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[Nils Lofgren Interview: E Street Band Guitarist on His Life, Bruce Springsteen and Latest Album](#)

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Written by: [Melissa Parker visit my website](#)

It has been five years since the release of Nils Lofgren's last studio album featuring his own songs. The songwriter's recent release, *Old School*, covers a variety of topics including desperation, self-doubt, true love, departed friends, holding on to your dreams, and a tribute to the late, great Ray Charles.

Old School runs the gamut from rough, bluesy tracks to haunting acoustic songs. The album features former Foreigner lead singer Lou Gramm, legendary vocalist Paul Rodgers, and Rock Hall of Fame inductee Sam Moore as additional vocals.

“I followed Bruce’s career for years. I’d buy tickets and go see him play with the E Street Band in the 70s and 80s, go back and say hello as a fan, and then developed a friendship with him. I’ve always admired Bruce, but it’s quite a long history. Before I even joined the band, he’d come out and just sit in with my band.”

As an integral member of Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band since 1984, Lofgren has remained consistently busy as part of the group and as a solo artist. The multi-instrumentalist formed the band Grin in 1968 and joined Neil Young’s band at age 18, playing piano and guitar on the acclaimed platinum album *After the Gold Rush*.

Old School is dedicated to Lofgren’s dear friend and band mate, Clarence “Big Man” Clemons, who died of complications from a stroke on June 18, 2011.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): Nils, I enjoyed the new music. Was there a theme planned for the album at conception and, if so, did that change after Clarence Clemons passed away?

Nils Lofgren: Not too much. The whole theme of the record, as I slowly started writing songs, was just simply reflections from a 60 year old. I started the record at 59 and turned 60, so I was just excited about a new batch of songs. It covers a lot of territory, from anger and rage to confusion about getting older and not having it as together as you think one should have it together. There are general themes and everything in between.

Certainly the song, “Miss You Ray,” which I’ve been singing in person as “Miss You C,” was already written for a lost musical hero, Ray Charles. Clarence just sadly happened to be someone I was very close to and we were friends when we lost him. But, loss is a part of life at any age, and it becomes something you have to navigate more and more as you get older.



Nils Lofgren (Photo by Mark Hendrickson)

The album just kind of reflects on that and living in a crazy, insane world. You stand in line at the coffee shop, and you've got some evil characters standing right next to the angels. You've just got to keep an eye out for the angels and try to stay away from the dark, which is everywhere. As you get older, you should have a little more wisdom and common sense to navigate through that journey.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): You and Clarence were close. Where were you when you received the news of his death?

Nils Lofgren: I was on tour in England doing an acoustic duo show with a friend, Greg Varlotta, whose been working with me for years. Of course, initially the shock was that Clarence had a stroke. It didn't look good at first, but later we had some hope. After he survived a difficult surgery, we were told he might have a long road to recovery. My plan was to play my last night in London and head to Florida to visit him at the beginning of what we had hoped would be the road to recovery.

Literally two hours after I left the stage that night, I was packing to go to Miami and got the call saying that Clarence didn't make it. That was very devastating. I immediately flew to Scottsdale, Arizona and got my wife, Amy, who was also his good friend, and we turned right around and flew to Florida. Unfortunately, instead of encouraging him to get well, we had to say goodbye. That was rough and a heartbreaking loss, but sadly it is more and more a part of life. If you are blessed with some sort of longevity, inevitably that type of loss goes along with it.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): What do you miss most about Clarence?

Nils Lofgren: We were better friends off the road than even on stage. I stood next to him for 27 years and made music, but even off the road we spoke every week. On the road, of course, it was every day. He was just a close dear friend right out of the gate 27 years ago when I joined the band. We had a lot in common.

I started having hip replacements and that was something he had experienced. He counseled me on that three years ago when I had both of my hips replaced. My first three-block walk with my therapist, my wife, and my walker was up the road to see Clarence after his first knee replacement. So, we were having body parts replaced at the same time to get us well for another tour. We both went out on the Working on a Dream tour and had a ball. Clarence and I spoke every week about our history and our friendship. It was just a great loss. I miss it all. There's nothing I don't miss about him.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): The band also lost Danny Federici to cancer in 2008. How did those two losses affect the surviving members emotionally?

Nils Lofgren: Well, we are a family. We're a family that's living together, traveling together, and working together. It's a very close-knit thing. To carry on without Danny was rough. We were lucky to have a brilliant musician and good person, Charlie Giordano, who is doing a great job. Nevertheless, when you're in a special band, everyone is unique.

Certainly Bruce does the heavy lifting, and thanks to his performing and songwriting, he's the only guy that has to be there. But, when you have a band with that kind of history, there are no interchangeable parts, so every loss of an original band member is very significant. It's very challenging to carry on.

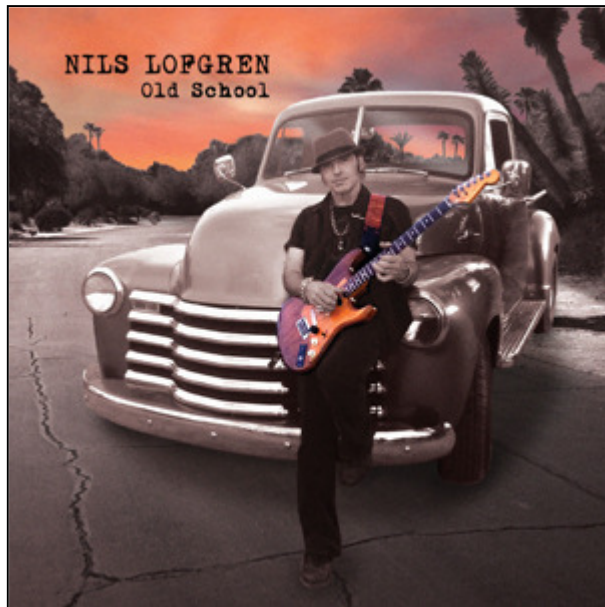
Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): Let's talk about the new album. In the title track, "Old School," you speak about our country. You say that Congress should be fired, and the death penalty should be upheld. Are those your personal views?

Nils Lofgren: Not entirely, but symbolically, yes. I have a lot of rage and anxiety about what I feel has been a poor job government has done. But, that's kind of been a theme my entire life. I think now, more than ever, the system is broken.

When you talk about this song specifically, the character in the song has actually lost a child to a predator. So, understandably, that person would like to see the predator basically put down like a rabid stray (that's the line). Personally, I'm not sold on the death penalty, but to be very clear, I do believe there are some things that, if you do them, you should never have a second chance. I think that raping, torturing, and murdering children falls into that category. Under no circumstances should any man or woman ever have a second chance to abuse a child like that. Now, how do you accomplish that? That is a job for Congress, and they are not doing their job in that area. I don't care how you get it done.

I think we would all agree that if somebody did that to your child, we wouldn't want them to ever have a second chance to do it to anyone ever again. I don't recall ever running into anyone, parent or not, that would disagree with that. So, just to be clear, that's why I mentioned Nancy Grace, Joe Behar, and Jane Velez-Mitchell. They are waving that flag and complaining about (I hate to admit it) ... men.

Men, in general and throughout history, have really screwed things up. I think this is one stance where our lawmakers should be ashamed that we give second chances to ANY predator that does that to a child under ANY circumstances. That is my personal view.



Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*):

Is the song, "60 is the New 18," an anthem for all of us older folks?

Nils Lofgren: Yes. I wrote it about everyone struggling to grow up. Hell, you could be 30 and say, "Oh my God, I'm not a teenager!" You could be 80 and feel like, "Oh my God, I'm not 50 anymore!" I have a sense of humor about it. You have this vision when you're a kid. You think 60 is an ancient age. You're like this retired, revered person, but the character in the song has anxieties and concerns about his world and his future. Thank God his are much more dramatic and greater than mine at the moment, but I can relate.

I'm very grateful to be alive, to be singing and playing and have some hope ahead of me. At the same time, I'm like, "Man, where am I headed? What am I doing?" Yeah, I sing and play, but I'm not ready to retire. I have a lot of anxiety about the world and don't really have any great ideas to fix the planet.

I certainly would like the Congress to do a better job. I see vast room for improvement, but don't see it happening soon. The guy in the song is obviously struggling with much deeper issues. He's abusing everything in front of him and ashamed of it, and he doesn't know where he's headed, but he's very concerned about it.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): In "Love Stumbles On," I love the line, "You cry to your maker, 'Why weren't you there!'" "He says, 'Hey, those were my big feet carrying you from despair.'"

Nils Lofgren: Yes, that's the great old *Footprints in the Sand* poem, which I love. I believe in God, but I'm not a fan of organized religion. I just felt like that was a great little dialogue between a person that's unhappy with his life and his maker.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): That was my next question ... to ask if you were a religious person.

Nils Lofgren: No. I'm a spiritual person. I don't like organized religion. I don't pretend to tell you it's not valuable to you or to any other individual. I'm kind of a recovering Catholic. I was counseled poorly by people in the Catholic Church when I went to catechism as a young boy. I'm not saying that was everyone's experience at all. That was mine.

I had a very spiritual father that was happy to have us raised Catholic because my mom was Catholic. He was Protestant, but was just a very spiritual man and a philosopher at heart. He was a great teacher to me and taught me to focus on the spiritual aspect of God rather than the rules that accompany organized religion. I remain that type of spiritual person.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): How did you decide on Lou Gramm, Paul Rodgers, and Sam Moore for additional vocals on the record?

Nils Lofgren: They are all great heroes of mine. Way back in the mid 80s, Lou Gramm called me and asked if I would play on his solo record. I was already a fan. We established a friendship that we maintain to this day. I was very blessed and grateful that when I approached Lou, he was willing to help and sang so well on such a radical topic.

Paul Rodgers is a longtime friend. He was very gracious to sing a funky blues tune with me. Sam Moore is a local resident here in the Phoenix area and we've done charity events together. In fact, Bruce and the E Street Band backed up Sam at the 25th Anniversary Rock & Roll Hall of Fame show that was filmed a couple of years ago.

We have been the house band for many singers like Darlene Love, John Fogerty, and Sam Moore. It was great to have an old veteran and iconic soul singer to come in on "Ain't Too Many of Us Left." That was beautiful because I got to stand in the room and look Sam in the eyes and sing with him live, which was also a little intimidating for me. But, he has always been very friendly and encouraging. His manager and wife, Joyce, are good friends. We had a very creative but casual atmosphere in the studio here in Phoenix.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): You mentioned hip replacements.

Nils Lofgren: Yeah, I had them both done at the same time and that was a big deal for me.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): Stage acrobatics led to the surgery?

Nils Lofgren: I had a trampoline on stage where I would do a backflip off of it. It gave me lots of height and made for a very violent impact. I jumped off drum risers for decades. But, the doctors figured it had as much to do with my sporting career as an amateur basketball player as the stage acrobatics. I'm only 5'3," but I would seek out games several times a week. Usually I played on city courts with terrible surfaces. So, between the abuse of playing basketball all the time and the stage antics, I destroyed both hips.



Nils Lofgren (L) & Bruce Springsteen (R) (Photo by Guy Aceto)

There was no cartilage left in either one the last five years and eventually I had to have them both replaced. Thank God I had a magnificent surgeon, Dr. Paul Pellicci out of New York City. He was adept at doing both hips at the same time. My wife moved in with me at the hospital, and we got it done, and (knock on wood) three years later I'm doing great.

I'm in no pain, I'm jumping around, and it has just been a real blessing. But, it was a real scary surgery for me because I don't like doctors or hospitals and it's a violent surgery. It has a high success rate if you do what you're told, so I was appropriately scared. But, so far so good.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): How did your association with Bruce Springsteen begin?

Nils Lofgren: We go way back. I grew up in the Northeast and was out of D.C. with my band Grin. Bruce was out of Jersey originally with other bands. Steel Mill was one of his early bands. Grin and Steel Mill both auditioned way back in 1970 for Bill Graham at the Fillmore West. I followed Bruce's career for years. I'd buy tickets and go see him play with the E Street Band in the 70s and 80s, go back and say hello as a fan, and then developed a friendship with him. I've always admired Bruce, but it's quite a long history. Before I even joined the band, he'd come out and just sit in with my band.

When I actually joined the E Street Band in May 1984, it was a different thing to go out and be integrated in that great band. The Born in the USA tour was a great honor and challenge musically for

me because I was the first new band member in a long time. Of course, Patti joined also. She eventually married Bruce and they're still together, doing great, with three kids. Initially, though, it was just a huge honor to help them get prepared for the Born in the USA tour. It exploded into a great journey for me.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): You have said that Bruce has a “no drinking before midnight” policy at his live shows.

Nils Lofgren: Well, not really. Basically, it's common sense. It's like, “Look, Miller time is after we walk off stage.” If it's 11:30 or if it's one in the morning, once you walk off stage, that's Miller time ... not before the show. That's kind of common sense when you're working that hard and doing the shows and challenging yourself on the spot to do songs you haven't played in 15 years. It's a very challenging, rewarding band to be in, but nobody's phoning it in. You have to stay sharp and you're challenged every night. It's really a healthy environment.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): Neil Young was also an idol of yours.

Nils Lofgren: When I was 17, I hit the road professionally with my band Grin. We were going to LA, but I knew nothing about the business, so I'd try to sneak backstage and ask questions of my musical heroes ... and through Buffalo Springfield, Neil was one of those. I went to see his first tour with Crazy Horse. When I got into the dressing room to ask him questions, he was kind enough to let me sing for him. I wound up spending two days with him while he played four shows. He even called me from the road.

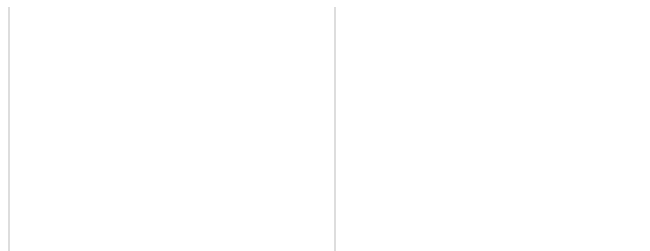
True to his word, Neil said, “Look me up when you get to LA.” He was always very supportive and turned us on to his producer, David Briggs. David moved us into his home and took us under his wing. As Grin made their way through ups and downs, I saw Neil regularly because David was Neil's best friend. I was blessed with the opportunity a year later at 18 years of age to be invited to do the After the Gold Rush project. For an 18-year-old kid, this was an enormous adventure and experience. I was very grateful to have such mentors as Neil Young and David Briggs at such an early age.

Melissa Parker (*Smashing Interviews Magazine*): Have you now gotten to play with all your heroes?

Nils Lofgren: I'd love to just sit around some afternoon and play funk guitar with Prince for a few hours. During the Amnesty tour in 1988, I got to play a little bit with Sting and Peter Gabriel, two of my heroes. I'm certainly open to playing with anybody and everybody. Of course, many of the greats are not with us anymore. I don't want to rush it, but maybe if I'm lucky, I'll get to jam with them once I get to heaven. Not to be arrogant, but I hope that's where I'm headed. We'll see.

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