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Nils Lofgren

Beginning with his early '70s work with Neil Young and Crazy Horse and his own band Grin, Nils Lofgren has carved a musical niche all his own and he brings it all back home with his 2007 DVD *Nils Lofgren & Friends Live Acoustic*. A compelling portrait of Nils in action, the '90 minute DVD features 2006 concert footage of Nils backed by fine players including Jeff 'Skunk' Baxter and his brothers Tommy Lofgren, Mark Lofgren and Mike Lofgren. Anyone unfamiliar with Lofgren's stature as a guitar icon and singer-songwriter legend will be in for a pleasant surprise and the DVD affords some excellent close-ups of Lofgren's legendary fretboard work. On Music Video Distributors, the DVD is a fine follow up to Lofgren's 2006 solo CD *Sacred Weapon*. On February 8, 2007 Nils spoke with TCG on a range of musical subjects, including his early work with Neil Young and more recently as a member of Bruce Springsteen And The E Street Band.

By Robert Silverstein

Nils Lofgren

TCG: Your new DVD *Nils Lofgren & Friends Live Acoustic* is excellent. It was recorded February 2006. How did the DVD take shape?

NL: Actually, I did an acoustic live album from the Wolftap Barns a number of years ago and it became very, very popular. It was in the more intimate acoustic format. We were debating doing a band DVD, or just any DVD, from my web site. I've been like thirteen years now without a record company, just kind of making my way with the web site, grass roots type of thing off the grid, but still it gives me the freedom to do stuff I'm excited about. It was really my manager Anson who kept lobbying for an acoustic DVD as opposed to the band thing, which probably some day I'll do. But anyway, we decided to do it and Roy Whitte, my guitar tech and sound man and his buddy Jeremy, who's out of film school who helps us out...they're all great musicians and young crew guys from the Annapolis area. Anyway, they called in some friends and we put together a great crew. One of the beauties of the Birchmere is we do three nights annually, usually every February. In fact, next weekend, January 16, 17 and 18 we're doing another three night acoustic stand there. So it gives us a chance to do multiple nights and not be too pressured about, gotta get everything right the one and only night. And that helped. We did very long shows, about three hours plus a night. I think one night was almost three and a half, which is outrageous. But the people...it's a grass roots kind of low key and in the spirit of what we did, the people hung with us and we came up with what we thought was a really great, homegrown, no frills project. I mean we didn't have make-up people and wardrobe people (laughter) and all that. We just tried to capture the ambiance of those intimate shows there and I thought we did a good job of it.

TCG: You play mostly acoustic on the DVD.

NL: Yeah, I fell in the love with the Takamine's years ago, as far as something you can put into a PA system and really just have it perform great for you. It's something I've always used. I've gotten real familiar with it and that main one is kind of an old one. I'm starting to actually wear away the pick guard area. The wood is getting thin. It's kind of like I'm working on my Willie Nelson guitar. But it sounds really great through a PA and it's what I've gotten used. So we use a variety of those for different tunings. Of course my brother and Buck Brown pick them up once in a while



Nils, Bruce and Little Stevie

and alternate between mando, keyboard and guitar and stuff. It was great to have Skunk Baxter and Mary Ann Redmond and Bob Berberich from Grin came up and we did some Grin songs, which I've never done. And it was just great to have the original co-lead singers of Grin doing an acoustic version of the Grin songs, which had never happened before. We can't do it without Bob Berberich and of course my brother Tommy was in Grin too...so it was a special night all the way around and I'm glad we captured it on DVD to share.

TCG: You're also playing the Fender on the DVD too.

NL: It's my old Stratocaster, yeah. I've been using my Strat for years. I started with a Tele. That was my first guitar 'cause Jeff Beck had it and then I moved over to the Stratocaster. But I used that briefly on a couple things... "Because The Night," one of my favorite Bruce Springsteen songs. It's something I got to do a solo on in our shows once in a while and I kind of crafted a very long solo. I put a bit of work into it with some touch tones and themes. I wound up doing that at some of Bruce's Christmas benefits over the years and in my own shows we wanted to share that too. That might be the only song I'm playing electric on...no, "Girl In Motion" actually, is another long electric piece where I stretch out on the Strat. So, it's like a long, good homegrown and we're going to do it again coming up the weekend after this weekend. I think we did a pretty good job at successfully capturing the vibe and music of those nights on the DVD.

TCG: How did you get so adept on guitar? Your playing has always been so tasteful.

NL: Well thanks. I grew up studying classical accordion from about five to fifteen, picked

up the guitar as a hobby. My brother Tommy played it first in the house and he showed me some chords. I think I would have fallen in love with melody anyway but thanks to some very serious classical music studies on the accordion of all things, mixed with being a young teenager...and having a combination of being at that age with that boundless energy and kind of a sponge for inspiration and you mix that with what we call the explosion of the '60s—the British invasion, Motown, Stax/Volt, people like Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin. It was such a massive explosion of creative music and I soaked it all up and kind of, by playing and loving to play, came up with a style that's a little bit of my own—mostly melodic blues. Roy Buchanan was one of my heroes. I got to see him play a lot and got to know Roy. I fell in love with the sound of harmonics sounding like bells through Roy Buchanan. I figured out how to do it with a thumbpick and to this day, I do a lot of it. It's just a sound I like. So, it's just kind of a nice combination of all my musical influences way back to classical accordion as a kid up through the whole '60s explosion and continuing on today with all the great music that comes and fortunately there's a lot a great stuff still coming out to inspire us.

TCG: You also play pedal steel on stage.

NL: Yeah, that was a beautiful offshoot of being in the E Street Band. By 2000, when Steve came back in the band, we now have four guitar players—Patty, me, Bruce and Steve. And I just realized I was probably the right guy to become the swing man and pick up some oddball sounds. Just as a beginner, with a little pedal steel, lap steel, bottleneck, dobro. Bruce really got me going on the pedal steel during the 2000 tour and I started picking up the other things as an offshoot of it. Mike Auldridge, my teacher, gave me a crash course on pedal steel and he's one of the great dobro players in the world so I had him put a crash course on dobro on tape. Even though I'm a beginner I do love the sounds and it gives Bruce, who in my humble opinion is certainly as great a band leader as their is, it just adds some more tools to the toolbox if you will, which is already pretty formidable with the E Street Band. It's fun. It's nice to take a break and be in an extraordinary band and not play every lead solo and not sing every lead. I'm so in to being in a band. I really enjoy, first of all not be being the boss for a while and getting to play really intricate secondary parts

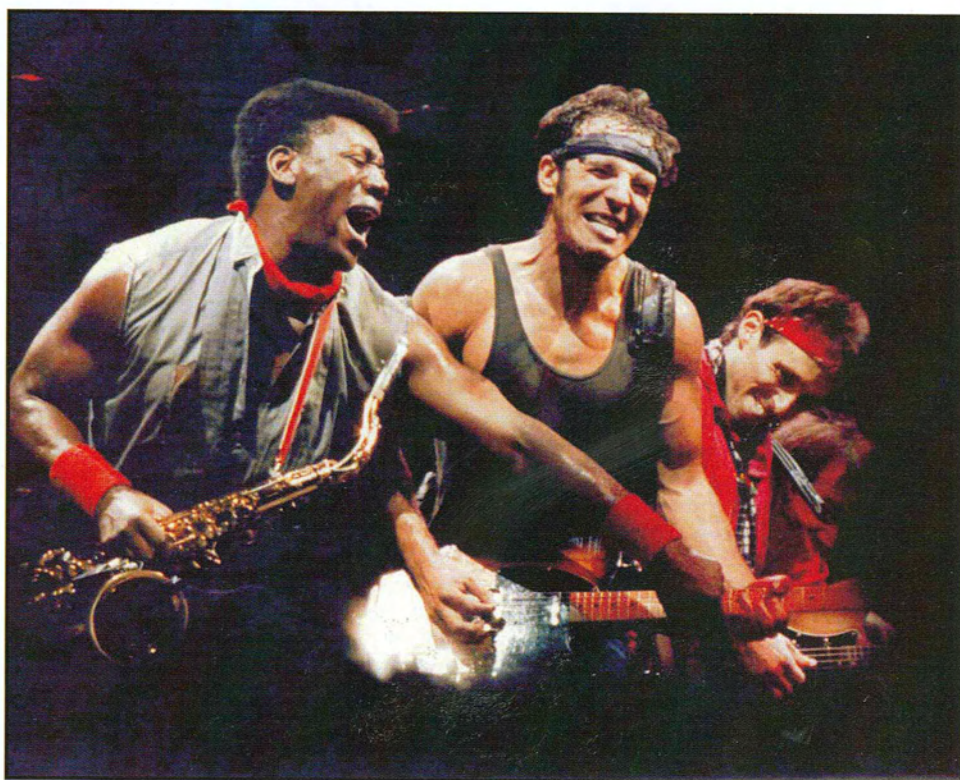
on different instruments with different sounds that I normally couldn't do on my own shows. So it's all part of a great journey, but yeah, thanks to my role in the E Street band I've picked up four or five new instruments that I was able to bring to my last record, *Sacred Weapon*. My first composing on the bottle neck dobro, "In Your Hands"—which was a duet with Willie Nelson—on the *Sacred Weapon* CD, a song I wrote for my wife Amy for Christmas, that was really my first bottleneck composition. And Willie's manager just asked him to listen to it and asked him to consider it. And he was kind enough to do that, which is a big thrill for me. There's also a song on *Sacred Weapon* called "Trouble" which is the first song I ever wrote on pedal steel. And again, nice acting, I was just sitting there practicing a little bit, came up with this riff and I got excited. I just happened to be tracking the record with a great bass player and drummer—Timm Biery and Kevin McCormick. And I said, 'man, I gotta write this song tonight so we can track it before these guys leave town.' So it's been great journey and been colorful opportunities to play in some extraordinary bands with Ringo Starr, Neil Young and Bruce, of course, in addition to continuing to plug away at my own stuff.

TCG: You must have a pretty interesting arsenal of guitars.

NL: The acoustic guitars, of course we use Takamine's, even with Bruce. I did the *After The Goldrush* album with Neil Young. I was just 18 years old. I mostly played piano but I played this beautiful old, beat up D-18 Martin on a couple of numbers. "Tell Me Why" in particular was of course, very bare bones...me and Neil on acoustic and Danny Whitten. And I got to sing some great harmonies. "Cripple Creek Ferry" I played guitar, but "Till The Morning Comes," Neil moved over to piano and put me on his Martin again. And this great old D-18 that he owned, he gave to me as a gift. So that's obviously a very, very special, sentimental acoustic that winds up not going on the road. I've got a few guitars like that, that really are special. I just love playing a Strat live. I've got a good collection of other guitars too. I've picked up (laughter) another twenty instruments or so just with the E Street Band between a few pedal steels and dobros and lap steels and bottle necks. And of course with Bruce, you've got to have three of everything because the tunings change and you never know when he'll call two songs in a row. And if it's the same instrument with a different tuning, you've got to have two of them ready to go and a third one if something breaks. (laughter) So it's been kind of an accidental bless to pick up some great new instruments and do sounds that I'm just still learning and fresh on.

TCG: Out of all the songs you've done, how did you pick the tracks you wanted on the DVD?

NL: I try to, out of deference to Grin and my history, try to find things from every era, but find things I can put my heart into 'cause you



Clarence Clemmens, Bruce and Nils

just can't fake a performance. I found that people don't need any musical ability, but if they love music and they're sitting there, they can sense when you're into something or not. And it's an intangible, beautiful thing that you get from an audience. So I found that if I just get a cross-section of my entire career—I certainly want to focus on some newer stuff and pick songs I can stay emotionally involved in—that always works. And sometimes people ask for requests and I'll try to do them. If it's something I'm just not emotionally into, I'll pass and try to dedicate something else to them. But in general, it's just a nice collection from the beginning up through the current batch of songs and I try to touch on all the different styles and also different eras and try to give a little something for everybody.

TCG: You have a musical family. There's a lot of Lofgrens on the DVD.

NL: Yeah, I got three younger brothers. Tommy joined Grin and has been a professional musician his whole life. The other two do it as a great hobby and when we're in town we all get together and do part of the set together, which is a lot of fun. Of course they'll be with me next weekend too, again at the Birchmere.

TCG: The DVD also features a guest spot from Jeff Skunk Baxter. How far back do you go with Jeff?

NL: In '79 or maybe '80 we did an album called *Night Fades Away*. Skunk produced it and we spent a few months in L.A. I was living in L.A. hanging out together, working together every day, became good friends. Still are and he comes to D.C. a lot for work and he was kind enough to come and sit in and let us use his performances. He's one of my favorite

players and always been favorite person too and we got to be really close when we did this *Night Fades Away* album together. It was very kind of him to lend his time and his musicianship to the project.

TCG: Crosby & Nash are also old friends of yours and they sing on the *Sacred Weapon* track "Frankie Hang On."

NL: Yeah I was fortunate to bump into them way back in the late '60s thanks to Neil. David and Graham in particular are really good friends and supporters of what I do. I worked on Stephen Stills second solo album down in Florida with him, so all of them are old acquaintances and friends. They played a show here in Phoenix while I was making the record and my wife Amy and I went and I got to come out on stage and grab a great old 1957 Strat of Stephen's and do some jamming with them on the song "For What It's Worth." And I mentioned this song to David and Graham and they were kind enough to say, 'hey send us a tape and if it feels right we'll be happy to sing for you' and I did. It's kind of an anti war song from the perspective of a wife of a soldier. It was right up their alley. Fortunately, they liked it and I got to L.A. and had a great afternoon just the three of us hanging out with a great engineer, Nathaniel Kunkel. Russ Kunkel, who's been a great drummer and remains one for many years on the scene, his son had a great studio and engineered for us. And they sang beautifully and really took the song to a better place.

TCG: It must have been a gas working with Ringo. *Sgt. Pepper* is 40 this year which is pretty amazing.

NL: Well, I mean, The Beatles to me have the greatest body of recorded music in history. That's how I fell in love with rock and roll was

Nils Lofgren

through The Beatles. To this day, they're my favorite band and on the *Born In The USA* tour I was lucky enough to using an E Street Band invite to Ringo's birthday party in the country at Titenhurst, after an E Street Band show in London's Wembley Stadium. In the wee hours of a party I got to jam with Ringo. A lot of people were jamming. We talked and played. He was just such a sweet guy and he gave me his number and said stay in touch, which I did. And I do shows in England every year, acoustically, acoustic shows usually and he and Barbara would come to the shows occasionally and we maintained a friendship. He was just such a down to earth man, I couldn't believe it. Very blunt, humorous, kind and honest. And in '89 he called me and said he was putting his first band together since The Beatles to go play. It was going to be called Ringo Starr's All Starr Band. It was kind of a round robin. He wanted to be up front but he wanted to play drums so everyone would take turns doing songs of theirs too and backing up each other and it was

extraordinary. To spend four months putting a great band together in '89 and then again in '92 with some of my musical heroes like Dr. John, Billy Preston, Levon Helm, everybody. It was just great. Rick Danko and Clarence was in the first band with me on sax. It was just an amazing opportunity to be in a great band which is what I thrive in and what I'm best at. It's the arena I'm most comfortable in out of all the musical things I do. Is being at a gig, with an audience and just the excitement building up to walking out. And the opportunity to make a special night for everyone in the building. I've always been in bands where I felt that was possible every night and I'm grateful for that.

TCG: What are your current plans?

NL: I've got eight shows coming up in the Northeast. I take them very seriously. I'm doing one alone. One at the Birchmere with some friends down there, then up to New York and Jersey. So it's kind of a jigsaw puzzle

putting together three of four configurations of acoustic shows. And I'm focused on that now. Memorizing lyrics, figuring out who's going to play what. Just the normal details of putting a show together. So, I'm excited about playing live and after that, kinda business as usual. Come home, start writing. Got a demo studio here. Hopefully come up with another batch of songs and slowly but surely start crafting another record. I don't imagine I'll have anything to share till next year, maybe even later next year, but I don't know. Right now I'm just focusing on the work, the live work and hoping then to come home and exploring some ideas in hopes of having a great new record somewhere in the future. Then of course on my web site, www.nilslofgren.com, I posted two hour guitar lessons that you can download. And I'm just looking start some more guitar lessons through the web site. It's kind of intermediate stuff. First lesson is my song "Keith Don't Go" and all the fingerpicking. Second lesson was the harmonics. Kind of how I do that. The next step might take a couple lessons to show people the acoustic "Counting On A Miracle" intro I wrote for Bruce on our last tour *The Rising*. And then I may move into electric guitar and break down the "Youngstown" solo from the Madison Sq. Garden DVD. Slowly but surely chip away at trying to share some of the stuff I've done through guitar lessons.

Thanks to Nils Lofgren @ www.nilslofgren.com

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