



## Music DVD Review: Nils Lofgren And Friends - *Live Acoustic*

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Somewhere about midway through this great DVD, Jeff "Skunk" Baxter, one of the numerous "friends" who join Nils Lofgren here — and no guitar slouch himself — offers the following assessment of Lofgren:

"There are three kinds of guitar people. There are guitar owners, and there's about a million of those. There are guitar players, and there's a few of those. Then there are guitarists," Baxter says turning to look at his friend Lofgren. "Nils writes great songs. He sings beautifully. But there are only a few people who can do what he does with a guitar."

To be sure, Nils Lofgren has written some damn fine songs over the years. It's possible you may have even heard a few of them. The funky "I Came to Dance," the lovely ballad "Valentine," or his ode to a Rolling Stone "Keith Don't Go" come to mind.

However it's far more likely you haven't, as Nils Lofgren is best known as a sideman. You know him for his fine work on Neil Young albums like *After The Gold Rush*. You even more likely know him as that guitarist for Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band who looks like a sawed-off cross between Keith Richards and Joey from *Friends*.

You remember right? Nils was that guy who did the backflips off a trampoline on the *Born In The USA* tour. He even did a solo album called *Flip* around that time.

The thing is, what a lot of people don't know about Lofgren is that he is a world class guitarist. Although he has had his moments with Springsteen — the solos on the title tracks of both *Tunnel Of Love* and *The Rising* are just two such moments uniquely stamped with his signature — Lofgren's virtuoso ability is largely swallowed up in the big noise created by the E Street Band.

Not so on this great DVD. Recorded live over three nights at a place called the Birchmere in Alexandria, Virginia before a rapt audience of hard core fans, Lofgren is joined here by an assortment of friends including three of his guitar playing brothers. In a set that covers his lengthy career from his first band Grin to last year's solo album *Sacred Weapon*, Lofgren shows that he is indeed a great, perhaps even under-appreciated singer-songwriter.

But mostly he puts on what basically amounts to a guitar clinic. Of the numerous musical highlights on this DVD — and there are many of them — none match simply watching Lofgren play his instrument. Whether you are a musician or not, seeing Lofgren's technique in the several closeup shots shown here is just nothing short of amazing.

Lofgren doesn't merely strum or pick the strings the way many guitarists do. He plays the entire instrument. He strums it open-handed at times, using all four fingers and his thumb at the same time. At other times, particularly when playing in the open-ended harmonics he so often favors here, Lofgren will play from the top of the neck all the way down the fretboard. The resulting sounds you wind up actually hearing are simply as stunning as they are beautiful.

Lofgren plays in this harmonic based style completely solo on "Keith Don't Go," making the one acoustic guitar he plays sound more like two playing at once. You hear both the lower bass parts and the higher notes. On "Girl In Motion" he continues to play in the harmonic style while switching over to an electric guitar. Here he takes one of the countless stunning solos heard throughout this DVD, as Buck Brown's equally dexterous fingers match him note for note on the keys.

By the time of "Because The Night," (the only tune played here not written by Lofgren), there is a full compliment of guitarists onstage in the form of Lofgren's brothers Tom, Mike, and Mark. Together, they make as big a noise in their own way on the Patti Smith hit as Springsteen does when it's played in stadiums with the E Street Band. There's also yet another of those great, crying guitar solos from Nils.

Earlier in the set, Nils also comes across as an engaging, even funny performer at times. Knowing he has this particular crowd eating out of his hand, he promises a long night early, joking that "I couldn't take a show this long myself, so if you need to get up and get a drink, you won't hurt our feelings." Performing solo acoustic, Lofgren segues nicely from a lovely sounding "I Found You" into the borderline Spanish style of "You". Lofgren's playing here takes on such a dramatic, flamenco type of feel you half expect sagebrush to go floating across the stage.

On "Black Books," Lofgren goes back to electric and proceeds to take off on yet another harmonic fueled solo tear, as Buck Brown's pastoral synthesizer provides a swirling backdrop. For "Valentine" and "Tender Love," Lofgren is joined by Baxter and Mary Ann Redmond for a round of vocal duets. At one point during "Tender Love," Lofgren stops and says "we gotta do that again." After replaying the track a few times, I still couldn't locate the apparent screw-up here.

When Lofgren later uses improvised song lyrics to announce "It's so nice to have friends who play so great, I feel so inspired think I'll take a break," he leaves the stage to Baxter and Buck Brown who use the spotlight to get into a tasty little guitar duel of their own.

Bob Berberich, who was Lofgren's one-time partner in Grin joins him here for a reprise of Grin songs "Everybody's Missing The Sun" and "Aint Love Nice." The show finally draws to a close with "I Came To Dance," "No Mercy," and a searing "Moon Tears" which features another Lofgren solo which begins all dark and bluesy before taking a left turn into Hendrix territory.

The extras on this DVD include several bonus tracks, including a few I've already mentioned here such as "Because The Night" and "Keith Don't Go." There is also a backstage interview where Nils talks about his shaky start doing acoustic performances at a time when he felt "a little more naked and exposed." He humorously recalls one early gig with several false starts where he was "waiting for the fire alarm to go off." There is also footage from the rehearsals for the shows captured here.

On *Live Acoustic*, Nils Lofgren and Friends more than prove their mettle as performers, and Lofgren's songs alone are enough to make for a great night. But if you appreciate watching a great, if criminally underrated, guitarist do his thing nearly as much as I do, this DVD rates as required viewing and listening.