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Nils Lofgren - Uber Rock Interview Exclusive

Written by Mark Taylor
Sunday, 12 August 2012 04:35

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Having played guitar with the likes of The E Street Band, Lou Reed and Neil Young's Crazy Horse during a career spanning over forty years, it's not everyday you get the chance to chat with someone like Nils Lofgren. However with his last studio album 'Old School' finally getting a UK release on vinyl and his day job playing with Bruce Springsteen getting him back into close enough proximity for us to actually make a call without breaking the Bank of Uber Rock, it seemed about as good a time as any for an interview to take place.

So whilst the sun finally shone down on London town I got on the blower to a an overcast Norwegian city to find out just exactly what it is that keeps Nils Lofgren interested in music now he has turned sixty and can't use his trampolines anymore.



Hi Nils, thanks for taking the time to speak with Uber Rock today especially as you're out on tour right now with The E Street Band. So how are things?

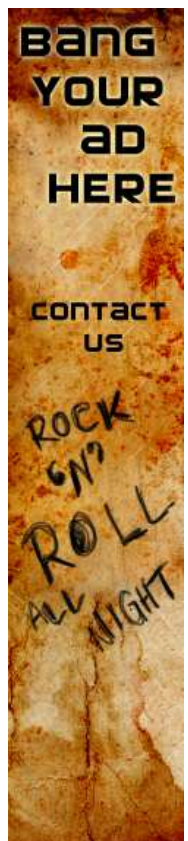
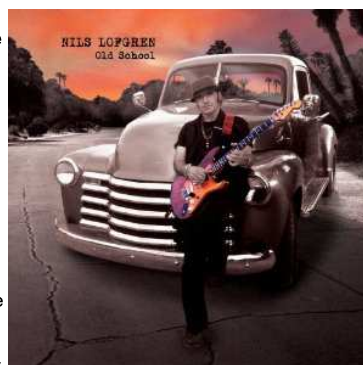
Hey Mark, I'm doing great thank you, we're in Norway right now in the lovely city of Bergen, we had some rain last night at the show but the show was great.

So let's talk about your latest solo album to kick things off, 'Old School'.

Yeah 'Old School', for this record I pretty much had the advantage of coming straight off the 'Working On A Dream Tour', and I felt sharp musically and it had been two years since my previous record so I was excited about the batch of songs that started to come together. I wrote it at home, recorded it at home and really took my time enjoying the process. Even when I had the songs written I practised them for weeks just so I could sing them live in the studio, just so we could capture things more in a live environment, which I'm better at than overdubbing, and it was really just a reflection of me trying to be authentic coming up to my sixtieth birthday, especially as 2012 is my forty fourth year on the road, and 'Old School' is really about all the good and bad that comes about for a while.

Is this record one where you've tried to get a few things off your chest? You do seem to be having a rant or two on the album if you don't mind me saying.

Well as I said there's a lot of good and bad that comes about from being around for a while and 'Miss You Ray' is about loss and I use Ray Charles, one of my musical heroes as a musical metaphor, because as you get older you say goodbye to family and friends, the grief gets greater so you need to focus on what's left. I actually wrote that song a few months before we lost Clarence (Clemons - saxophone player in The E Street Band) and then I started singing "miss you C" in my shows. I've actually just had my sixty first birthday, but on my sixtieth birthday my wife and I were in Florida and unfortunately had to go to Clarence's funeral to say goodbye, but as I said you have to focus on what is left after



The Gaslight Anthem -
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Records)

The Rockford Mules - 'Ma They
Broke Me' (Mizkid Records)

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go to Clarence's funeral to say goodbye, but as I said you have to focus on what is left after the grief.

On that note how has life changed for you entering your sixties?

I think it's just a natural progression really, again having been on the road for forty four years I've developed a new level of home sickness, which my wife describes as having a "champagne problem" to have a home you love and miss, which is true I guess. On the other hand I found a new gratitude and excitement about the live show, I've found a new level of enjoyment, a deeper focus and I feel I've trained all my life for this. Not just playing on stage but the foot pedals, the amps, and the travel, everything that goes with leaving home to play for people. My favourite thing to be doing is playing live; making records takes a patience I just don't have (laughing).

We'll talk about the live show in a minute but let's get back to 'Old School' because you have a few friends playing on this record like Lou Gramm, Paul Rodgers and Sam Moore, so how did these collaborations come about?

When I was getting near done with this record I thought of what duet touches I might be able to add with my friends and as you say Lou, Paul and Sam all kindly stepped up and wanted to help me, which is kind of spectacular. But my friends have always been there when I had my double hip replacement due to too many years playing basketball, messing around on trampolines and playing live, the song 'Ain't Too Many Of Us Left' came out of a call I had with Neil Young. He gave me a pep talk following the operation, and I always remember at the end of the call Neil said "get well, do the healing and get back out there playing, because there ain't too many of us left". Which kind of stuck with me as a song idea, and to get Sam Moore to come to the studio in Phoenix and sit across from me was indeed a very great honour.

And Paul Rodgers does 'Amy Joan Blues'.

Yeah, that's kind of a bottleneck blues, I did that live in the studio and Paul added some fabulous vocals, I mean, to me I think he's the greatest rock singer in history and he's singing just great. I saw him on a night off on my own tour recently in a casino in Atlantic City which was fantastic, and I'm lucky enough to have guested on some of his festival appearances, he really is an inspiration you know, and a really lovely guy. I was just honoured that he was willing to step up and help me.

Finally you have Lou Gramm on the record, and he is someone who has had a few personal and physical problems of his own to deal with, how is he these days, is he getting on fine now?

Yeah, he's got a band together now and has started to get out there and play again, he's certainly had some rough chapters in his life, but he's on the mend, which we need him around you know, as he's one of the great singers of all time. Ah, back in the late eighties, I think it was anyway, he gave me a call and asked me to play on his first two solo records, and we established our friendship from that time really. He really is a sweet guy and a great great singer.

A track I really love on 'Old School' and I guess is something we've already touched on, but I have to tell you is '60 Is The New 18'.

Oh that is a funny and dark song. The character on that song is struggling a hell of a lot more than I am fortunately, but I just realised I'm still a kid at heart, there may be some aches and pains and some fears. Look when you're nineteen and you lose your job and you got to get another house to rent, it's different when you are sixty and you can't feed your family or you're losing your home. Fortunately I'm doing much better than that guy in the song but I just wanted to point out its not all fun and games.

And the record has just been released on vinyl, which is a format we all love here at Uber Rock. I was just wondering do you still listen to music on vinyl or are you a CD man?

Ahh, yeah I do like vinyl, and I do still have some, but I'm not too worried about having a vinyl rig you know? Immediate access is more for me these days, a few years ago now my wife insisted I try a smart phone and I've worked my way from an iPhone to an iPad, and I was just staggered by the amount of music I could get. I mean I know the quality of MP3's deteriorates, but to have all this music on your phone was really helpful, especially on the road just to do homework (laughing) making records, even putting shows together. I mean when I've been doing my own shows recently there is a lot of my old stuff that is now out of print, but it's on iTunes, so to be able to access stuff that in the past took weeks for a collector to track down and then have shipped, I guess I'm kind of like a mercenary when it comes to what's the quickest way to get something and get my work done, so I'm winding up using the phone for that. I know Neil Young's done a lot of work into the whole analogue thing that he holds a lot of faith in, but as I've said for me I need music quick and fat.



Talking of Neil Young, your first big break was the 'After The Gold Rush' album, what was that like for you as a guitarist?

There's a lot of similarities to working with Neil as there is working with Bruce, they both give you as a musician a lot of freedom to contribute, play what you feel, and they both trust your instincts as a guitarist. But it's like when I put bands together, you don't want to tell them what to play, it's great to work with musicians who will surprise you with good ideas. I guess the main thing with working with Neil was I was eighteen and an accordion player and guitarist, so when Neil asked me to play piano I told him and David Briggs the producer that I wasn't really a piano player, to which they reminded me of my accordion history, and that I could find some simple parts that would work. That was a great lesson to me, because they taught me it's more about what you are hearing than the physicality of the individual instrument. To this day I am the swingman in The E Street Band learning a little pedal steel, bottleneck whatever just to throw some extra tools in the case. And it's given me some extra scope for my own records. On 'Sacred Weapon' for example I wrote a Christmas song and that was the first time I'd ever worked using a bottleneck dobro, and that song ended up being picked up by Willie Nelson's management and he in turn loved the song so he came along and duetted with me on it. I mean it's all part of the same musical journey, and I'm really proud of what I do on my own records, I love 'Old School' I think it's as good a record as I've ever made. Plus it's also great to not be the bandleader and I'm thankful of my time with Ringo, Bruce and of course Neil Young.



Let's move onto your current role in The E Street Band, what levels of preparation do you need for such a demanding boss (excuse the pun)?

We're currently doing about three and half hours plus right now on the 'Wrecking Ball' shows, so again with my metal hips and some aches and pains you do end up having to go to the gym occasionally, but it's as much about trying to eat right and get enough rest. I'm not really regimented in this but I certainly pay attention to it as it's all part of the job you know.

So with my earlier dreadful pun in mind do you actually call Bruce "The Boss"?

Ahhh, no I don't, he's always been Bruce to me.

Okay moving swiftly on then (laughing), you played Hyde Park only just a week or so ago and there was a lot of press off the back of the incident that occurred that night with the plug being pulled on your set especially with Paul McCartney being on stage with you. What was it really like backstage afterwards; I bet there was a lot of effing and blinding going on?

Well you have to have a sense of humour about things like this too. For me personally it was very surreal, I'd played in teen bands back in the day doing Merseybeat stuff, so I've often played Beatles songs and played for too long at teen clubs where the Principal would then go and pull the plug. So for me it was hilarious to have the same thing happen but with Paul McCartney singing, I mean it would have been preferable if they had given us another ten minutes but at the same time it was such a surreal and beautiful night I have a sense of humour about it all.



I understand you got your own back in Dublin though?

Yeah Bruce did a great skit at the start of the show with a big power switch and we continued where we are so rudely interrupted (laughing), but that was a great start to the show.

Having played with both Ringo and Paul I was just wondering who else is left out there that you might like to play with in the future?

Anybody great and talented is fun to play with, but a lot of my heroes are passed away now, but a couple of my heroes I did get to play with on the Amnesty tour back in 1988 that being Sting and Peter Gabriel who are both still around doing great music. Plus I got to do some lap steel stuff on Jerry Lee Lewis's country record, which was great fun to do.

Getting back to 'Old School' once more then, after the dates with The E Street Band, do you have any plans to tour your record?

Yeah, certainly, but I'm loving this run of shows right now, so I'm in no real rush for this to end. I'll take as many shows as Bruce wants to play and then at that point I'll just go and spend some time at home, rest up and then start planning my own run of dates, most probably it will be my acoustic duo show I had going which I'm really proud of and I'll try and get back to the UK and Europe with that next year hopefully.

Before I bring things to a close Nils I was wondering what your favourite memory of Clarence Clemons is? I mean what is it about him that still makes you smile?

Everything about Clarence was fun for me; well we stood next to each other for twenty seven years for a start. We had a lot of chats off stage, he liked to talk and so did I so we would call each other weekly from our homes when not on the road. He was a great friend, and I certainly miss



him terribly, but I really feel his presence up there with us every night too, and we do a memorial to him in the show, which I just like to take in by looking at the pictures and reminiscing you know.

Nils on that note I'd just like to say it's been fantastic talking with you and I really do hope we see you back in the UK sometime soon touring 'Old School'.

Mark thank you for your time too, I would like to mention I have a beginners guitar school at my website nilslofgren.com which I'm sure you guys won't mind linking to this interview. And is you want me to teach you how to play rock guitar that the place to go as I know all the short cuts as I've been studying music since I was five. It's designed for people with not talent or rhythm who need someone to teach them how to play guitar. But as I'm still learning every day in this great adventure, remember it's not a race; I've got a great school there for beginners if anyone wants me as a guitar teacher.

Thanks also for letting people know all about 'Old School' I really appreciate it. I hope to see you guys soon.

Uber Rock would like to thank Jacob at Wienerworld and Jeff at RockStarPR for setting this interview up.

<http://www.nilslofgren.com/Home.html>

Photos by Mark Hendrickson, Jo Lopez, Guy Aceto, Joe Quever and Rainer Drechsler.

[To pick up a copy of 'Old School' on Vinyl - CLICK HERE](#)