

# NILS LOFGREN

by RM Engelman

Nils Lofgren has enjoyed what many may consider, a dream musical career. 25 years of playing with *The Boss* should automatically qualify his success. After heading up his band *Grin* in the late 60's, at age 17 he met and later teamed up to record and tour with Neil Young. He's been in the Sgt. Pepper movie, Jerry Lee Lewis's Last Man Standing DVD, received his own day in Montgomery County, Maryland, and is a two-time tour veteran of *Ringo's All-Starr Band*. In addition to doing TV/film work

(and being Paula Poundstone's musical director), Nils also recorded a novelty song "Whatever Happened To Muscatel" with friend/neighbor/author Clive Cussler. Starting out as a classical pianist and accordion player, Nils developed a desire to transfer his talents to piano and guitar. Not bad for a guy who is actually left-handed and learned guitar using a thumb pick! Talk about grueling schedules, *The Boss* (who recently turned 60), and band joined other rock luminaries to help celebrate the *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame's* 25th Anniversary with two benefit concert shows at *Madison Square Garden*. This was followed up by two shows at *MSG*, the first one covering The Wild, The Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle (the first time done live), the second show covering The River. Next it was off to Cleveland to cover Born To Run. Adventurous but fun fare, playing the catalogue, one city and one album at a time! It should be noted that during the tour (as has been his policy),



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Bruce partners with and supports the local food banks. I thought I'd mention that Nils also just came off physical therapy after having a double hip replacement!

RME: How did the show go for you last night?

NL: It was fabulous, especially doing Born To Run. Cleveland is such a great town for rock & roll! Bruce was just extra special, the way he jumped styles, doing things like going from "Ramrod" to "Stolen Car".

RME: I remember how big Bruce got in Cleveland early on with the support of *WMMS Radio*, and then the whole thing just took off. When you joined the band some 25 years ago, did you even imagine that you would still be playing with one of the hottest acts out there?

NL: At the time, I thought it might be just one tour! Actually, I joined the band the same month as Patti (Bruce's wife). Born To Run was just iconic. After 41 years on the road, it's an incredible gift to be with this band and on an incredible tour. This is the best shape the group has ever been in.

RME: You play some vintage pieces like the 60's Strat live, are you a big time collector?

NL: I have a sizeable collection, but I don't consider myself a collector. I won't go out and pay an extravagant amount for a piece. That's just an extra expense. I couldn't afford a lot of the guitars back in the 60's. I do play the guitars in my collection a lot, but mostly in the studio. I take about 30 instruments on the road, as I'm sort of the "swing man". Bruce will look at me and call out impromptu what song we're doing next, indicating which instrument to switch to. On certain songs I play bottleneck and 6-string banjo. On guitar, I use the heaviest strings I can get. My guitar tech Roy Witte keeps everything organized. Live I try to play something like a Jazzmaster in addition to the Strat's that compliment Bruce's Tele's and Broadcaster, and Steve's Strat. Sometimes Bruce uses a Gretsch in the studio, and I have a few (newer) Black Falcons and Black Penguins that I use.

RME: What about pickups?

NL: My newer Fender's have the noiseless versions. Before Fender came out with the noiseless versions, I remember playing in England and I had to aim the guitar at the gaffer's tape we put on the wall where there was less noise! On one 61 Strat I have Joe Barden pickups, and on the other I have the Bill Lawrence ones.

RME: What amps are you using live?

NL: Now I'm using the 4X10 Hot Rod Deville. With Bruce I use two Twin Reverbs. I had been using blackface Super's, but when I added the POG (Poly Octave Generator), chorus, and the green Line 6 (the 3 pedal w/the fake reverse reverb), and Boss delays, the 10" speakers couldn't handle it. The Twin's adjust better and have more warmth.

RME: What is your effect set up with Bruce?

NL: Most of the effects are rack mounted and run by Roy. He does a lot from the rack-mounted units, but he's programmed three-four rack pedals that I can activate from one setting onstage on a pedal board. I use a Behringer and G-Force trigger board controllers. I like being able to kick things in onstage. We have chorus, Boss DD-3 delay, an old Boss delay that I use mainly for improv, a few Boss OC-3 octave pedals, that produce a flat low end, the POG, the green Line 6, and two Barber Burn Unit overdrives with two settings; one is overdriven for lead guitar.

RME: What was it like playing with Neil Young?

NL: Neil is just amazing. I met him when I was 17 years old, in 1968, at the Cellar Door in Washington D.C., where he was playing with Crazy Horse. We got to be friends, and he had given me his phone number. When Grin moved to L.A. I looked him up. We were the house band at the Topanga Canyon Corral and (producer) David Briggs would come in with Neil and we'd jam. When I was 18, Neil called me to sing and play guitar and piano on After The Gold Rush. That was when Danny Whitten was alive, and that was the only album he was on. I toured with Neil in 1973 and then in 1983. On my CD The Loner-Nils Sings Neil I do acoustic versions of his songs. I think that Neil and Bruce are the two greatest active songwriters there are.

RME: How did the Ringo's All Starr gigs and doing the live album go?

NL: Great. I was invited to one of Ringo's birthday parties at his house and we ended up jamming and becoming friends the Beatles were a major inspiration for me to play. That's when I first really fell in love with music. I was just a square classical accordion player until the Beatles came out, and then I was able to play a Beatle's medley on the accordion! They were a great band, and wrote the book on modern recording. Their music is still fresh today. I toured with Ringo in 1989 and 1992.

RME: You played on the live Jerry Lee Lewis Last Man Standing which was a diversion.

NL: I loved doing it. They already had three guitar players, so I played pedal steel.

RME: Who is the guitar hero you would love to be onstage with?

NL: Jeff Beck. He's the greatest. I'm his #1 fan! Jeff doesn't jam though. My solo band opened for them on the Jan Hammer tour.

RME: Who's close to Beck in your opinion?

NL: Steve Vai is amazing. I make a point of trying to see him. Hendrix is a favorite. He's was always just off on his own! Albert King always seemed to have the best sound. Roy Buchanan was

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great and I got to know him. His harmonics sounded like bells! George Harrison was brilliant. Unfortunately, he always seemed to get lumped in with *the Beatles*.

RME: You just had double hip replacement surgery, which is a rarity, no doubt the cumulative result of years of stage jumping. Eddie Van Halen had one done, and he was right back to stage jumping, which I thought was dangerous. How are you progressing?

NL: Well, I didn't have much of a choice. It wasn't that my hips were bad, they were basically dust, bone on bone! It's the result of years of flips and jumps from drum risers, and also playing basketball and doing acrobatics/gymnastics. The pain was a life sentence if I didn't get something done. It's been a bonus on tour, in that I have a little stiffness, but I'm no longer in extreme pain! I researched the surgery for three years before going forward with it. I have a fantastic doctor Paul Pellicci @ *HSS, Hospital For Special Surgery* (Orthopedic) in New York. Everything is progressing fine, and I have to limit what I do physically, like continuing playing basketball, but no more three-on-three!

RME: Reflect on your 25 years with Bruce, your silver anniversary. Did you get a gold watch?

NL: (Laughs) No. Patti (Bruce's wife) and I joined the band around the same time. We basically gave each other a celebratory acknowledgement wink and nod before going on stage. When Patti came into the band, it made it easier to work on harmonies. She joined the band to sing.

RME: How did it affect you when Miami Steve, being the other guitar player, came back?

NL: Actually, it was a relief. We got one of the major elements back in the band! I like to sing, but I don't have a rough, hard voice like him. Mine has a smooth quality, and Patti can go from rough to soft. To a real fan, it's just not the same live without Steve Van Zandt's voice. It's great to have him back on guitar too. One of my favorite things is playing acoustic rhythm guitar, which I don't get to do in my solo shows. Bruce and Steve have an amazing duet history. They just compliment each other, like Mick and Keith, who incidentally have the biggest toolbox in rock! *The E Street Band* has the chemistry and the toolbox it takes to do a roaring rock anthem with 12 people, and always be ready for *The Boss* to point to you to jump in or start a new song. It's always fresh because Bruce changes his mind song after song! It's also great that we all have side projects to do during the long touring breaks. After 41 years of being in the business, I'm both lucky and blessed to be where I am, and getting better at my job!

RME: Tell us about your online guitar lessons.

NL: Thanks for asking. I wanted to be able to reach a beginner through intermediate player, who would love to play rock guitar for fun, and who doesn't feel that he has the talent or patience to learn. These are one-hour lessons, with no time limit. When you are ready for the next lesson, you buy it. There is some one-finger fun stuff that you can play, and I back you up! A lot of people don't want to just learn chords and get frustrated trying to learn. I want them to come back and continue playing, and enjoy music! It's fun to just sit in. You have some 3-5 minute loops, and Nils is your back up band!

RME: What other new ventures, are on your plate?

NL: [The Tribute To Nils Lofgren](#) DVD that features the *Grin* reunion in 2004 at *Strathmore* is being released, with profits going to the charity *Hungry For Music* in D.C.

RME: What advice do you have for young or starting musicians?

NL: Young people tend to get frustrated. Music can be a hobby too. If it's a hobby, be patient and let it be a hobby. If you're young, be serious about your journey. Go to college and find things to keep you engaged in music. Don't sign your life away to one record company. Maintain your freedom, and build up a fan base. Learn to play in front of people. It's a dying art. You'll never be anything unless you can play in front of people. If you just play at home, it's a solitary adventure. For anyone that wants to learn, be happy. It's not a race anymore!

Note: For more info on his CD's, tour schedule etc., go to his website. To check out his touring rig, click on notes, then on rig.