

Rolling Stone

Nils Lofgren Dedicates New Album to Clarence Clemons

E Street guitarist collaborates with Paul Rodgers, Sam Moore on 'Old School'

by: Steve Baltin



Nils Lofgren performs at Cadogan Hall in London

Despite 27 years as a member of the E Street Band, guitarist Nils Lofgren has no more idea than anyone when the legendary group might tour or record again. Nor is he concerned about that right now. "I'm so heartbroken Clarence is gone," he says of his fallen bandmate, Clarence "Big Man" Clemons, who passed away earlier this year at age 69.

But Lofgren is filling the E Street downtime and expressing his sorrow the best way he knows how – with music. He has a wonderful new album, *Old School*, featuring guest appearances by Paul Rodgers, Foreigner's Lou Gramm and Sam Moore, and he just wrapped up an acoustic duo tour with friend Greg Varlotta, with more dates to come in 2012.

Lofgren spoke with *Rolling Stone* about the new album, his relationship with Clarence, and the Wack Brothers – his nickname for a part-time band featuring him, Bruce Springsteen and other members of E Street.

You just came off the road. How did it go?

I had a two-and-a-half week run in the northeast with my acoustic duo show, had a great run. The last few shows we just got the hard copy of my new album, and it was fun to sell 'em at the merch table at the end of the night and sign 'em for people. It's been a long road to get a new record. I feel great about it.

Is the recording process something that's difficult for you?

It's more a case of, it comes in second place to what I'm most naturally good at. Live performing is the first. When we did *Tonight's the Night* with Neil Young I was in heaven because it was, like, "Hey, we're doing a live record, an anti-production record. No one will be allowed to fix a single note as a singer or musician, so stay down in it and there are no exceptions." But I write songs, I'm a songwriter. I love that almost every show there's one person that goes, "Hey, I didn't know you wrote, I didn't know you sang. I just thought you played guitar for Bruce and I just thought I'd take a chance. I just want to buy a couple of CDs because I liked your songs." That's very heartening to hear.

What are your plans for *Old School*?

I do need to tour for this. Although I'd love to take out a five-piece band with four crew and a bus, I'm not gonna sell the ranch to tour for two months and do great shows, 'cause I play these little clubs that can't support that kind of overhead. And that's not gonna stop me. I got a duo show with my buddy Greg Varlotta that's, I think, the best shows I've ever done. We're gonna keep doing it, playing songs from the new record. I don't know what's gonna happen with E Street. I'm so heartbroken Clarence is gone. We were dear friends. I talked to him every week off the road, had a much greater friendship with him offstage than on, even though I stood next to him for 27 years. So that's heartbreaking, and I don't know where it's gonna lead. Meanwhile, I got a new record, and I'm excited.

Did Clarence's passing directly influence the writing on *Old School*, or was it largely done by the time he passed away?

A little bit of both. The writing was almost complete when that happened. But for instance, there's a song called "Miss You Ray" about Ray Charles' passing, and it's a metaphor for saying goodbye to family and friends. [I've been singing it as] "I miss you, C," and I've rearranged the lyrics live to apply to my friend Clarence. But that concept is no stranger to all of us. Me and Clarence used to commiserate on and off the road about the loss of Danny [Federici], about personal losses that might be in his life and mine. It's a part of life that's rough for anybody in or out of show business, no exceptions.

What were you looking for in collaborators?

The beauty of this is I was able to just call Paul, who's a dear friend, and there's no bigger Paul Rodgers fan than me, or Lou Gramm fan or Sam Moore fan. I sent everyone rough sketches of harmonies I had ideas for that I didn't need them to honor, but just as a courtesy. With Paul and Lou, I sent them a tape and explicit instructions to ignore my harmonies if they had any ideas. Being great singers, they came up with things I would've never heard and cannot sing. Now, Sam Moore lives here, he's an old friend. We've done a lot of charity work together, and of course he did the E Street thing at the Hall Of Fame. But Sam and I have been bumping into each other for 15 years, 'cause he lives right up the road.

Who else is on the wish list of people to work with?

On the Amnesty International tour in '88 I did get to play a little with Sting and Peter Gabriel, two of my heroes.

But I guess if you're talking about a working thing, I'd love to do some funky guitar jamming with Prince. Any and all of the greats – Aretha Franklin.. Branford Marsalis after the Amnesty tour had me on one of his records, and I didn't even know what I was doing. But there are kind of keys to the kingdom you keep discovering. The more you learn, the less you know. It's just a great journey. I got to play with Cab Calloway the last year he was alive, one of my heroes. He kind of invented rap music in the Thirties and a whole language, and the whole fashion thing with the zoot suits. He was 70 years ahead of his time. I got to play with him on a TV show in L.A., which was a huge honor.

It's funny, thanks to Bruce and Steve coming back I'm learning all these instruments – bottleneck, Dobro. When I got off the road, beginning of last year, Steve Bing, a dear friend from L.A., [was] producing with Jim Keltner, a Jerry Lee Lewis country record. They said, "I want you to come to L.A. and play lap steel." I packed my lap steel, went to L.A. and I had a hell of a ball playing all day long with Jim and Jerry Lee Lewis. In fact, to challenge Jerry, Steve said for the first time in his life Jerry's gonna play guitar and sing live ,and we're gonna record a few things. And, man, thankfully I got all these great outtakes of the day that are just like gold to me. At one point I'm sitting there playing lap steel and Jerry Lee Lewis is singing, this is all very visceral and live in the studio, and all of a sudden Jerry Lee just goes, "Play that steel, Killer." I was about to throw it away 'cause I was a beginner. And it just reminded me, "I've got good ideas, I was blessed with a gift." My parents were very musical. They danced as a hobby, and they always encouraged me. I started playing accordion when I was five. And I realized I'm just working hard like the next guy and I'm very, very grateful at this point to, after 43 years, have this journey keep evolving and changing and growing.

Have you had a chance to give the music to anybody in the E Street Band yet?

I have not had any chance to mail it to Bruce or anyone else. About a month ago, Patti [Scialfa], who makes great records – Steve Jordan's kind of the producer and drummer – we did some session work, started a new record of hers. But this was weeks before I had the record. I just got home, there's this big box of new CDs here and I'm gonna have to start mailing some out and get 'em to my friends and hope they hear something on there they like. Meanwhile I'm just so grateful I actually got it done. It seems like such a big project, it's finally done, and I'm proud of it. I'm anxious to share it.

Some bands, when they're on break they don't speak. But here you are working on Patti's new album.

When I go to Patti and Bruce's we call ourselves the Wack Brothers. We laugh and come up with wacky stuff 'cause we're very uninhibited around each other. Patti's singing, usually playing a guitar. Steve Jordan's on drums. I'm usually on some kind of guitar, Cliff Carter or Charlie Giordano are on keyboards, Willie Weeks sometimes on bass, or Bruce is on bass. All of a sudden Bruce, instead of being Bruce the bandleader, he's just the bass player or rhythm guitar player, or a great organ player. He has great ideas, and it's fun to just not be on the E Street Band. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's intense. This is a different kind of intensity, but still musically challenging and gratifying. With Steve Jordan and Patti Scialfa Springsteen as the heavies directing us, it's just a whole different vibe. But ultimately it's musical growth and experimentation. That is good for the soul and the spirit.

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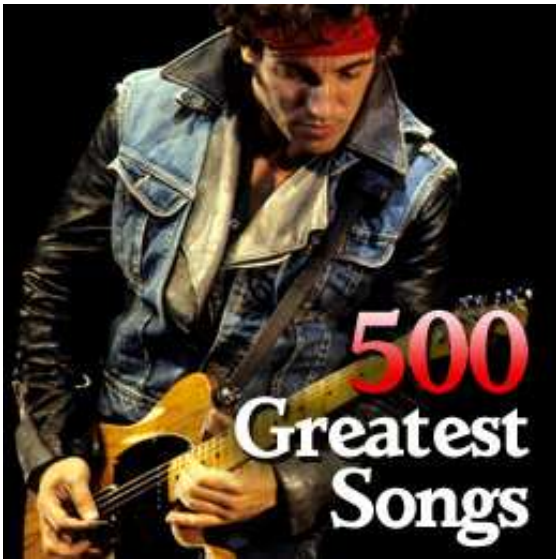
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