to the message and the music. “Everyday People” was the number one song in America for four weeks in 1969 and “Stand” went on to sell two million copies.

“Stand” sounds so familiar today because Sly Stone influenced everyone who came after him (most notably Michael Jackson and Prince, who in turn influenced everyone from Beyoncé to Bruno Mars). Sly and the Family Stone laid the foundation for interracial, mixed gender, genre-spanning bands from the Jimi Hendrix Experience to Fleetwood Mac; from Prince and the New Power Generation to Alabama Shakes. “Stand” was a revolutionary leap forward in artistry and it’s an album we are still learning from today.

Eddie Santiago is the author of “Sly: The Lives of Sylvester Stewart and Sly Stone” (2008). He is a former music business executive who held positions at Mercury, EMI, and Atlantic Records. His work includes marketing albums for Aaliyah (“One in a Million”), Brandy (“Brandy”), and Digable Planets (“Blowout Comb”). Eddie earned a master’s degree in Community and Economic Development from Pennsylvania State University.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.