

Grin And Bear It

NILS LOFGREN INTERVIEW

In *Rock Albums of the 70s*, Robert Christgau described Nils Lofgren as "always the best man, never the pop star". For a performer who's spent plenty of energy helping out the likes of Neil Young, Crazy Horse and now Bruce Springsteen on his *Born In The USA* world tour, the quote had a certain ring of truth. Especially if you consider that Lofgren has put his name to a dozen or so albums.

So what about Christgau's description, Nils?

"I don't know what to say about that, except to me the only thing I feel competent at is writing songs and singing

and performing them, especially on stage. How people view me is up to you or him and you can call it how it looks."

This phone conversation was squeezed in while Lofgren was in London to do a video for his new single 'Secrets In the Street'. He had to get a taxi across town, but still managed to stretch what was meant to be only a 10 minute chat to 25 minutes. He has the reputation of being a nice guy and I was beginning to believe it. So nice, in fact, that he's helping Springsteen out after the defection of guitarist Steve van Zandt rather than concentrating on his new album, *Flip*. Why put Bruce first?

"To me it's not a matter of first or

second. My career is music and playing with somebody like Bruce is important, it's given me a lot of confidence, so it's better for my solo career. There'll be plenty of time for my albums."

Why does someone 15 years in the business need more confidence?

"No matter what you do or how long you do it, the more confident you are the better you'll be at it. It's not something I lack, but I've never been over-confident and playing with people like Neil and now Bruce helps a lot. If I had to describe the most important thing I've gained from playing with Bruce outside the friendship with the band, it would be the confidence it's given me."

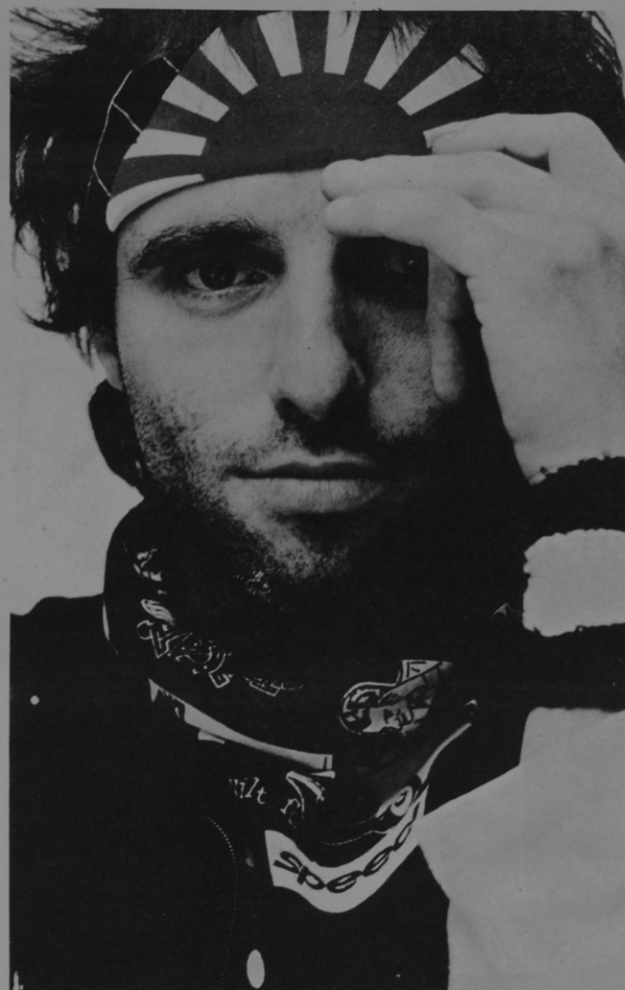
Do you feel you have much in common with Bruce?

"Very much so. We're about the same age and we grew up in the same era with the same music. The 60s were a kind of renaissance in music so we were lucky to grow up at that time and Bruce and I have a lot of similarities in the way we approach music."

Grinning But Not Winning

A major difference is that Bruce's career has taken off and Nils' hasn't even made the launching pad. It must be a bitter disappointment to have made some good and even great albums (Grin's *1 + 1* and his first solo, *Nils Lofgren*, still live in the great category and *Grin*, *All Out* and *Cry Tough* have some heartwarming moments) without receiving the due recognition?

"I don't feel bitter about it, but it's



Nils Lofgren

frustrating. I make albums for people, and for myself too of course, but the whole point is to reach as many people as you can and if you don't then it's not something you should dwell on all your life. You must keep trying to improve until that one day comes when hopefully you get a hit single or whatever it takes to get that massive airplay that all of us writers are looking for."

Lofgren entered rock 'n' roll in the early 70s with his band Grin. They released three quick albums, *Grin*, *1 + 1* and *All Out*, but they barely raised a whimper, despite strong critical support. Lofgren then toured as part of Neil Young's Crazy Horse before reforming Grin to release the turkey *Gone Crazy*. From there he began his solo career in style with *Nils Lofgren* and *Cry Tough* but the live double, *Back It Up*, and the limp *I Came To Dance* didn't do him any favours. Four albums later and he's signed to Bob England's Towerbell Records to do *Flip*, but before he can get through the studio door, Springsteen needs him for the tour."

Have you given your own ambitions a good enough chance?

"Certainly, I don't think that playing with Neil or Bruce in any way hurt my career at all and I don't think that's discouraged radio people from playing my records. To me their job is to play good music, whether it's played by the Rolling Stones or some band they've never heard of. I'd like to think that my new album, which is the best one I've done, would get the airplay a record needs."

Flip was recorded during a six week break in the Springsteen tour. Not the ideal time to record the album that's meant to lift Lofgren's failing career:

"You would think so, but I went straight into the studio and worked until it was time to get on the plane for Australia. But I did have the songs written and as it turned out the time limit was a great advantage, because when you have too much time in the studio you overthink things and try things 50 different ways and you keep putting off decisions. So having limited time was good for me as it forced me to approach things as a live singer and musician, and in the studio we went for live vocals. So if I wasn't into the song vocally I'd just move onto the next one. All of the vocals and performances were very emotional, as opposed to going in and overdubbing the voice."

Flip won't resolve Lofgren's lack of commercial success. I get the feeling that his ship has sailed; he's too old and too much part of the establishment to be the cult he was in the 70s, but he's still too much of the quaint outlaw to crack the charts. Still, 'Secrets In the Street' and one or two other songs from *Flip* have

the hooks to prove me wrong.

Improving?

In 1971 Lofgren had guested on Crazy Horse's classic first album, on Neil Young's classic *After The Goldrush* and he found the time and talent to release Grin's first album that same year. The good old days. Is the best behind him?

"Not at all, my best stuff by far is in the future. I'm getting better all the time and I think *Flip* is an example of that. There's so much I wanna learn and there's so much room for me to grow as a musician."

How do you define improvement? What makes one song better than another?

"Just the emotional content. I'm certainly proud and happy about my best songs, but there's a lot more in me that's yet to come out, but getting it out is another story. That involves getting better technically as a musician. I wanna learn how to play drums, more about singing and how to read music — a lot of things different from rock 'n' roll. Emotionally, I think I'm getting better at getting more of myself into a song."

Grin began in the days when songs took the back seat to instrumental prowess. Lofgren's belief in song has never faltered:

"My songs are more important than my guitar playing. I'd rather have two five-minute songs on an album than a ten-minute solo in one song. When you're making a record and you have a bad song and you wann bail it out then maybe it's time to play a lot of guitar. But I try to leave all my bad songs at home and not bring them into the studio."

Drifting through a lot of Lofgren's songs over the years are the impressions that he's a victim of love and an outsider:

"I don't see myself that way. When I first started I was so young (17) that most of the things I wrote were love stories, boy-girl relationships. Quite a long time ago I got into different subjects. On the new album there's only one love song but generally the songs deal with hope and turning things around for the better. That's what the title *Flip* is about, more so than the gymnastic stunt that I do."

Touches of sentimentality and melodrama have never been strangers to Lofgren's music. 'No Mercy' is the prime example:

"I tend to be overly sentimental in relationship to a lot of things. As far as 'No Mercy' is concerned, I was trying to make the point that it's a very competitive world and so you've gotta fight for what's yours, but that doesn't mean you can't have compassion for the people you're fighting against. It's one of the best songs I've written, but as I said, my best stuff has yet to come. I still feel like a beginner, that I'm just starting."

George Kay

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