

Rock Guitar Daily with Tony Conley

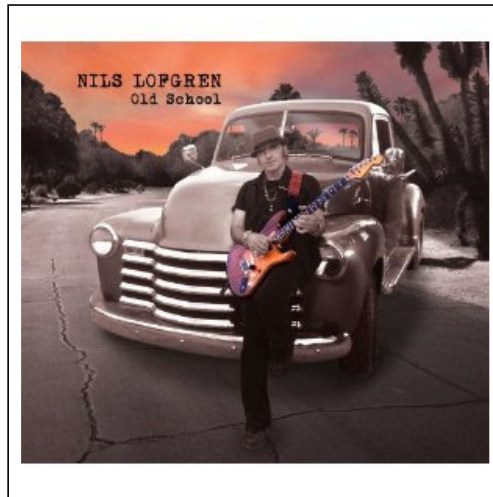
Thoughts, recitations and meditations on the world of rock and roll guitar

Tuesday, November 1, 2011

Nils Lofgren - Old School

"Dream big, work hard, stay humble." Nils Lofgren.

As I peruse the public relations blurbs, and early reviews, I'm reading a lot about Nils Lofgren's new release, *Old School*, and while everyone is talking edgy anger, and vitriol, I don't see it. What I do see is a consummate song stylist who is looking at a couple of rough years and singing some world weary tunes in a very hopeful voice. Lofgren is in great voice, his guitar playing is as jaw droppingly brilliant as ever, but it's his songwriting that has drawn me deeply into this record. This is a great record that will stay in your head through many listenings. It hasn't been off my screen for a week, and it's still growing on me.



Lofgren is coming through a difficult double hip replacement just three years ago, and the deaths of longtime E Street Band members, Clarence Clemons, and Danny Federici. He's also had enough time off of the road to take a long look at the tough shape our country is in. He may be reflective, and at times edgy, but as I listen to this disc, I hear tremendous resilience and hope in his voice and in his melodies.

Conceived and recorded in his home studio, this record sounds great and I was surprised to hear that Lofgren recorded it mostly live, without a lot of overdubs or layering. Years of live performance have honed the singer/guitarist's skills. The guitar work on *Old School* is nothing short of brilliant - he somehow manages to fill every nook and cranny with lyrical, and tasty forays that never sound forced, or self indulgent. It's no small wonder that Neil Young and Bruce Springsteen have kept Lofgren employed for over forty years.

Lofgren kicks it off with the title tune, and *Old School* is a great way to start - Lofgren's state of the union message. Greasy, slip sliding guitars strut from front to back, and some killer horns keep things moving as Lofgren is joined by ex-Foreigner frontman Lou Gramm on the first chorus and the remainder of the song. Lofgren proclaims, "Oh no, ain't no old school anymore," but I beg to differ. This is very old school, and it flat out rocks - it reminds me of the days when Aerosmith still had their groove.

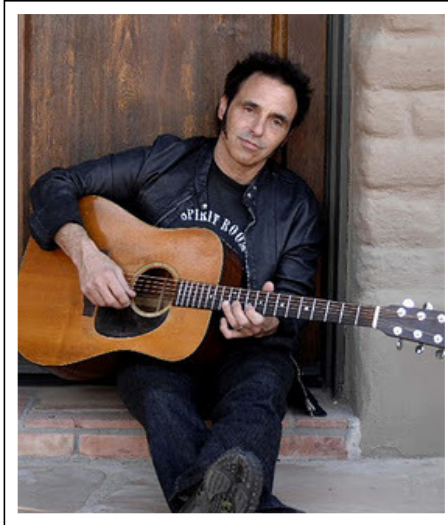
60 Is The New 18 sees Lofgren waxing on the inelegance of growing old without grace. I suspect that Nils is telling this tale as a wry observer more than anything autobiographical here. Sonically, this sounds like a lo-fi dub take on the 80s school of intelligent and melodic guitar pop as practiced by The Police, or The Fixx. This should have a whole generation of

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indie rockers realizing that homegrown, handmade records needn't sound that way. Lofgren and his band sound like they spent ages working up these arrangements, but they are mostly live basic tracks, some guitar overdubs, and a few vocal fixes. The instrumental breakdown sounds like the love child of Andy Summers, and Billy Gibbons - it will have you scratching your head, and wondering where such brilliance can be bought.

Paying tribute to the voice of Ray Charles, *I Miss You, Ray* is a song that you know is a classic the minute you hear the first notes (think James Taylor's *Fire and Rain*). Nils Lofgren's guitar playing is as tremendously identifiable as ever - his touch and tone

are sublime, whether he is playing electric, or as on this tune, acoustic. The rolling, laconic notes remind me of many Paul McCartney classics, as the moment you hear them, their intent and meaning are abundantly clear. As a vocalist, Lofgren is in fantastic form - his smoky resonance is endearing, as if a friend was singing to you in your living room.

It turns out that during all those years of incendiary guitar solos, and trampoline flips, Lofgren was listening very closely to the wordplay of his notably poetic ex-employers. Throughout this entire record, Lofgren assumes the position of wise bard, writing lyrics that are heart felt and compelling. *Love Stumbles On* is a look back over a life of broken dreams and hearts, yet love soldiers on bravely, and one never gets the notion that Lofgren is anything but hopeful.

Amy Joan Blues kicks the energy up a notch - it's a cajun-esque romp that features one of the greatest voices to ever grace rock and roll, Paul Rodgers. Throwing lines casually

back and forth, Lofgren and Rodgers sound like they've been singing together all their lives - a couple of old pros just doing what they do. Lofgren plays some amazing slide guitar from beginning to end and never seems to repeat the same lick twice. This is a somewhat standard piece of roots rock that is tremendously elevated by some superb performances.

Nils has been featuring *Irish Angel* in his solo shows for years, and has now recorded what will be the definitive version of the Bruce McCabe written ballad. Maybe one of the best ballads you've never heard, it's a tearjerker that has Lofgren lamenting that he'll have two drinks, one to forget, and one to remember his Irish angel. Beautifully played and sang, this one will stay on your mind long after listening.

Rock and roll Hall of Fame inductee Sam Moore (Sam and Dave) joins Lofgren on the autobiographical *Ain't Too Many of Us Left*. This makes me wish that somewhere along the line the six stringer had served as musical director for Bob Dylan. A very deceptive, and Stony rhythm sounds simple until you listen close and hear the interplay going on between the band on this cut. Yeah, they're old school as hell, and razor sharp, as Lofgren bemoans too much B-ball, too many flips, and artificial hips, all the while noting along with Moore that



Tony Conley



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there ain't too many of us left.

If I had to pick one word to describe this album, I'd say that that word would have to be soulful. When Lofgren sings, "you were mine, when you were mine," it evokes memories of country ballads, haunting loss, and graceful resignation. Words sung by a less skilled vocalist could sound trite, but when Nils sings them you don't doubt that they are straight from the heart. This

is another song that has a subtly beautiful arrangement with some nice synth pads, and Lofgren's beautiful acoustic guitar fills.

It takes Lofgren nine songs to finally uncork one that will have you saying, oh yeah, he has played with Springsteen for a quarter of a century. Straight Jersey shore rock with an upfront organ and a loping guitar line, *Just Because You Love Me* is a heartfelt paean from a man to his wife. This is a cut that lets you far enough into the artist's world to know that the hope he conveys in his voice is well placed.

Dream Big unfolds against sample laden electronic rhythms, and some sweet Philadelphia soul strings that keep getting cooler, and cooler as Lofgren lays down an impassioned rap that contains the most important message I've heard in a song for a very long time. This is street music circa 2011. With lines like, "love like a work of art," this song is an instruction manual on how one must live in perilous times. The angst comes flying out when Nils straps on his '61 Strat and knocks down walls with a stunning solo that is half emotional outburst and half technical wizardry - Lofgren's style is completely unique. His sound is tailor made and handcrafted.

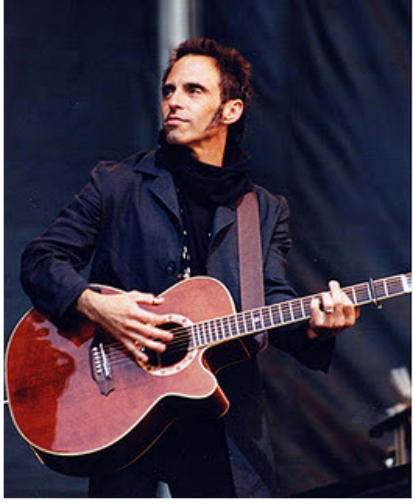


Another heart on his sleeve ballad follows, with *Let Her Get Away*. It tells the tale of a man who just can't find the way to let go of a lost love. Lofgren's gentle, wispy acoustic guitar is the perfect accompaniment for the song, as Nils describes what dooms him to lose all love subsequent to losing the one he let get away. A beautiful prayer of contemplative resignation.

After evoking the spirit of Neil Young with a tasty bit of guitar squawk in the intro of *Why Me*, Lofgren is again examining his psyche as he wonders if there is "any hope in my catastrophe." I'm guessing that anyone who gives this a listen will be able to relate to this on many levels. Incredibly personal, but also universal, Nils's lyrics sing to and for every man.

Nils Lofgren's legend is based on guitar histrionics, vaulting into somersaults off of drum risers, being a dependable sideman, and occasional solo artist. *Old School* may be his most well realized solo foray, and is a marvelous album for our times, as well as his - the pains and woes he sings of are those of all of us in these turbulent times, but it is his sense of hope and perseverance that has kept me listening to this record repeatedly, and digging it more with each subsequent listening.

Old School is one of the finest records I have heard this year, and it's been a pretty good year. A great album for our times - it is a bit sad and reflective, but willing to do the work to make things right.



You should buy this record today.

Posted by Tony Conley at 9:28 AM 

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