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# Nils Lofgren Interview – New Album, Springsteen and Jerry Lee Lewis

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By: Rob Cavuoto

It's been five years since the release of Nils Lofgren's last studio album featuring his own songs, but now he is back and has something to say! An effort that's been in the works since the culmination of Springsteen's *Working on a Dream* Tour in November of 2009, Lofgren's new album *Old School* covers a variety of topics including desperation, self doubt, true love, departed friends and holding on to your dreams while the world goes mad. I had the pleasure to speak with Nils about his new release and the importance of being true to yourself as an artist.



Nils Lofgren

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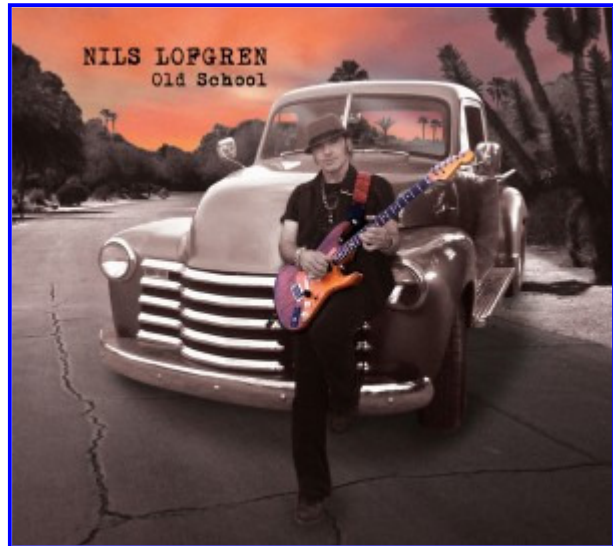
**Rob Cavuoto:** *Old School* takes you on a journey from anger and sorrow to love and hope. Do you find it difficult to open yourself to your audience like that?

**Nils Lofgren:** As I have gotten older I don't have the energy to approach my audience unless I open myself. I find myself turning 60 and my whole

journey in music has been such a life altering and life saving thing. I want to make records and I have a lot of ideas, but they have to be very authentic and visceral in order to commit to year and half worth of work.

**Rob:** Has that always been your philosophy when creating solo albums?

**Nils Lofgren:** Yes, I look back at some of the songs I wrote as a kid which were pretty juvenile, but damn if I wasn't really into it, or heartbroken, or mad for some reason at the time. I was a classical accordion player, playing Beatle's medleys at 9th Grade variety show, my whole foray into rock 'n' roll and pop music was because of the emotional content and passion of the Beatles and Stones. It was all very powerful stuff that imprinted me. It wasn't just the notes or the rhythm; it was those things combined with the emotional and powerful messages.



Nils Lofgren - Old School

As I have gotten older and see the world going to hell, with evil standing in line with saints at Starbucks, you have to navigate it. It's easy to get disheartened and down. There is still a lot of beauty out there, and we have to right the ship. I ask myself, "What can I do?" Like to sing in front of 400 people, keep them off the streets, and then sending them home with some hope and inspiration that may linger in their lives.

**Rob:** How do you manage to have your own identity and not pick up the styles and traits of Bruce Springsteen or Neil Young on your songs?

**Nils Lofgren:** Well, I think it started back in the 60's when Bruce, Steve Van Zant, and I were all in different cover bands growing up. We weren't writing yet and just playing the Beatles, Dylan, The Who and Stones songs. Those were the song that we were immersed in at the time. When we started writing, those bands were our templates. Those guys were to songwriting like Hendrix was to the guitar. We were students of that.



Nils Lofgren, Photo: Jan M Lundahl

After a few years it became a soup to all of us. We are imprinted with that at a young age and it was all part of a journey. Even before I ever heard of Bruce I was writing songs. I can guarantee that I have been influenced by Bruce and Neil, not only as being fans of the songs but being inside the song and how it's presented. It's all about learning, growing, and osmosis. I have no problem taking inspiration and tips from everyone, including the great guys I have worked with.

**Rob:** What was the catalyst for putting on the producer's hat for *Old School*?

**Nils Lofgren:** I'm not a producer for hire per se, but naturally, on this CD I wanted to keep it emotional and home grown. I thought it was best to be at home with family, my wife Amy, and our six dogs in Arizona. To craft something that was true to me. I like to sing and play the songs to my dogs for two weeks before I recorded. Now I'm not reading the words off a lyric sheet, I know the song. I might get inspired and start taking liberties with melody that weren't there two weeks prior. I wanted to record all the songs live. Ten of the twelve songs are live vocals played with a guitar. That is why there is more emotion in this CD; I wanted to take those songs to a more powerful place before I recorded them.

**Rob:** I know you're a Fender man... What guitars did you use to record the CD to get that unique raw sound?

**Nils Lofgren:** Mostly my 61' Fender Strat with Bill Lawrence pick-ups. I used a lower action Owens Bottle Neck Dobro for "Old School," which I ran through a Barber Fuzz Tone. I used a Paul Reed Smith for some

whammy bar solos and a few Takamine acoustics. On “Let Her Get Away” I used an old D18 that Neil Young gave me after the *Gold Rush* sessions. I used a Bottle Neck Strat through a POG pedal for “Amy Jones Blues.” Brendan O’Brien turned me on to that when making E-Street records. It seemed like whatever he put that through sounded like a pipe organ, then if you take that pipe organ sound through an overdrive it gets really gnarly. In “Ain’t Too Many of Us Left,” I used my 61’ Strat through a POG and the lead guitar is an old 52’ Gold Top Les Paul with a Neil Young-inspired Bigsby from the Trans tour. Those are the two most classic guitars that you can have and use.

**Rob:** You have played with Neil Young and Bruce Springsteen, two music giants. What was greatest thing that you have learned from them?

**Nils Lofgren:** I have learned so many lessons on so many fronts. Basically, to follow your heart. I’ve learned it doesn’t matter if you don’t have a record deal or a hit record. To not let the lack of hits or your financial empire get in the way of creativity and growth. When people of that stature are comfortable to have you stand next to them, it goes without saying that they are not giving you a hand out, they are expecting a return and you need to deliver.

**Rob:** You’ve accomplished so much in your career, so what has been the high point?

**Nils Lofgren:** Oh wow... [long pause] I have had too many to pick just one. I have been really blessed, and it’s been a great journey.

I can remember when I was 18 doing *Gold Rush* with Neil Young and having to tell him and David Briggs that I’m not a piano player and to let them decide due to my classical accordion background that I would do just fine. They had confidence in me when I had none...and they were right. Or even when Steve Van Zant came back to the E-Street, and I went to Bruce and said you don’t need four guitar players so I designated myself as the swingman and went a studied lap steel, pedal steel, banjo, and bottle neck. It helped me with my solo career, like on “Old School,” I couldn’t play bottle neck like this five years ago.

A beautiful accident from this journey was when an old friend of mine, Steve Bing, was producing a Jerry Lee Lewis country CD and wanted me to come in and play lap steel. Now, I'm a beginner lap steel player, and I'm thinking I shouldn't tell Steve that there are twenty lap steel players better than me, but I have come to learn to say, "Thank you and when should I show up?" [*Laughs*]

During a nine hour session, here I am playing lap steel with Jerry Lee Lewis. At one point Jerry started playing guitar for the first time in his life during a recording session, and I have a front row seat. To think I almost said no! It gets even better... We are doing the second take to "Blues After Midnight" and Jerry says in the middle of the song, "Play that steel, killer!" I'm like, "Is he talking to me? I'm on the only steel guitar player; he must be talking to me." [*Laughs*] To have that on tape is hilarious and beautiful.



Nils Lofgren, Photo: Fotex/Rainer Drechsler

**Rob:** Playing Giant Stadium is a huge feat but selling it out for ten nights, I'm guessing would rank up there?

**Nils Lofgren:** That was one of the greatest runs in my life! The good thing is you have band leader who never follows a set list. Bruce will call audibles from a list of two hundred songs, and you can't know all of them at any one time. You can do all your homework and second guessing, but it's still like Mission Impossible. I go to sound checks three hours early. My whole day is submerged in the band, interfacing with this monstrous tech world to trying to prepare. It's like a jig saw puzzle, and you need to be at the top of your game knowing that Bruce is going to hit you with songs you never played at sound check. If there is a mistake, he smiles at you but he knows that it wasn't because I was out all night screwing around or doing a corporate meet and greet. He knows I'm on the case, and he's throwing curve balls.

It's not to mess with us; it's just that he got an idea that he didn't have earlier in the day when he was making up the set list. He understands that he is going to take chances like that, and you can't get upset when there is a mistake.

A funny story about that ten-run night... By accident I ran into Steven Tyler on the steps of my hotel in NYC prior to that announcement. It was the first time that we met. I love Aerosmith and we got talking. He tells me that he played Giant Stadium and sold it out two, three times. He then turns to me and asks how many nights we are playing. I told him we just sold out our tenth night. His face dropped, eyes opened wide and he's staring at me....there was dead silence. He leans into my face and says "Fuck you, man!" and we both fell down laughing!

**Rob:** With the passing of Clarence Clemons, I know there are rumors about the status of the E-Street Band. Can you set the record straight and put our minds at ease that everything is going to be ok?

**Nils Lofgren:** For me, nothing is ok. We loved Clarence and his memory lives on. We miss him terribly. We had a strong friendship off stage, and I spoke to him at least one a week. Honestly there are no plans; it's an ominous and complex thing to address. As a band member and not the leader, I'm giving myself time to grieve. It's really not my call, and whatever Bruce decides to do is with him. I love him, and he is a powerful friend. I'm behind whatever he wants to do. It's a heavy responsibility that lies with him.



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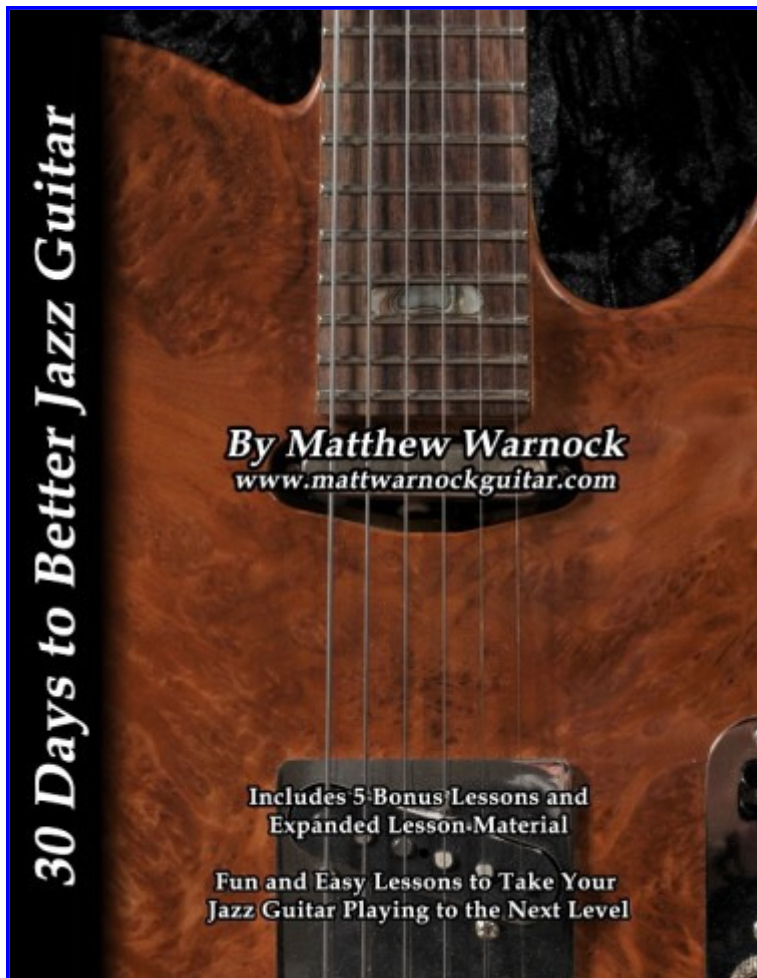
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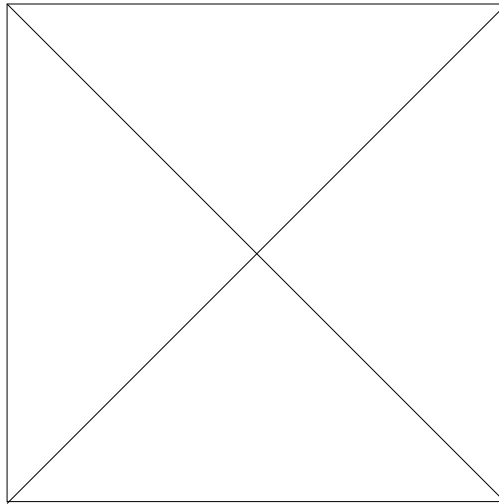
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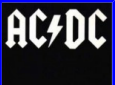







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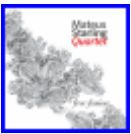
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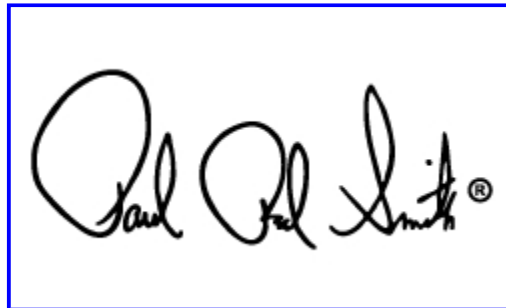
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