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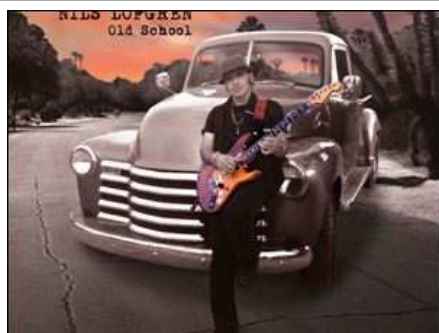
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Nils Lofgren gets chance to let loose on 'Old School'

OLD SCHOOLHOLLER AND STOMP TAKE CARE

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Nils Lofgren 'Old School' (Vision Music)

One of the most perplexing mysteries of Bruce Springsteen's post-"Born in the U.S.A." career is the almost criminal degree to which he generally under-utilizes Nils Lofgren.

Lofgren's one of the best rhythm guitarists and lead players of the generation of guitarists that came after Jimi Hendrix, a remarkably deft and tasteful player who can release flurries of notes on one song and play impeccable finger-picked acoustic guitar on the next one. But somehow he gets lost in Springsteen's E Street Band arrangements, which always raises the question: If you can't hear Nils Lofgren, why do you have him in your

band?

Whatever the answer, thankfully Lofgren has his long-running solo career to present his own music. "Old School" is a rumination on getting older, staying in love, and coming to terms with the past, but it's never a bummer and Lofgren keeps everything from becoming maudlin.

The rockers are a bit too busy in their arrangements (perhaps he's spent too much time with Springsteen) with horn sections, back-up singers, his own lead work, and frenetic rhythms robbing the title cut and "60 is the New 18" of a bit of their urgency.

But on the ballads, Lofgren shines brightly, especially on "Miss You Ray" and "Love Stumbles On." On the string-heavy "Dream Big," he is meditative and almost hypnotic, and "Just Because You Love Me" sounds like a John Hiatt outtake thanks to its rootsy power pop arrangement.

"Old School" is the sound of a veteran musician working in a disc before his gig with the Boss cranks back up and as a result is slightly uneven, but always interesting. And when it hits its mark on emotionally complex songs like "Let Her Get Away" and "Why Me," "Old School" is brilliant.

-- ROD LOCKWOOD



The Cash Box Kings 'Holler and Stomp' (Blind Pig)

Traditional blues and rural country twang intersect on this album, the third by an up-and-coming group that gets its inspiration from post-war Chicago-style blues of the 1940s and 1950s.

Covers include songs by Ray Sharpe and Hank Williams,

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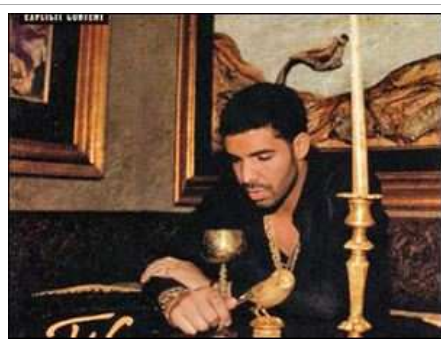
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Sr., but the influences of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Little Walter remain strong on this 16-song set. The Cash Box Kings, fronted on vocals by Joe Nosek and Oscar Wilson, play with more maturity than would be expected during their 10 years as a group.



The band won a 2010 award from Blues Blast magazine for its potential as a rising star. When it's not headlining Chicago clubs, it is on the road in Europe and elsewhere. A fair amount of original material to go with the covers, all in fun throwback era mode.

-- TOM HENRY



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DRAKE 'Take Care' (Cash Money/Young Money/Universal Republic)

For all his success, Drake -- Degrassi grad, platinum-selling Canadian MC -- doesn't seem too happy on "Take Care," his star-studded second album. The Weeknd's weird production frippery, the love of good lady collaborators Nicki Minaj and Rihanna, Stevie Wonder's harmonica: Nothing cheers him. Then again, sad-sack stature might be the baritone rhymer/crooner's master plan. "What have I learned since getting richer?/ I learned working with the negatives could make for better pictures," he raps on "HYFR."

Frank Sinatra couldn't have said it better in his "Only the Lonely" era. Forget about ac-cent-u-a-ting the positive. Raise a glass to the bad and the broken.

Sonically, it's slow and low, that is the tempo. Yet "Take Care" is opulent, expensively wrapped, and delicately cushioned with beats as fluid as pudding. Though grand pianos trill and gurgling synths swell through "Over My Dead Body," Drake can't even enjoy his night out on the hot town. "I was drinking at the Palm last night / And ended up losing everything I came with," he sing-speaks.

The elongated "Marvin's Room," taped in the place Mr. Gaye recorded his divorce classic "Here, My Dear," lets Drake expound woozily about the lack of real love during powerful sex on a lost weekend. Pity parties never sounded as dynamic as this.

-- A.D AMOROSI, *Philadelphia Inquirer*



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