

The ultimate rock 'n' roll wingman

Guitar god Lofgren flourishes in multiple bands as well as solo spotlight

By Michael Popke

Mention the last time (at least for now) that guitarist Nils Lofgren toured with Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band — in support of *The Rising* — and he fills with pride.

"That might have been our best tour," he says. "Arguably, the E Street Band is one of the great bands in history, and I think Bruce is probably our most prolific songwriter who is still writing and putting out music."

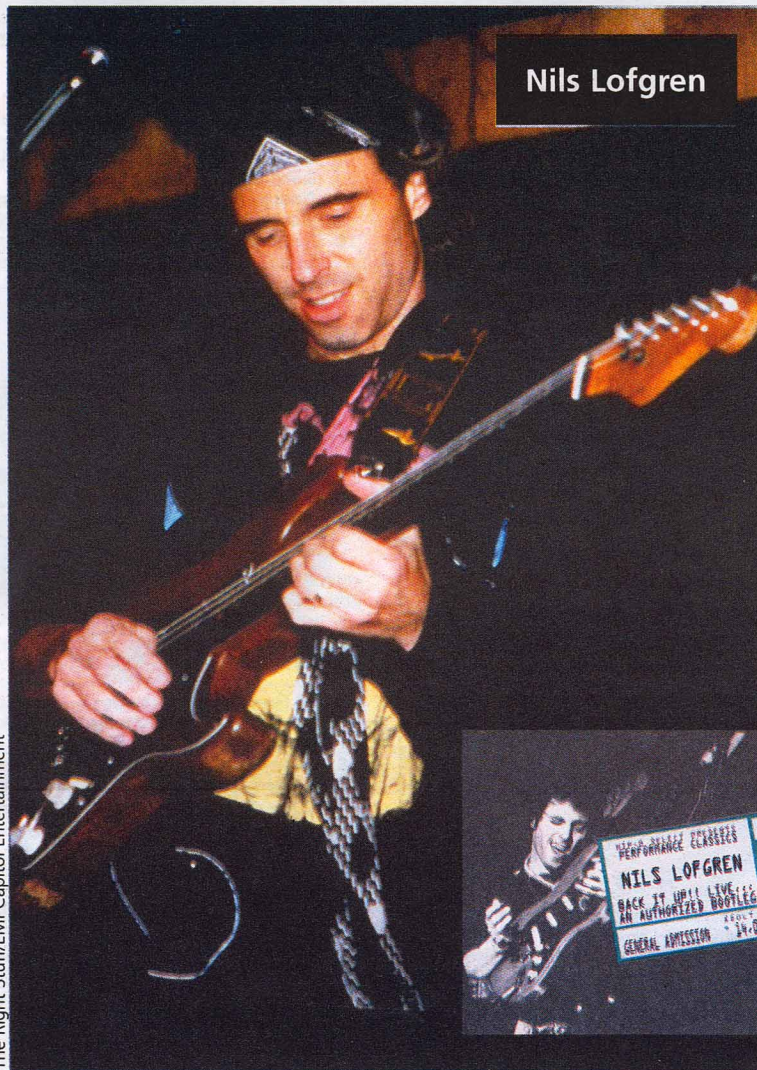
But despite Lofgren's involvement with Springsteen, as well as Neil Young's Crazy Horse and Ringo Starr's All-Starr Band, the 55-year-old, who has called himself a professional musician since age 17, is a solo artist at heart. Critics hailed his 2006 album, *Sacred Weapon* (featuring a duet with Willie Nelson), as one of his best. In February, Hip-O Select's limited-edition CD release of Lofgren's 1975 performance, *Back it Up!! Live... An Authorized Bootleg*, hit store shelves as part of the label's Performance Classics series. Lofgren recently released *Live Acoustic*, a DVD chronicling a three-night stand in February 2006 at the intimate Birchmere in Alexandria, Va. The DVD features several of Lofgren's musical friends, including drummer/guitarist/vocalist Bob Berberich from Lofgren's first band, Grin, and renowned session guitarist Jeffrey "Skunk" Baxter (Steely Dan, the Doobie Brothers), as well as Lofgren's three younger brothers. Lofgren checked in with *Goldmine* from Scottsdale, Ariz., where he lives with his wife and stepson.

Goldmine: Why acoustic shows?

Nils Lofgren: My brother, Tommy, is the other professional musician in the family. He and I started the acoustic shows in the early '80s. At first, it was very uncomfortable, but we really grew to embrace it. We realize that it's an intimate look at performing that people like. I try to play with Tommy whenever I can. But the other two brothers, Mike and Mark, are also quite good. So when I'm playing anywhere in the D.C. area, we try to get all four of the boys together to sing. The Birchmere is a great place with a homegrown atmosphere, which I think we captured on the DVD. It's a comfortable environment. People have a table; they can get snacks. It's not like everybody's standing up and getting antsy.

GM: Is there a mental adjustment that you need to make from arenas and stadiums to intimate venues, where people sit at tables and eat snacks?

NL: An even bigger adjustment is to go from "bandleader" to "in the band." I've been leading bands for 38 years. It's a transition I enjoy, and I'm comfortable with either role. When you walk out into a club environment, where you're literally surrounded by people, it's a little easier to get lost in the music and stay in it than in a stadium or arena setting, because it's such a spectacle. In a club, there's no spectacle.



The Night Stuff/EMI Capitol Entertainment

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Nils Lofgren

GM: You are the most musically prolific of all the E Streeters, aren't you?

NL: It's not intentional. All of these wonderful, accidental and beautiful side trips are great, but it's not something I'm seeking. If the phone rings and Neil Young wants me to do MTV's "Unplugged" with him, which happened, I'll find a way to do it. But my focus continues to be my next batch of songs and my next show and trying to get better. Without that, I'd be depressed.

GM: Does it depress you that your sideman gigs with the E Street Band and Crazy Horse have overshadowed your solo career?

NL: The last thing I am is a sideman, because I'm being asked to contribute. I remember Ringo, who was in the band that got me out of classical accordion and into rock 'n' roll, told me, "I want you to play whatever you feel, sing whatever you feel, dress however you want and go wherever you want on stage. I want all of you, all of the time." That's not a sideman.

GM: Do you get offended when someone refers to you as a "sideman?"

NL: Not at all. I'm thrilled to be in those bands, and they're a big part of my musical journey. Along the way, there have been a lot of businesspeople who actually tried to tell me, "Look, man, you're screwing up your solo career. You gotta stop playing in those other groups." And I'm like, "Politics aside, I'm a musician for life, and when Ringo Starr asks me to be in a band with Dr. John, Billy Preston, Levon Helm, Joe Walsh and Clarence Clemons, if you think I'm going to say no, then you have no idea what the spirit of music means to my heart and soul." When you start violating your musical spirit — it doesn't matter how much money you make — you're screwed. And it's a conscious decision I've had to make all along. I can't worry about political ramifications; I just have to do it.

GM: Did you struggle creating an identity for yourself?

NL: My identity has always been as part of my own band doing my own music. That's probably been 85 percent of the last 38 years.

Although the massive media attention focuses much more on these liaisons with a few famous bands, it's such a smaller part of the day-to-day life that I've led for so long. But my dream is still to play for 3,000 people a night instead of 300, with my own lights and PA, the same crew, bands of my choice and control over the artistic environment.

GM: *Sacred Weapon* has been hailed as one of your strongest and most consistent records. How did you approach the album?

NL: When I finished *The Rising* tour, all of a sudden I was a pedal-steel player, a Dobro player, a lap-steel player. I'm a beginner, but these are new sounds and exciting tools to bring to my own music, and I felt recharged making *Sacred Weapon*. I gave myself permission to write songs as a hobby. I started writing anything that came out of me, and I forced myself not to evaluate it professionally. Thus, I wrote a lot of silly country songs I wouldn't even play for you. But rather than let them build up like bile and get frustrated because I felt like my writing was

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