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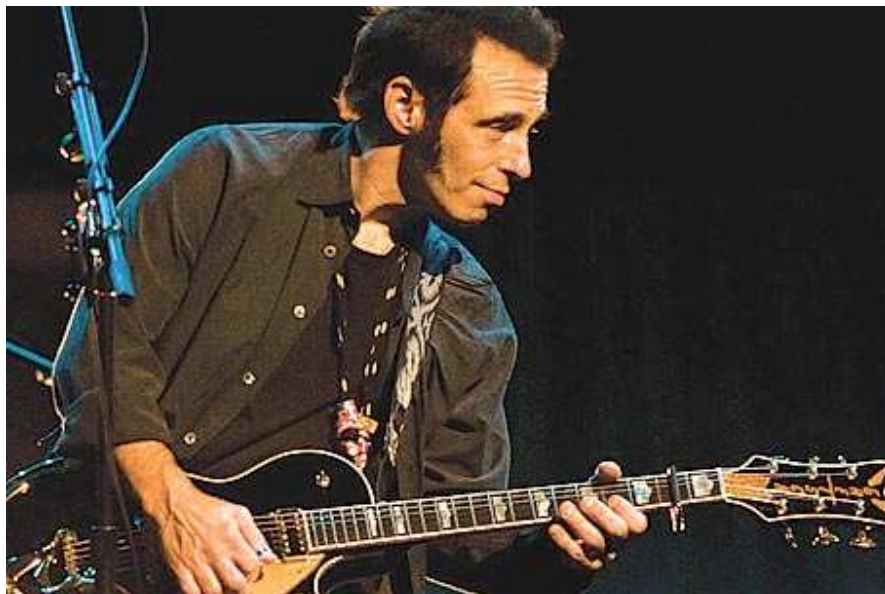
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## Nils Lofgren Talks Life Without Clarence Clemons and the Future of E Street

- Posted on Dec 6th 2011 4:20PM by [Dave Steinfeld](#)
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Joseph

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*[Nils Lofgren](#) has worn many hats during his 40-plus years in the music business. When he was only in his late teens and virtually unknown, he played on [Neil Young](#)'s classic album 'After the Gold Rush.'* He led his own band, *Grin*, which made four albums during the first half of the '70s. He joined the E Street Band in 1984 and has played with [Bruce Springsteen](#) on and off since that time. And throughout all of this, he's had a career as a

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*Lofgren returns to that part of his career on Dec. 6 with 'Old School,' his first album of original material in five years. True to form, the record has a nostalgic vibe to it. On the scorching title track, Lofgren is joined by former [Foreigner](#) lead singer Lou Gramm, while 'Ain't Too Many of Us Left' finds him singing with the legendary [Sam Moore](#). '60 Is the New 18' is jazzy, upbeat and quite appropriate, as Lofgren recently hit the big 6-0. Ballads like 'When You Were Mine' and 'Irish Angel' round out a musically diverse but thematically consistent effort.*

*Nils recently chatted with Spinner from his home in Arizona, where he lives with his wife, Amy, and their six dogs, about 'Old School,' working with Young and the death of [Clarence Clemons](#).*

### **The new album is called 'Old School.' What inspired the title track and what it was like singing with Lou Gramm?**

Lou and I got to be friends back in the mid-'80s. I played on his first two solo records. He's just a soulful singer and a really wonderful friend. I'm honored that he was willing to step up and sing.

The song is a very nasty bottleneck blues. I'm sure my wife, Amy, and I are two of millions and millions of people that watch TV and wind up cursing at the ineptness of all our lawmakers to not keep dangerous, evil predators locked up. The song is born of that. I poke fun at the youth a little bit in the first verse, just to ease us into a much darker topic. At a certain point, if you do grave harm, you really shouldn't have a second chance to do it again. Period. And we're not accomplishing that as a society, and that kind of rage is what inspired the lyric.

### **Listen to Nils Lofgren's 'Old School'**

### **One of the other tunes on the album that has a nostalgic vibe is 'Ain't Too Many of Us Left.' What was it like singing with Sam Moore?**

It's kind of two vignettes. There was a great book written awhile ago, a Civil War story that they made into a movie, about this guy who was damaged by [the] war. But he was slowly stumbling through the wreckage,

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Then I kind of went to the second one, which was talking about my peers now that I keep burying. I was in the hospital after double hip surgery, doped up because I was in a lot of pain. My wife got a call, said it was Neil Young, put the phone in my hand and my old buddy Neil was there to see how I was doing. It meant a lot to me, but it was very intense. I remember near the end of the call, he said, "Yeah man, you gotta get well. There ain't too many of us left." Even in my haze, I kind of filed it away as a great theme for a song. And in keeping with the 'Old School' title, that was a requirement, to get it written and recorded.

And what a gift to have an iconic singer like Sam Moore [on it]. There's nobody like Sam Moore. He happens to be a friend who lives here in town. So I asked him and his wife, Joyce, to consider it, sent him the track, they were open to helping, and the next thing I know, I'm standing across from Sam in a local studio.

### **So, you had double hip replacement a couple of years back?**

Yeah, three years ago. I had them both at the same time. Not a lot of surgeons will do both at once. And both my hips had been bone on bone; no cartilage in either hip for years, so I was a good candidate. From 40 years of playing street basketball as a hobby and jumping off trampolines and drum risers as a performer, I completely destroyed both hips. I got my heart cleared and got 'em both done at the same time. It was a huge deal! I don't like hospitals and needles and doctors and all that stuff.

### **Wow. Are you feeling pretty good now?**

I'm beyond pretty good! I'm great. Did the whole 'Working on a Dream' tour [with Springsteen], standing next to Clarence with these hips and jumping around, having a ball. I'm in zero pain. I mean, obviously, I have to pay attention. The new hips don't like impact. So the surgeon promised me that if I don't knock off the street basketball, and if I don't put the trampoline in the closet, I'll probably be a cripple again soon -- which is not the goal of going through major surgery! So I'm being smart.

### **What has your time in E Street been like, and how do you think the future will be with Clarence gone?**

Well, I'm a band person. That's where I thrive. And the E Street Band is a joy. I mean, we never follow a set list. Bruce is always calling audibles. [It's] a big band so I don't have to play as much a lot of the time. I don't think there's ever been a better band. And there's certainly never been a better band leader [and] performer who happens to have 400 great songs than Bruce Springsteen. So it's just been a blessing for the last 27 years to be in that band.

I'm taking the luxury as a band member of what to do about the loss of my dear friend Clarence Clemons. I mean, there's no Clarence Two. And we were such powerful friends offstage. We spoke every week. So I'm letting that be kind of an impossible topic for me. It's not my decision, and it's a very painful, complex one. Whatever Bruce decides, I'm behind 100 percent. I'm in enough pain losing Clarence without trying to figure out something it's not my place to figure out anyway.

### **You wrote a letter a couple of years ago [to ESPN about Michael Vick](#). What prompted that?**

You know, I'm a giant football fan, and I'm also one of those football fans that watches the pregame stuff and the behind the scenes -- I like the windup stuff, and I admire a lot of these guys. Initially, of course, as a human being and a dog lover, I think all dog fighting is animal torture. If it was up to me, I would prefer the NFL not allow people who did that back in the league. It doesn't matter what their name is.

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But what happened is I went on this tear [for] two or three weeks of turning on the windup to football games every Sunday, and I listened to hours and hours of these sports reporters singing Michael Vick's praises on the field, which I understood is part of their job. What I was so upset about is [that] after 10 hours of just going on and on about how great this man is, there was not one minute of what I would consider appropriate reporting about, "Okay, here's what happened to the dogs." I'm not begrudging Michael Vick [for] taking advantage of an opportunity he was given. My initial problem was with the reporting. It's like the dogs are anonymous. Where's Mike Ditka with his dogs? Where [are] the great players and coaches with their dogs, talking to the kids, saying, "You don't have to do this?" Where is that two minutes every 10 hours? There was not two seconds of it. And I was so angry.

I wrote [this letter and] sent it to the reporters; it wasn't meant for the public. They asked me to work with their editor and let it be published -- which I did -- and then all hell broke loose. People were calling me racist, telling me I was an evil, disgusting musician with no talent who had no forgiveness. And I was like, "Did you read what I wrote?" It reminded me of the scary times we're in now, where people just get on a bandwagon and they don't do any research. Kind of like when Bruce got polarized with the police community when he wrote '41 Shots.' He says in the song to respect policemen! He was writing about an awful situation from both sides of the fence -- as I thought I was.

I have no regrets that I did it, and I stand by what I wrote. But it was a hell of a chapter in my life and a real eye-opener to the polarization behind all this.

**You were in your late teens when you played on 'After the Gold Rush,' still a landmark album 40 years later. Did you ever think at the time, "I'm 17, what the hell am I doing here?"**

Well, I met Neil when I was 17. I'd just hit the road with my band Grin, and we were on our way to L.A. Long story short, he was very kind and helpful while he played four shows at the Cellar Door in Washington, DC., and said, "Look me up in L.A.," which I did. A year later, [he] asked me to do 'After the Gold Rush' as a guitarist, singer and piano player. I didn't even play piano, and I told him as much, but as [producer] David [Briggs] pointed out, I'd been a classical accordionist since the age of 5. And they said, "Well, we just need some simple parts, you'll figure it out." It's fascinating to me in hindsight that they had more faith in me [than I did]. I certainly would not have called myself a professional piano player, and that was the first professional session work I ever did.

At the time, you know, I was so wrapped up in trying to carry my weight that I just thought, "Wow, this is a fresh sound, very sparse." You've got this busy kind of James Jamerson, deep-pocket bass lines by Greg Reeves. Neil's beautiful stuff up top. And then in the middle, you've got very simple drums and piano by me and Ralphie [Molina]. And it just had a great vibe to it. I certainly didn't project what it would be 40 years later, but at the time, I thought we were doing something really fresh and emotional.

**Watch Nils Lofgren's Video for 'Across the Tracks'**

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