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Nils Lofgren Interview

by Bob Cianci

Nils Lofgren has enjoyed just about any musical experience imaginable, from Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young's bands to his own solo work. We talk about his extraordinary career and gear.

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photo: Mark Hendrickson

For many writers, myself included, the hardest part of writing a feature story is the opening sentence. It can be even harder when trying to describe the career of a distinctively talented guitarist, singer, keyboardist, and songwriter like Nils Lofgren. Just what can you say about a guy who played with Neil Young at age seventeen, had success with his own band, followed that with a fruitful solo career, plus a twenty-five-year stint as a member of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, a composer for television and movies, and now, an online guitar teacher? What would be an appropriate phrase? How about "Truly remarkable."

Nils Lofgren, as they say, is the real deal: a forty year rock 'n' roll survivor, who has experienced one of the most noteworthy musical careers anyone could possibly hope for. The consummate rocker, Lofgren easily juggles multiple roles as a bandleader, solo artist, sideman, session player and music teacher. Born of Swedish and Sicilian parentage, Lofgren will turn 58 in June, and despite a recent double hip replacement, shows absolutely no signs of slowing down. In fact, he's raring to go, ready to resume his solo acoustic club gigs, and possibly an upcoming worldwide tour with Springsteen and company in 2009.

You seem to be most closely identified with Fender guitars. Why so?

When I first started playing guitar, I loved Jeff Beck, so I started with a Telecaster, and played that for two years. Then, I gravitated to Jimi Hendrix and the Strat. My favorite old Strats are the ones I've been playing for years, both '61s. I also have some reissue Strats. I'm a very physical, exuberant player, and Fenders really hold up to a beating. I've found that with a Fender, you can lose your finesse and not totally lose it on the instrument, if you can understand that. I like to lean into the guitar and use those five settings you can get out of a Strat. I like playing lots of different guitars, but I'll always reach for a Strat. It's the most beautiful electric guitar ever made.

Fender recently has supplied me with some Gretsches, including a couple of Black Falcons and Black Penguins that I use with Bruce. They're working out well.

I also like playing Jazzmasters onstage with Bruce. When I mix the Jazzmaster with Bruce's Telecasters or Broadcasters, and Steve Van Zandt's Strats, it sounds very sympathetic with their guitars. With the Jazzmasters, I use D'Addario 13-56 gauge strings, which are very heavy. That gauge doesn't "splat," if you know what I mean. With all the adrenaline pumping onstage, the Jazzmaster, with those strings and the thumb pick, work great.

I noticed you used a thumb pick exclusively.

I'm left-handed, and when I started to play guitar, I found a thumb pick in the case of my dad's guitar. After about eight or nine months, some of my guitar-playing friends told me I was doing it all wrong... I should use a flat pick, but it didn't work for me.

Any Gibsons or other electrics?

I have a real nice '52 Goldtop Les Paul that I played when I did the Trans Tour with Neil Young years ago. It was a nice combination with his "Old Black"

Les Paul. I also have an Epiphone Les Paul I used when I did the tours with Ringo Starr & The All-Starr Band. Now, I just use those guitars in the studio.

How about amps?

Back in the old days, I used blackface Fender Super Reverbs with four 10" speakers. I eventually moved on to Hot Rod DeVilles for my electric gigs, then to Fender Vibro Kings with three 10" speakers. Lately with Bruce, I've been using two Twin Reverbs onstage to hold my low-end effects, and they're working out real well.

Why do you like Fenders amps?

When you turn a Fender up to about 7 or 8, you get a very comforting, warm saturation that I really like, without the fuzziness. It's very natural and doesn't take away the metal from the strings. With the thumb picks I use, they give me a very percussive sound that enhances the warmth. There's no harshness. I don't like amps that sound brittle or harsh.

Do you endorse any products?

My endorsements are limited. I have deals with Fender, D'Addario for strings, and Takamine acoustic guitars. All of those companies are very helpful, and none of them insist on exclusivity, which I appreciate.

How about effects?

On tour, I use a large rack of effects that's run by my tech, Roy Witte, who's been with me for about eight years. We have a POG, a Poly Octave Generator built by Electro-Harmonix; two Barber Burn Unit Overdrives; a Line 6 Delay, the green one with the backwards sounds; a couple of Boss Octave pedals and a Boss Delay. I really like having my effects at my feet, but it's been getting more and more complicated since the last tour with this big rack unit. Roy has programmed three or four rack pedals to kick in with one stage pedal setting.

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Comments (3 comments)

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Ron Johnson
on 02/17/2009

You know what. I'm an idiot! It was Nils "twin" Jack Sonni that played with the Dire Straits. Ahhh the brain isn't what it used to be. Ignore the first comment. But, if Nils did play with the Straits it would have been great!

Ron Johnson
on 02/17/2009

I agree on the interview. Nils has one of the great LP covers of the 70's with him standing in front of a Fat Man painting. Good LP, too. I was surprised that the Dire Straits didn't come up. I would have liked to have know what it was to play along with Knopfler. I worked with a former crew member on the Brothers In Arms tour and he said Mark was a great, but quiet guy.

Donna Brady
on 02/17/2009

Great story about one of my favorite guitarists! Fine writing with passion. I felt like I was at the interview!

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