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Nils Lofgren reflects on life at 60 and the loss of Clarence Clemons as new solo album arrives

December 6th, 2011, 5:15 pm · View all 4 comments · posted by ROBERT KINSLER, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Timing is everything. When I spoke with guitarist [Nils Lofgren](#) on Nov. 9, he was candid about his recovery following a double-hip replacement and turning 60 on June 21, as well as the loss of his close friend, E Street Band saxophonist [Clarence Clemons](#), just a few days earlier.

But not once during our phone chat did Lofgren tip his hand about [Bruce Springsteen and the band's 2012 tour](#), news of which the Boss revealed on his website a week later. Still, it was clear in the interview that Lofgren is always ready and willing to follow Springsteen's lead when it comes time to get out on the road.

"It's all up in the air," he said at the time when asked if the E Street Band might tour again. "We don't know, man. I'm still heartbroken about losing Clarence. [We lost \(keyboardist\) Danny \(Federici\) a few years back](#). I just don't know. That is a rough one. There is no Clarence 2."

"Look, I'm not the bandleader," he continued, "so I'm giving myself permission to just be heartbroken and have that be an impossible topic for me, because it's not my choice. I'm glad it's not. It's an awful burden, but I know Bruce is the best. He always has been; I think he is the best rock performer in history, and he'll do what's right. And

whatever that is for him, I'm behind him 1,000 percent. I just don't know what that is right now."

Such weighty topics abound on the just-released *Old School*, Lofgren's first studio album of original songs since *Sacred Weapon* in 2006 and his first solo work since his affecting tribute to [Neil Young](#), 2008's *Nils Sings Neil*.

The self-produced *Old School* is one of the most personal albums of Lofgren's wide-ranging career, with songs addressing aging ("60 Is the New 18"), politics in the 21st century (the title track), the loss of friends and heroes ("Miss You Ray"), survival ("Ain't Too Many of Us Left") and love ("Love Stumbles On").

More open and articulate than most songwriters, Lofgren discusses his life's journey as of 2011 with the kind of enthusiastic zeal he wields when playing and singing on stage.

"Yeah, certainly that loss is a part of the journey," he said when asked about "Miss You Ray."

"All along, certainly when I started writing the song 'Miss You Ray,' Clarence was alive." ([The legendary tenor sax man died June 18.](#)) "We spoke every week, and we were very close offstage even more than on.

"But after losing Danny ... you think about your friends and family (being) the very important people in your life, which has been a part of my journey headed toward 60 years of age, (and) it just got me in the frame of mind to use that song 'Miss You Ray.' Obviously one of my heroes is [Ray Charles](#) – that was a great loss – and it just is my way of letting out the emotions that I am losing people, losing family, I'm losing friends ... but life is still grand, right? Because some of them are left and I gotta focus on that, too.

"And that's kind of the whole theme of the record, that I wanted to touch on things that are real and emotional to me, and part of the life: getting older, being wise about it, having a sense of humor about it, having to give yourself permission to make mistakes – at least I do – and once in awhile have the same kind of childish silly thoughts you might have had when you were a kid."

Anyone who saw Lofgren perform in the '70s with Grin or Neil Young (as a momentary member of Crazy Horse) or as part of [Ringo Starr's All-Starr Band](#) in the early '90s – not to mention his role in the E Street Band since the mid-'80s – knows all about his virtuoso guitar skills. What's sometimes overlooked is his equal gifts as a songwriter and singer. On "60 Is the New 18," for instance, he uses a fast-paced rock rhythm as he occupies a fictional character not quite ready to face the future.

"Now, fortunately (laughing), the only thing true about me (in that song) is that I do have two titanium hips. At the moment I've avoided the hair plugs. I've not taken any drugs for pumping up, sleeping up, sexing up or waking up – (but, laughing a bit) I get it. I can relate because I do have fears. All of a sudden I'm like: 'Damn, I'm 60.' You can't really spin that number."

It's like: "Yeah, OK, pay attention, dude – you don't have half of your life ahead of you. Even though I'm young at heart, I'm excited – I got a new record and I'm singing and playing well. I also got to say 'Dude, don't be stupid.' ... The good news is you can be young at heart. There is a lot of stuff to do that is very child-like and fun – you just have to avoid the childish stuff that gets you into trouble."

"Old School" itself features a number of high-profile guests, including Free/Bad Company/Queen vocalist [Paul Rodgers](#), Lou Gramm of [Foreigner](#) fame, and soul legend Sam Moore.

Lofgren considers himself lucky "to have had histories with them individually and collectively, where I could simply call them and not insult them and have to go through a manager. 'Look, I'm making a homegrown record in my garage. I would love you to consider singing for me. Could I just send you a track, just to listen to, and we'll go from there?' They all said yes. They heard the tracks and they all said they'd help."

While he hopes *Old School* is a commercial success, his priorities are soundly geared toward continuing to master his craft, spending time with his wife Amy and their six dogs at their Arizona ranch, and playing music with some of the most acclaimed rock 'n' roll greats of all time.

"I always want a hit record because it means you're reaching a lot of people, and that's why you make music: to share it. But at the same time if I had had hit records when I was a teenager I probably would have never played in Neil Young's band, and Ringo's band and Bruce's band, and all these other great bands.

"Heck, at the start of the year I went off to be a lap steel session player for [Jerry Lee Lewis](#) in L.A. on a country record. I've just been blessed with so many great opportunities, and they continue to come. I'm just trying to be humble about it and get better at what I do slowly but surely– and take care of my health enough so I can continue to do it."

Photo, from a 2008 performance in Madrid, by Paul White, The Associated Press.

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Geoff Allibone

Nils is a legend in his own right. May he live forever.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 20 hours ago



Teri Lawrence · Portland State University

Huge hugs and respect to ya, Nils! You've always given your heart in your music and that's what's made you so good. Had no idea you went through hip replacement - hope all is healing well! I learned early that those we lose live on in us, and you're a great vehicle for that. You're still the kid from Bethesda, and don't ever grow old!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · December 12 at 11:34am



Curt Nordeen · University of Maryland, College Park

I agree with Teri! You are still the kid from Bethesda. Can't wait to hear your new album!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · December 13 at 7:11am



Gunvor Edling

Nils you are one of the nicest person I know God Bless you!Many hugs to you!

[Reply](#) · [1 Like](#) · December 15 at 6:54am

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at The Infamous Tee Room, Sat, Dec 31 8:00p

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