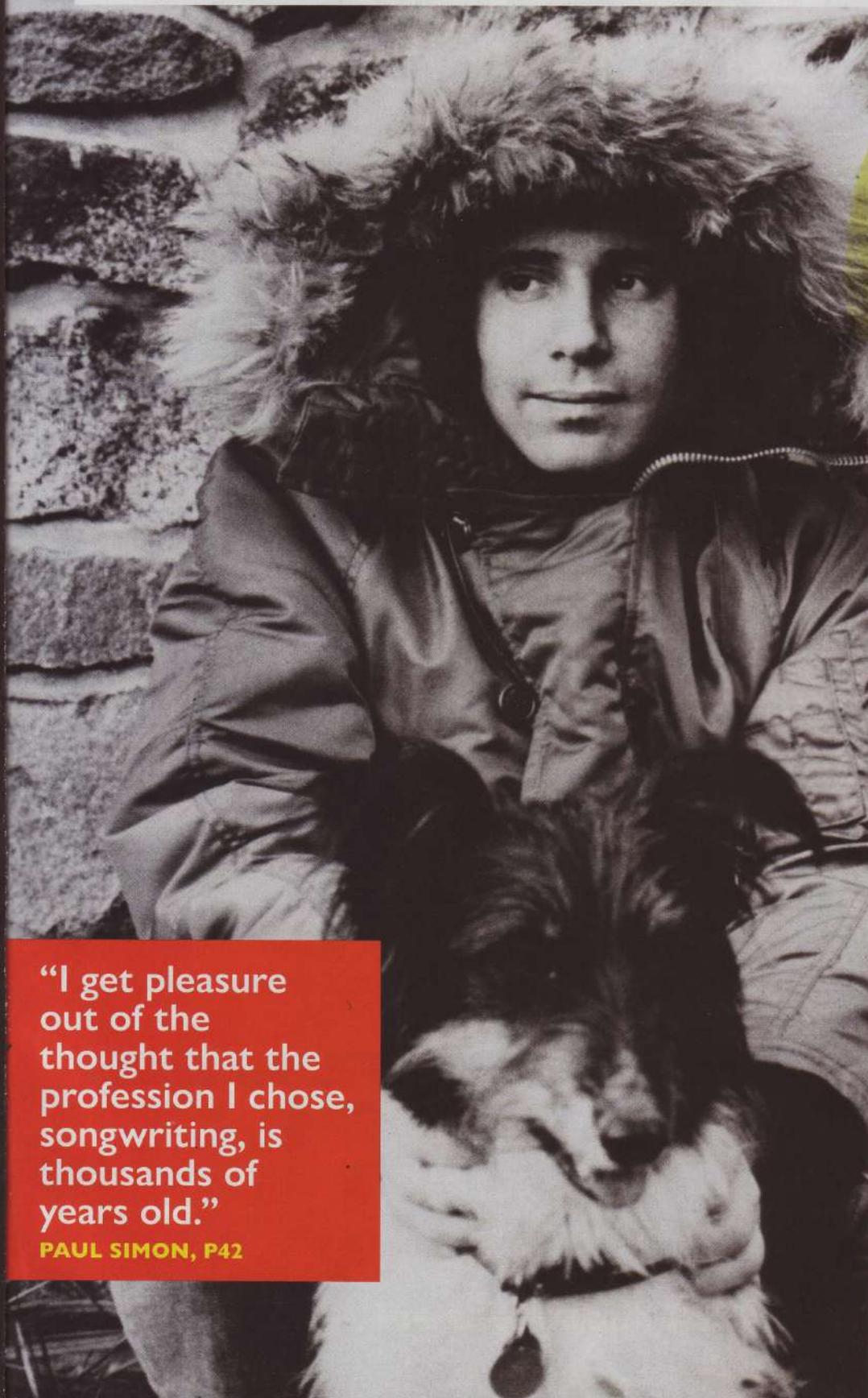


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LONDON ♦ MEMPHIS ♦ CHISLEHURST

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“I get pleasure out of the thought that the profession I chose, songwriting, is thousands of years old.”

PAUL SIMON, P42

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Serving the songs of Bruce, Neil and Lou, and carving a niche for his own music, a Swiss Army musician on how Hendrix saved him from classical accordion.

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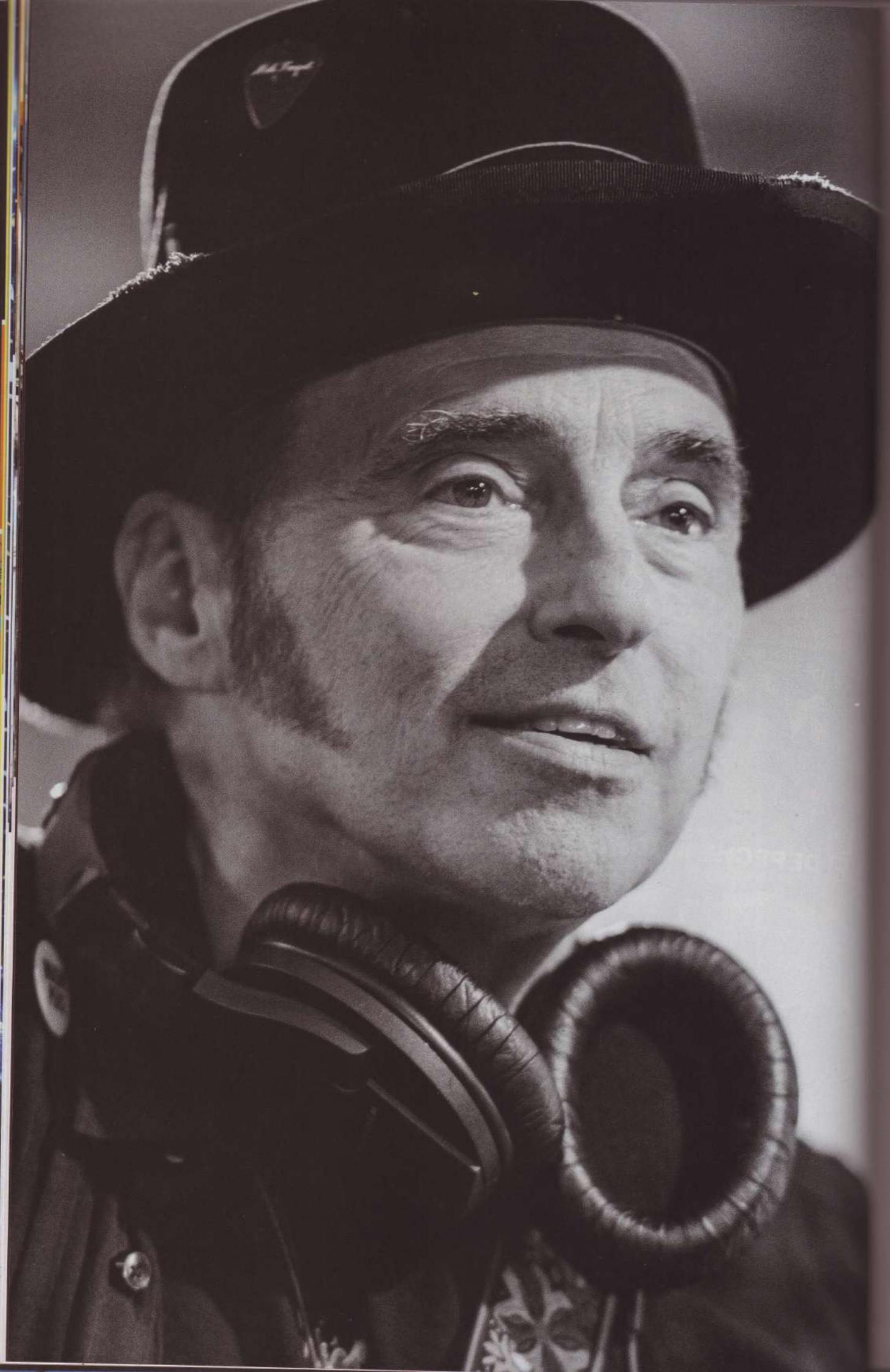
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Getty

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Watching Jimi Hendrix turned a teenage accordion prodigy into a rock'n'roll lifer, solo star and Swiss Army sideman to Bruce and Neil (and Lou). "I've kept waiting for the possession to leave me," says Nils Lofgren, "and it still hasn't."

Interview by **BOB MEHR** • Portrait by **ROB DeMARTIN**

"I'M FEELING PLEASANTLY BEAT UP," SAYS Nils Lofgren, groggy but grinning from beneath a knit cap.

It's an early June morning and the diminutive Lofgren is spread out on a couch in his Scottsdale, Arizona home, where he's back for a rare week off in between legs of the current Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band world tour – roadwork that began in January and will carry through to the end of 2023. "I'm a little jet-lagged and punch drunk from all the experience and travel," says Lofgren, as he makes tea for his wife Amy and cuddles his dogs. "But it's better than being stuck the way we were a few years ago."

Born in Chicago and raised just outside Washington DC, the 72-year-old Lofgren has been on the road and in the music business since he was a teenager. A childhood accordion prodigy turned on to rock'n'roll by The Beatles, he found career direction after seeing Jimi Hendrix, and has become an indispensable multi-instrumentalist and creative foil for two of America's most iconic and enduring musical figures in Springsteen and Neil Young.

His work with Young stretches across some six decades – dating back to *After The Gold Rush* and his early membership in Crazy Horse. Having joined the E Street Band during the *Born In The USA* tour, next year will mark Lofgren's 40th anniversary as part of Springsteen's crew. All that has run parallel with his own career as a name artist, which began with his '70s com-

bo Grin, and then later as a solo act over the course of 21 soulful albums, including the current *Mountains*.

Written during a reflective moment amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the new album recounts Lofgren's loves and losses. I Remember Her Name chronicles the meetings, 15 years apart, that led to his marriage to Amy. Nothing's Easy – which features Young on vocals – quotes a line from *Tonight's The Night's Tired Eyes*, as the spectre of late Crazy Horse guitarist Danny Whitten haunts the chilling reckonings of Only Ticket Out and Dream Killer. There are fond farewells to Charlie Watts, on Won't Cry No More, and to David Crosby, who adds his final harmonies to the record.

Mountains emerges from what's been a decidedly busy period for Lofgren. Since 2019, he's made four new records with Crazy Horse, including this year's *All Roads Lead Home*, released under the Molina, Talbot, Lofgren & Young moniker.

As he settles in for several hours of chat, Lofgren is happy to look back on what's been a long and musically charmed journey. "It's been a lot of years," he says. "It's worth taking stock of everything that's happened."

What was the first music you recall hearing?

My mom and dad were big dancers, so there was a lot of big band, swing band, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett around. They were tuned into the healing and inspiring properties of music – they loved it, but they didn't force it on us. For some reason a lot of the kids on our block, couple of the older kids, played accordion. When I was five, I asked my parents if I could take accordion lessons and I ➤

WE'RE NOT WORTHY

Nils's boss, **The Boss**, on a unique talent.



"Nils is a unique combination of talents: musical and psychological and emotional. Steve [Van Zandt] and I are both rock guitarists – we squeeze the neck until it squeals – but there's a musicalness to Nils's playing that's uniquely his. He's also about the nicest guy you've ever met. They don't come sweeter."

◀ just fell in love with the study of music. After waltzes and polkas, my teachers moved me into classical, and I won some contests. My parents – bless 'em – they paid for, like, 10 years of lessons.

As a trained musician, did you relate to rock'n'roll early on?

When I'm 10 or 11, and somebody plays a Jerry Lee Lewis record, I'm too young emotionally to understand it beyond the fact that it's three chords: C, F, G. I didn't get it. But a few years later, when I'm 13, The Beatles come out and with the extra chords, the melodies, the raw visceral soul they had, it exploded on me. It was through The Beatles and Stones, the British Invasion and their American counterparts, The Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, that I went and discovered Stax-Volt, Little Richard and Muddy Waters and my whole life changed. I was playing Beatles medleys at my 9th grade talent show on accordion. But then I put down the accordion and just got infatuated with the guitar. I started playing in little bands in teen clubs. But back then nobody in Bethesda, Maryland thought you could make a living playing in a band, including me. I just played for fun. My whole thing was to get Bs in school for my dad and mom so I could play sports all the time: football, basketball, soccer.

What finally made you think music was your future?

Wasn't until [1967] when I went and saw Herman's Hermits and The Who with Blues Magoos at Constitution Hall in Washington DC, and then we ran over afterwards to hear Jimi Hendrix at the Ambassador Theater on his first tour. The Who were great, Herman's Hermits were great, the Blues Magoos had on the blinking light suits. But seeing Jimi that night... Hendrix was so insanely good on every level – visual, emotional, musical – that I left there possessed, uncomfortably so, actually. Like, Man, I think I need to be a professional rock

musician. And the thought had never crossed my mind until that night. After that, I put a note to my mom and dad under my pillow, dropped out of school and ran away to Greenwich Village to look for work. That's 55 years ago. I've kept waiting for the possession to leave me and it still hasn't.

In your teens, you made a lot of connections just going around to concerts, sneaking backstage and meeting musicians...

On the Jeff Beck Band's first tour, they were in Alexandria, Virginia playing a roller rink. I snuck backstage trying to find the band. Peter Grant, this giant 300-pound manager with a Fu Manchu, sees me: "Where's your ticket? Where's your pass?" He starts dragging me by the scruff of the neck to the door. Ronnie Wood and Rod Stewart poke their heads out of the dressing room and say, "Leave him be, leave him be, he's with us." They saved my ass from Peter Grant, and so I befriended them. I got to meet Jeff Beck and I started following them around the East Coast. I'd go to Rod and Ronnie's hotel room with my Tele – I was blown away they would allow me, this kid, into their circle. Then the phone would ring, and it was like, "Hey Nils, the girls are coming up – time to go" (laughs).

But I got to meet a lot of my heroes that way. I snuck into this dressing room at the Cellar Door – this tiny place where I later met Neil Young – to see Muddy Waters. He was in there playing cards with six or seven guys, yelling, "Hit me! Hit Me!" They didn't notice until finally Muddy Waters looks and sees this white kid standing there. "Oh Mr Waters, I bought tickets to both your shows, I'm so excited to see you. Do you mind if I just stay here and watch you play cards?" He just looked at me funny and said, "Sure, kid." I didn't know anything about show business, so I'd try and ask for advice or just learn whatever I could just being around people like that.

Another person you saw up close was the great guitarist Roy Buchanan – what did you take from him?

I became aware of Roy early on and I'd go see him play at this redneck bar called the Crossroads. I had a little Beatle haircut over my ears, and Roy would have to tell the clientele, who didn't like how I looked, to leave me alone. I loved Roy, I couldn't believe how great he was. There was Hendrix, Jeff Beck and Roy Buchanan that impacted me the most. We jammed a lot, even with Grin – we thought Roy could be the fourth member of the band. But he had four kids and a family. Roy was like, "Nils, I'm gonna go to barber school 'cos I need a more solid job." He graduated and started cutting hair at Montgomery Mall in Bethesda. He was a great guy, but a tortured soul, of course. It was devastating when we lost Roy [Buchanan was found hanged in a Virginia jail cell in 1988]. The police did him in. I don't believe he killed himself.

In 1969, you were up and running with Grin and about to make a move to California, when you met Neil Young and Crazy Horse...

Grin had auditioned for [Hendrix engineer] Eddie Kramer in New York and we'd struck out. We weren't good enough for Eddie. Even though I was immature, I wasn't stupid enough to think there was something wrong with Eddie; I knew there was something wrong with us. So, I figured we'll just keep writing songs and we'll go out to LA and try there. That's when I encountered Neil at the Cellar Door. He had his Martin guitar and said, "Sing me a song." I had just about the whole first Grin record written. I think I played him four or five things: Like Rain, Outlaw, If I Were A Song. Neil said, "That's really good, why don't you hang out with us?" I was underage, so [Young's manager] Elliot Roberts gets me a cheeseburger and Coke and a table for the show. I had loved Neil from the Buffalo Springfield, but I was blown away by Crazy Horse on that first tour. Neil said to look him up when I got to LA. True to his word, when I did, he hooked me up with [his producer] David Briggs. Neil and David – those two guys became my greatest mentors.

A LIFE IN PICTURES

Grin and wear it: Nils through the ages.

1 Brothers in arms: the young Nils (left) with even younger sibling Mike.

2 Keep smiling: Grin, 1973 (from left) Tom Lofgren, Nils Lofgren, Bob Berberich, Bob Gordon.

3 The reluctant soloist: Lofgren during the cover shoot for 1976's *Cry Tough*.

4 Computer agents: Lofgren (left) with Neil Young, translating *Trans* on-stage in Paris, September 16, 1982.

5 Glory days: Lofgren with Bruce Springsteen, 1985.

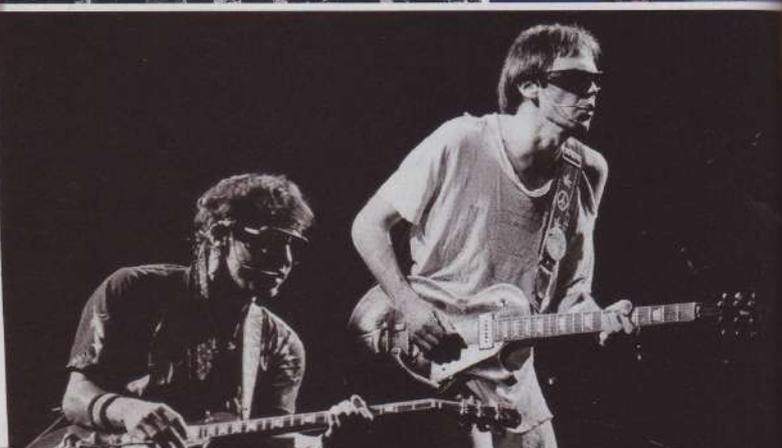
6 Smells like E Street spirit: Lofgren pals up with Nirvana's Krist Novoselic at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony in New York, April 10, 2014.

7 "One of the great tours of my life": Lofgren takes time out in 1989 with fellow All-Starr Band members

Ringo Starr and Dr. John.

8 Squeeze-boxing clever: Lofgren revisits his accordion virtuoso youth at the 30th Annual Bridge School Benefit Concert, Mountain View, CA, October 23, 2016.

9 Glass half-full: Lofgren during the cover shoot for his self-titled 1975 debut solo album – "I've been blessed with a gift I didn't ask for."



Courtesy Nils Lofgren, Joel Bernstein, Ed Caraeff/Iconic Images (2), Getty (4), Alamy

You ended up playing on *After The Gold Rush* and also became part of *Crazy Horse* on their first band album. I imagine those were formative experiences on a lot of levels for a teenager.

I used to get into David Briggs's VW and we'd drive up the hill to Neil's blasting Creedence Clearwater Revival every day going to work on *After The Gold Rush*. I remember telling David, "Wow, it's cool not to be a band leader – all the stuff that's non-musical goes away." Even then I realised it's great to be in a great band and not have to lead it. With *Crazy Horse*, I didn't know they were going to ask me to join. But I'd gotten to be friends with Danny [Whitten], Ralphie [Molina] and Billy [Talbot] and then you got Jack Nitzsche who's a genius and a mad man playing keyboards and producing. This was heady stuff for me. I was so lucky to hook up with these great savvy, compassionate players at such a young age. That imprinted on me my whole life up to the present day.

Danny Whitten's life and death have been so mythologised, partly because of the *Tonight's The Night* album, but his passing must've had a real impact on you.

It did. Danny flew to Maryland at one point, potentially to join Grin. He had just deteriorated. His life had become drugs and alcohol. I remember we were going to see Roy Buchanan play. And just as the show is about to start, a guy comes on the mike: "Paging Nils Lofgren to the stage – you have a phone call." It's our roadie saying, "I've lost Danny." "What do you mean?" "He snuck out – he's probably going door to door in the dark in rural Maryland looking for drugs." Fuck!

We realised Danny was too sick to be in our band. When he left, it was heartbreaking. And, of course, it's well documented the saga with

Neil trying to help Danny out, and then Danny ODs. That was a big turning point – when everyone started dying, your heroes and your friends. Jimi Hendrix had died. And when Danny died, it was like, Oh my God. By the time we get to *Tonight's The Night* it's a different world.

The *Tonight's The Night* album and tour seemed like a strange wake or maybe an exorcism of some kind.

Nobody was in a good place. I certainly didn't have any tools to process what had happened. Then we went on the road and people were

and everyone. But we were not making money for the record company and they were not interested in continuing. Briggs and [manager and future film producer] Art Linson checked out all the other companies, and no one was interested in signing us. We did a farewell concert at the Kennedy Center in DC and tried to go out with some class and dignity, but it was a very traumatic period. A&M records finally said, "We'll give Nils a solo deal, one record at a time to see how it goes." So I kinda had to wrap my head around carrying on as a solo artist – even though I didn't even like that term.

Your self-titled debut came out in 1975 and featured Keith Don't Go, your tribute to Keith Richards. What inspired the song?

On the *Tonight's The Night* Tour in 1973 in England, every day I met what seemed like half a dozen of Keith Richards' "best friends". All of them were saying, "We're really worried about Keith, we don't know if he's going to be around much longer." I'm thinking, Keith Richards just made *Exile On Main St.* – he can't be in that bad a shape. That was my naïve take on it (laughs). But constantly hearing

all these friends worried about him, I got this idea, and had this riff. For the box set [2014's *Face The Music*] we found an earlier version, of Grin recording it, with Neil actually playing some piano and singing. That's my favourite version, very raw and aggressive, with Neil's haunting voice going, "Keith don't go..."

It was around this time that you tried for the Stones guitar gig, right?

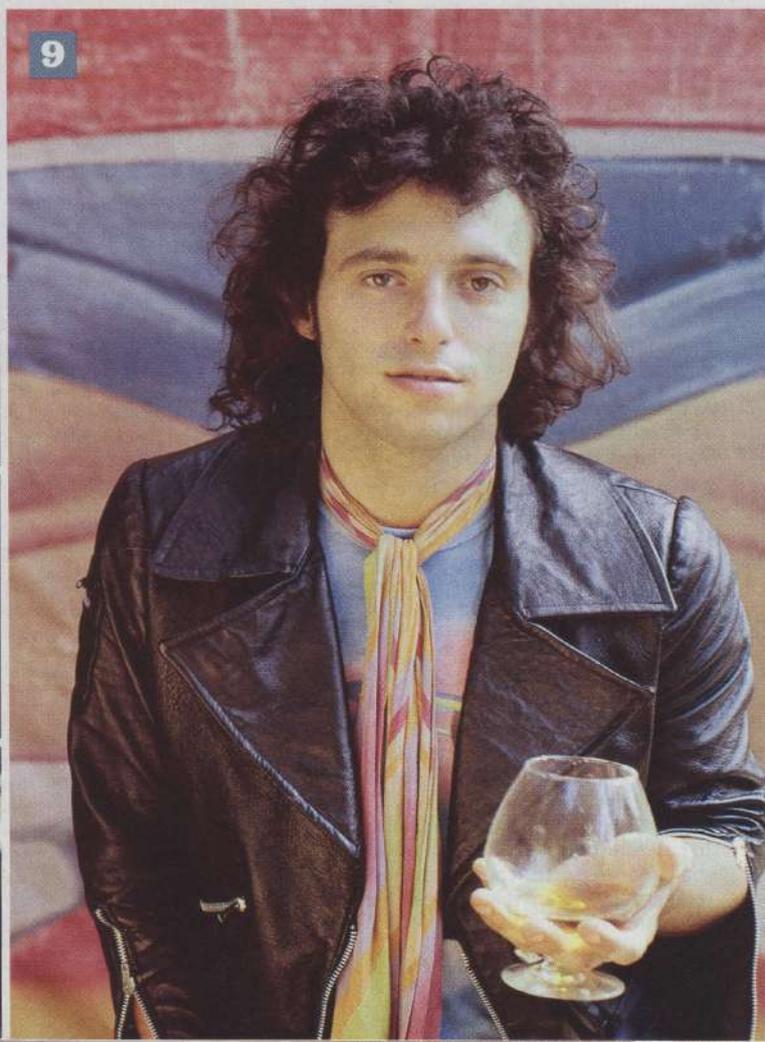
I was running errands in Maryland and I hear on the radio Mick Taylor has left the Stones. I gotta ask for an audition. Before I can do anything, I think, Ronnie Wood – he's the guy, that's his gig. But a month passes, and they still haven't announced a new guitar player. What's ➤

“Peter Grant sees me: ‘Where’s your pass?’ Starts dragging me by the scruff of the neck to the door.”

expecting to hear Heart Of Gold and receive Neil as their hero-poet. But we're doing a show where it's all this dark stuff they've never heard and Neil's doing these intense raps and we're making all this noise. People were booing, throwing bottles, it was heavy. There was a madness to it. But the music and the madness kind of saved us, got us through the grief and the rage.

With Grin, you released several great records in a short period, then you split abruptly in the mid-'70s – why?

We made four good albums with Briggs, got good reviews, and we became a great road act – we were the band that would open for anyone



◀ going on? I tried calling the Stones, couldn't get through to anybody. Finally, I got hold of Ronnie Wood. He says, "I turned the Stones down, I'm gonna stay with Rod and the Faces. But I told Keith about you. He's staying at my cottage – call him up." I call and sure enough Keith answers. "Yeah, Ronnie told me about you... we're gonna get the band together in Geneva and we're gonna have a bunch of guitar players come through. You're welcome to come out." Of course, not too long after, Ronnie realised he should take the gig and he did.

How did your unlikely collaboration with Lou Reed start?

I was working with [producer] Bob Ezrin on an album, and Bob said, "You got some great music, but the lyrics aren't up to standard. Rather than have you rewrite, how about we bring in a lyricist?" I said, "Well, it depends on who it is." He goes, "How about Lou Reed?" Next thing I know I'm in a cab across town to Lou's apartment, and we're sitting there drinking and watching a football game together. Anyway, I put together a tape with 13 songs, music with some lyrics, a couple of titles, and FedEx it to Lou. Three weeks go by. It's 4.30 in the morning, telephone rings. "Nils, this is Lou Reed. Sorry for the late call but I haven't slept for three days and nights. I loved your cassette and I just finished 13 sets of lyrics. Do you want me to dictate them to you now?" I said, "Did you call and tell me I just wrote 13 songs with Lou Reed?" We had a good chuckle about this pretty painless co-writing adventure. I ended up using three of the songs on my *Nils* album and Lou used three on *The Bells*. I put a couple more on [1995's] *Damaged Goods*. Over the years, Lou and I would talk occasionally about doing something with the other songs. Sadly, we lost Lou but I ended up getting the rest of them out on the *Blue With Lou* [2019] album.

In the early '80s you reconnected with Neil Young during his *Trans* period. What did you make of his music at that time?

That was very powerful. On *Trans*, he gave those machines a soul, a voice, a name. He wrote songs about these machines' experiences to help handicapped children. To me, that's genius. For the tour, we rehearsed for, like, two and a half months at his farm. On one hand it was old school: I'd be playing the *After The Gold Rush* upright piano on Old Man, and Ben Keith is there with his pedal steel. But then I'd put on a headset, and I've got a voice called Sylvia coming out of my head and we're doing Computer Age, with Synclavier and all these crazy sounds. Neil was overseeing this forward-thinking space-age tour but mixing in the old classic funky rock stuff, all flowing in and out of each other. It was strange and beautiful.

In terms of your solo career, when the early-'80s rolled around, did you find yourself at another crossroads?

Basically, everything dried up. I had an album, one of my best I think, called *Wonderland*, on Danny Bramson's [MCA imprint] Backstreets Records. Then Irving Azoff took over MCA and got rid of Danny. I'd known Irving from way back when he was palling around with Elliot Roberts. I met with him and I said, "Listen, I understand I might be one of the acts you have to clean house with because I don't make you money." It was the standard showbiz thing. Irving says, "Don't worry. It's going to be great" – and they'd already signed my release papers (*laughs*). Then followed a period where I could not get a record deal. "Nils, you're a dinosaur" – I heard the word "dinosaur" more than a few times in '82 and '83. To basically have the industry say *en masse*, you've had a good run but there's no place for you here any more... that's tough, that's pretty scary. And I hit a blue period.

Rob DeMartino

Which is where you connected, or rather reconnected, with Bruce Springsteen...

I'd met him back in 1970. Steel Mill, Bruce's band, and Grin did an audition night for Bill Graham, so I'd known him since then. When I called Bruce [in 1983] I was kinda saying, I don't know what to do here with my career. We just went around and jammed in clubs and hung out. He offered me some support during a rough time. Then at some point a month before opening night of the *Born In The USA* tour Bruce needed a guitar player. Stevie [Van Zandt] felt he needed to devote 100 per cent of his time to his solo career. And I got the job. Out of the blue, I wind up in another great band.

You were also in Ringo Starr's first All-Starr Band...

I'd met Ringo on the *Born In The USA* tour, after one of our shows at Wembley. I got to jam with him and he gave me his number and said to stay in touch. Fast forward to '89, I'm living in LA, and he's telling me the fame and money weren't cutting it, that he needs to be a drummer – and so he came up with the All-Starr Band concept, where everyone does a few numbers, and he

PLAY TO GRIN

Three shots of Nils Lofgren, by Bob Mehr.

THE POWERPOP PRELUDE

Grin

★★★★

1 + 1

(SPINDIZZY, 1972)



The sophomore effort from Lofgren's *Grin* – which also features drummer/vocalist Bob Berberich and bassist Bob Gordon – is arguably the best of the band's four-album run.

Divided into two halves – the Rockin' Side and Dreamy Side – Lofgren hooks the listener with the keen riffage of *White Lies* and *Moon Tears*, while he offers up more ethereal pleasures via his acoustic playing and angelic voice on the Beatles-esque *Sometimes* and *Lost A Number*.

THE SPOTLIGHT KID

Nils Lofgren

★★★★

Nils Lofgren

(A&M, 1975)



Solo debut that bridges West Coast pop and country rock, connected by Lofgren's rhythmic smarts and moody lyrical meditations. Standouts include the lovelorn *Back It Up* and the autobiographical *The Sun Hasn't Set On This Boy Yet*, while *Keith Don't Go* (Ode To The Glimmer Twin) is the rare tribute song that works ("Don't nail yourself to a cross," his hero is implored). The sort of soulful songwriting Lofgren would make a career of.

RETURN OF THE SIDEMAN

Neil Young & Crazy Horse

★★★★

World Record

(REPRISE, 2022)



A veteran of *After The Gold Rush*, *Tonight's The Night* and *Trans*, Lofgren shines on this return to the Horse's fold. Like *TTN*, this is another album of mourning, this time for a dying planet – the mood carried by his delicate touch and versatility on lap, pedal steel and bottleneck guitar, accordion, dobro, percussion, and vocals. A half century on, Lofgren remains a vital part of Shakey's muse and music.

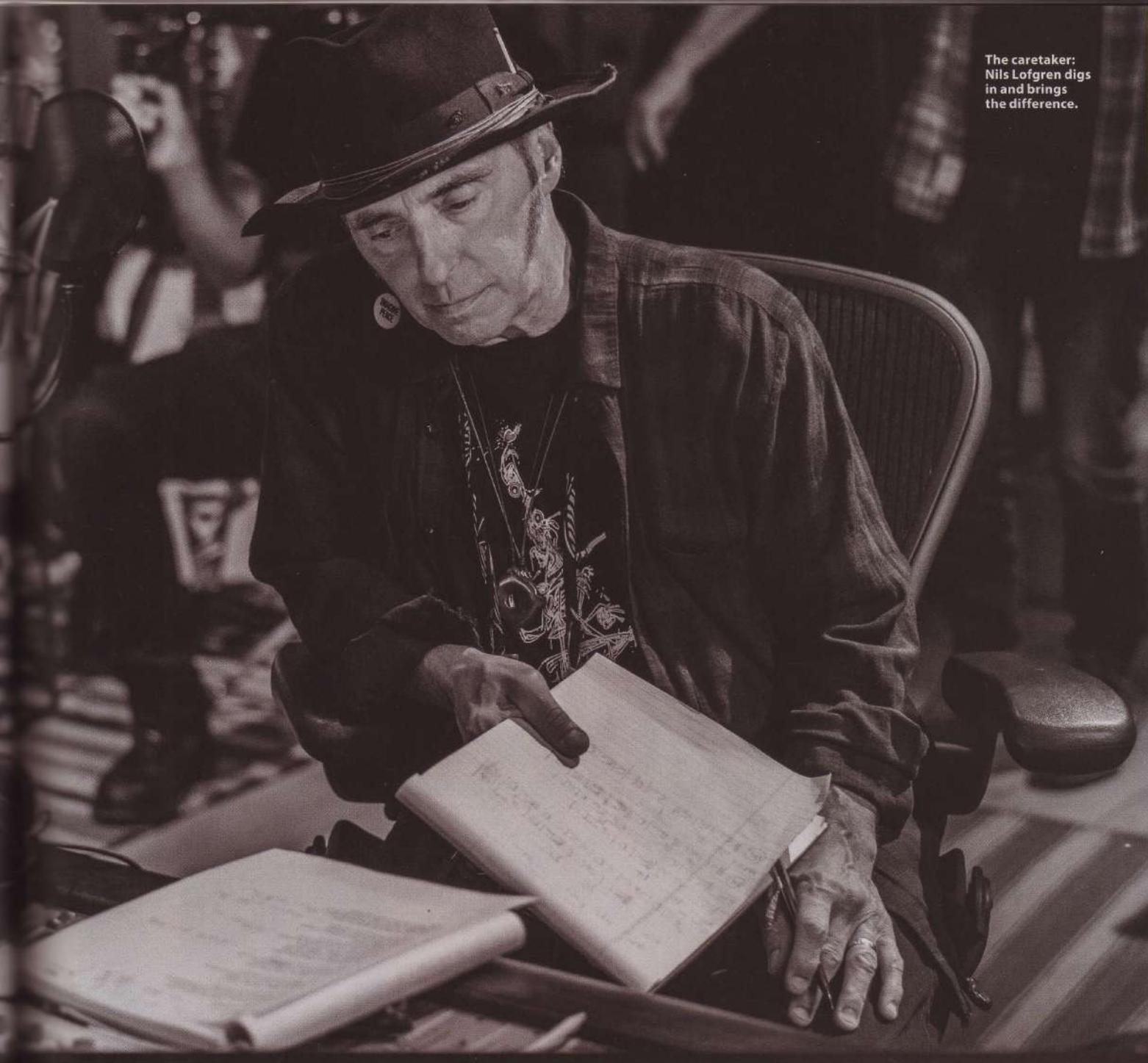


gets to go out front and sing and dance. Photograph and *You're Sixteen*, but he sits at the drums and is a drummer. The Band had been put on hiatus, and so he thought that he wanted me in his band was a blessing. Ringo asked, "Don't you want who else is in the band?" I said, "If you band that's enough for me." He laughed then said, "It's you and Joe Walsh on guitar, Billy Preston on organ, Dr. John on piano, Helm on drums, mandolin, and whatever he wants to play, Rick Danko on bass, your buddy Clarence Clemons on sax, and Jim Keltner's gonna be our third drummer." I like, "You gotta be kidding me." It was one of the great tours of my life.

It must've been interesting to see Ringo experience touring for the first time in modern age.

His only frame of reference to the road was the Beatles. I remember we were in rehearsal and they had two giant PA speakers under the stage coming through grates, aimed at him, just beautiful monitors. And he's up there saying "I can't believe how great everything sounds." During a break, the soundman comes up

The caretaker:
Nils Lofgren digs
in and brings
the difference.



“There was a madness to *Tonight’s The Night*. But the music and the madness kind of saved us.”

says, “Mr. Starkey is there anything I can change for you in your monitor?” And I will never forget, he turns to the guy and says, “*What’s a monitor?*” The guy explains, “Oh, we got a PA under your feet,” and Ringo looks down like, “No wonder it sounds so damn good.”

Over the decades you’ve had close working relationships with Neil and Bruce. What do you think it is they saw and continue to see in you?

Bruce and Neil are these revered historic American characters and rockers, but I will say, something the three of us have in common is that they’re swing men – in the sense that they will sit at any keyboard, they will pick up any guitar, a dulcimer or a zither, whatever, and even if they don’t know how to play it they’ll listen to the song and they’ll figure out a great part on the spot. And I think that’s what they like about me. I don’t care – give me a shaker, gimme a tambourine, I will contribute something in my

physical scope that might add to the tune. Bruce and Neil, I don’t want to say they’re underrated as guitar players, but they’re underrated as musicians. Because they are so naturally and innately great at picking up anything and within a couple takes having a part that fits. Their instincts are just impeccable.

When the E Street Band reunited in the late-’90s, and Steven Van Zandt rejoined the band, was that an adjustment for you?

When Steve came back into the band, I challenged myself to bring something different. Because you don’t really need three guitar players on every song. I went and took lessons for pedal steel, lap steel, dobro, I got a six-string banjo and learned how to play with the metal [picks] on my fingers. I wanted to put these other sounds in the toolbox. Now, I’m that swing guy for E Street.

As you move between E Street and Crazy Horse, what changes in your approach?

On [2022’s] *World Record* with Crazy Horse, I got my amp and started cranking it, stepping into it more because there was so much space. Ralph [Molina] kept saying, “You don’t have 18 people like in the E Street Band. Play more, step up, be louder.”

Looking back, is there anyone you would have liked a chance to have played with?

Of course, tons – Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin... But I’ve had more than my share of good fortune in the people I’ve played with. From the time where I was a kid playing classical accordion to being a teenager feeling the pull and charm and inspiration of blues guitar to now, music remains a very joyful expression for me. I’ve been blessed with a gift I didn’t ask for – I was given it through my parents’ DNA and some higher power. I don’t even think of it as mine, I’m just caretaking it and trying to do something useful with it. That’s how I’ve always looked at it.

M



The Hives

★★★
The Death Of Randy Fitzsimmons

Garage-pop Swedes' first album in a decade.

Here re-animating the "perpetual teenager" of rock'n'roll. The Hives have long understood the worth of self-mythology and mirth. Album number six is named for the demise of their mysterious founder and songwriting benefactor Randy Fitzsimmons, who has of course guided their return via a demo tape of these songs recently unearthed by his tombstone. The short, explosive tunes are as big as the fibs, opening riff-fest Bogus Operandi impressively ardent, and Countdown To Shutdown dripping with that drilled commitment to the cause that only The Hives, Rocket From The Crypt, the MCS and select others can muster. Over 12 mostly blueprint-hugging songs returns diminish, but scuzzy beat-box disco outrider What Did I Ever Do To You is great, and packs the fabulous

couplet, "Maybe it doesn't fit/ But at least it's a shoe."
James McNair

Soft Machine

★★★★

Other Doors

DYAD. CD/DL

John Etheridge and team keep the 55-year-old band/brand alive.



The great jazz-rock drummer Bill Bruford bowed out at 60, wary of seeing his chops decline. On the new Soft Machine album, it's heartening to hear a great jazz-rock drummer giving his all at the age of 81. *Other Doors* may be John Marshall's last sortie with the umpteenth Soft Machine line-up but he propels the quartet with precision muscularity. The soundworld will be familiar from two previous Etheridge-led releases – ranging from Theo Travis's flutescapes and electronica to crunching, angular guitar-saxophone riffs. In-between there's a good deal of surprisingly mellow and reflective new music, plus a couple of repurposed old Softs tunes. Etheridge's guitar mastery is always a delight – he sounds like a more melodic Zappa – and Fred 'Thelonious' Baker's fretless bass adds new colours. Once a byword for avant-garde weirdery, this Soft Machine doesn't frazzle heads but paints in more delicate shades.

John Bungey



Bush Tetras

★★★

They Live In My Head

WHARF CAT. CD/DL/LP

No Wave veterans return with first new LP in 25 years.

The itchy punk-funk of their early singles is history, but Bush Tetras' fire remains undimmed on their first new album in a quarter of a century. Begun with late drummer Dee Pop, who passed away in 2021, the LP debuts a new rhythm section: Sonic Youth sticksman Steve Shelley and Pogues bassist Cait O'Riordan. The focus, however, is on the group's enduring founders. Cynthia Sley's snarl is withering on 2020 *Vision's* account of a plagued year, the eye of Walking Out The Door's fierce hurricane, and disdainful on the merciless *So Strange*. Pat Place's guitar, meanwhile, is a revelation, the ex-Contortion employing distortion, delay and artful abuse to sculpt noise that keeps these songs' grungy twists on blues and punk electrified. Alongside Live Skull's recent scourging reunion album, the revived Bush Tetras prove No Wave's not dead.

Stevie Chick

Bokanté

★★★★★

History

REAL WORLD. CD/DL/LP

A pan-continental blues odyssey.

A band with members in five countries and four continents was always going to suffer during lockdown but, five years on from their second album, bandleader and Snarky Puppy Michael League has reconvened the old gang for a brisk run through the history of the blues, tracing lines from the Arab world, through Africa and into the West. Opener Bliss comes with a sweeping bass line, North African maracas, and stinging lead guitar; most tunes come with a none-heavier guimbre or bass ngoni; on seductively layered vocals, Malika Tirolien switches neatly between English and Creole. The focus, however, is on the rhythms they pick up on their travels – unsurprising, really, when your band has four drummers; pure West African tradition in feel, it's here you can hear the many roads the blues would take when shipped abroad, from Led Zeppelin to Prince.

David Hutcheon



Jungle

★★★★★

Volcano

CAIOLA. CD/DL/LP

Get swept away by the Shepherd's Bush duo's pyroclastic flow.



Jungle's fourth album continues their unique exploration of nu-disco; 14 three-minute or so bursts of funk and soul with superbly selected guests and samples. The duo – Josh Lloyd-Watson and Tom McFarland – have managed to grow from their feted Mercury-nominated eponymous debut in 2014 to quietly become a global concern; hugely popular in America and Europe, their sweet, slick fusion has both heart and bite. It is clear proof of what happens growing up listening to Daft Punk and Basement Jaxx. Working with Essex multi-instrumentalist Lydia Kitto and some of their usual supporting cast, *Volcano* continues where 2021's *Loving In Stereo* left off. Roots Manuva provides a stand-out contribution on 'You Ain't No Celebrity', and Channel Tres's turn on 'I've Been In Love is memorable, while the Latin shuffle of 'Every Night' should enliven even the most jaded palette.

Daryl Easlea

Nils Lofgren

★★★

Mountains

CATTLE TRACK ROAD. CD/DL/LP

Solo album featuring old friends including Neil Young, David Crosby and Ringo Starr.



Nils Lofgren was stuck at home in Scottsdale, Arizona when he wrote and recorded these 10 rockers and ballads with themes of truth and love; nine are new originals and there's also the Bruce Springsteen cover, *Back In Your Arms*. Opener *Ain't The Truth* Enough starts *Mountains* off on a high note, catchy mid-tempo rock with great guitar, fine vocals and Ringo Starr on drums. It has an instant familiarity. So does the next track, *Only Ticket Out*, with its late-'70s California-rock-with-a-dash-of-drama feel. The first half of the album has two more highlights: *Won't Cry No More*, a guitar-heavy uptempo blues dedicated to Charlie Watts, and a ballad, *Nothing's Easy*, featuring Neil Young on vocals and quoting a line from *Tonight's The Night's Tired Eyes*. Lofgren played on that album; he and his guests have history, but the second half of *Mountains* might have benefited from fewer backing singers – however good, they over-egg the songs.

Sylvia Simmons

Bettye LaVette

★★★★

LaVette!

THE. CD/DL/LP

Iran deep soul powerhouse gives her a connoisseur's songsmith.

GETTING HER debut 45 in 1962 and masterpiece, the deep soul classic *Let's Stay Together*, in 1965, Michigan-born Bettye LaVette (née Betty Jo Haskins) is enjoying a sensational 21st century of barnstorming gigs. Gut-wrenching but wry, bloody but sorrowful, she wrings everything into and out of every song. Dylan, Beatles, Stones and even Led Zeppelin, Floyd and Zep tunes have been blistered by Bettye, and now she's delved into the sprawling songbook of Randall Bramblett, Stones keyboardist Chuck Leavell's old band *Sea Level* and also solo since 1975. It's a perfect fit, his smart but heartfelt compositions finding the ideal voice to do full justice to their quality. They range from the flywheel *It's Not Easy Bein' The Blues* to the stoic ballad *It's Not Easy Bein' The Blues*, magnificently framed by a crack band marshalled by session drummer Steve Jordan. A profoundly satisfying album, *LaVette!* is reservedly recommended.

Mat Snow



You better you Bettye: LaVette delivers another barnstorming LP.



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