

Michael Waddacor's  
 **Strange Brew**<sup>TM</sup>

Fresh insights on rock music | Edition 02 of September 28 2006

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# Long may you run!

## A tribute to Neil Young: still burnin' at 60 – part one

Forty years ago, in 1966, **Neil Young** made his recording debut as a 20-year-old member of the seminal, West Coast folk-rock band, Buffalo Springfield, with the release of this band's eponymous first album. After more than 35 solo studio albums, *The Godfather of Grunge* is still on fire, raging against the System, the neocons, war, corruption, propaganda, censorship and the demise of human decency. *Michael Waddacor* pays tribute the Canadian-born songwriter and musician for his unrelenting courage and uncompromising individualism in a world gone crazy and short of adorable eccentrics in the realms of rock music.

The latest Neil Young album, *Living with War* (Reprise Records, May 2006), may well be his best since 1994's haunting *Sleeps with Angels*. From the first listening, one has no doubts that the folk-metal protestor is still railing against the system, refusing to sell his soul. He is disconsolate over the mockery of American democracy, the neocon, militarist Bush Administration and what appears to be the dearth – if not, the decay – of good sense and human decency in the corridors of American political powerhouses.

At a time when so many of the inspired and inspiring musicians of the 1960s and 1970s have become parodies of their former selves with little or nothing of any artistic substance to contribute to rock culture, Young's heart continues to pound with passion – and this is the dominant spirit of his new album. This work is reviewed in the next edition of *Strange Brew* (edition three: Neil Young, part two). *Living with War* is an imploring, heart-felt cry for a return to human decency and freedom from the malaise of modern living: Third World exploitation, debt and misery, idiotic political and business leadership, hyper-consumerism and the lies of marketers, American imperialism and militarism, censorship and the invasion of privacy and personal rights.

### Warmth of familiarity

His detractors will deride him, proclaiming that Young is just another ageing hippie with predictable polemics, no new songs to sing and nothing significant to add to modern thinking and culture. Well, his new album may not have many groundbreaking sounds and novel ideas. Instead, however, the familiarity of the man and his music warm and reassure us in age of music-industry indifference and musical blandness and creative poverty as epitomised by the mindless

MTV pop-and-rap-muzak machine. We are given the opportunity to enjoy another hearty, foot-stomping album with lots of unbridled, sing-along melodies, simple, memorable lines and that inimitable shaky, nasal tenor voice many of us have come to love over the last four decades because it is so honest, frail and unpretentious.

Neil Young belongs to a rare cluster of rock artists that can still play honest, imploring and passionate music at the age of 60. Bob Dylan can still cut it on a good day, as does with his brand-new studio album, *Modern Times*. Mick Jagger, Keith Richards and The Stones fared reasonably well on last year's *A Bigger Bang*. Largely, though, we have long since said "goodbye" to many of his rock contemporaries who have reached the age of 60. Crosby, Still and Nash, Paul McCartney, Ray Davies, Rod Stewart and their ilk are largely poor shadows of their former glories as songwriters and genre leaders.

Perhaps Young's 1979 masterpiece, *Rust Never Sleeps*, is much more than a paean about the death of The Sex Pistols and punk. Young sang with conviction more than 25 years ago that it is "better to burn out than it is to rust" – and so his truism endures.

### **Travelling far and wide**

Neil Young has traversed musical and topical ground more interesting and daring than most rock musicians have from an external perspective. From the adorable, smiling, mop-fringed pop star of the 1960s in high-fashion gear, he metamorphosed into the enigmatic, sombre, bare-souled counterculture troubadour with scraggly, long hair and patched jeans in the 1970s. Then he (mostly) squandered (or so it seemed) his talents in most of the 1980s, producing works that were largely bland or bizarre and, in some respects, lacking creative direction or intrinsic meaning. Then he arose, reborn and revitalised, in 1988, 1989 and most of the 1990s to make some of his best music and strongest anti-Establishment gestures, such as throwing musical zap signs to the big American

corporations about the sponsorship of rock music.

Young has embraced several musical genres, from country and folk music to blues, rock, rockabilly and rock 'n roll. He has shifted from acoustic gentleness and introspection to blazing, hard-rock electric assaults and pointed diatribes about political, social and environmental issues. Young has experimented with synthesisers, vocoders, orchestras, dobros, banjos, accordions, tack pianos and choirs. His songs have celebrated and acknowledged Hank Williams, Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix and Johnny Rotten. Young has sung out against Richard Nixon and George W Bush. He has made several quirky, but forgettable movies, and he has co-organised and performed at scores of benefit concerts.

Young has recorded with Crosby, Stills and Nash, The Stray Gators, Crazy Horse, Stephen Stills, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Nils Lofgren, Linda Ronstadt, Emmylou Harris, Booker T and the MGs, and Pearl Jam. He has performed on stage with Joni Mitchell, Waylon Jennings, James Taylor, The Band, Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, Thom Yorke, Ryan Adams, Paul McCartney, Randy Bachman and many others. Most important, he has created an impressive and enduring oeuvre – a songbook only few have beaten in folk, rock and allied musical genres over the last four or five decades. For many followers of the folk-rock-based singer-songwriter genre, Neil Young is probably the most important member of this movement after Bob Dylan in terms of overall songwriting abilities, messages, collaborations, influences and endurance.

### **Staying true**

In the Noughties, Neil Young is fusing the best of his more illustrious past – and still raging against the machine with unflagging vehemence. Best of all, he remains true to himself – and sounds as strong, witty and offbeat as ever with no signs of taking the back seat.

With the passing of time, old-fashioned eccentricity, fierce individualism, erratic creativity and an unpredictable defiance of trends and expectations have become the hallmarks of Neil Young and his music – not to forget his adroitness at writing a simple, strong melody and a mesmerisingly frazzled guitar riff – along with some thought-provoking lines of street poetry.

When Buffalo Springfield had become one of the stellar American West Coast bands of the late 1960s, he quit to go solo. Then, when his early solo career aroused the interest of fans and critics, alike, he joined the early Crosby, Still and Nash (CS&N) to create Crosby, Still, Nash and Young (CSN&Y). After CSN&Y, he was glorified as a hippie icon and a folky counterculture poet and revolutionary. So, in defiance, he amplified the volume and distorted his fuzz box more than ever – and played with increasing zest, abandon and distortion, drawing as much inspiration from the Beat Generation as the Punk Generation. After a series of hard-rocking albums, he would delve back into his American folk and country music roots and play his part in spawning both the alt country and grunge movements of the 1990s.

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## EARLY LIFE

### Rocking in Canada

Neil Percival Young was born in Toronto, Ontario, in Canada on November 12 1945, the son of Edna “Rassy” Young (nee Ragland), a former television quiz-show panellist, and Scott Young, a well-known sports writer. He spent much of his earlier years in Omemee, a small, country town in Ohio, to which he would later allude on his CSN&Y song from 1970, *Helpless*.

At the age of six, Young was struck with polio, which weakened his left side and since has left him with a slight limp when we walks. He then moved to Florida in the USA with his mother for a year to recuperate before returning home to Ontario.

At the age of 12 or 13 (circa 1958/1959), Young moved westwards to Winnipeg, Manitoba, with his mother after she divorced his father. Here, he attended Kelvin High School. This smaller Canadian city would have a profound influence on him and became the topic, or background, of many of his later nostalgic songs, despite becoming a permanent American resident after 1966. He grew up in River Heights area of Winnipeg, where we met Randy Bachman, a person who introduced him to American blues. Bachman would later become the guitarist and one of the main songwriters of The Guess Who, Brave Belt and Bachman Turner Overdrive.

### Overcoming setbacks

Young was fragile as a child, not only from contracting polio, but also because he had back problems that necessitated him wearing a back brace. Since his tenure with Buffalo Springfield, he also has been known to suffer from epilepsy (some say due to a harsh bash on his head by a police officer following his participation in a 1967 Los Angeles riot that left him minus a tooth). Nevertheless, such physical and related personal maladies would not deter his steely will to succeed in life and music, as he later proved when writing and recording the *Harvest*, *Re-actor* and *Prairie Wind* albums, for example.

Like many teenagers growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Young was hooked on rock ‘n roll, rockabilly and some blues, and taught himself to play guitar at the age of 14. His father gave him his first instrument, a banjo, as a Christmas present in 1958 shortly after his thirteenth birthday. He formed and played in a few rock cover bands in his high-school years and shortly afterwards, among them The Classics, The Jades, and Neil Young and The Squires. He later ventured off to play music solo on the Toronto folk circuit in the mid-1960s after

dropping out of high school at the age of 16. Although intelligent and gifted, Young was not considered an assiduous student during his high-school years.

During his “good, ol’ folkie days” in Toronto he befriended several musicians, including compatriot Joni Mitchell and the travelling American singer and guitarist, Stephen Stills. By now, he had begun in earnest his career as a songwriter of note with his early compositions including *Sugar Mountain*, which he later recorded with Buffalo Springfield. In 1965, he joined the future Motown funkster, the late Rick James, and Canadian bassist, Bruce Palmer, to form The Mynah Birds. This band recorded an album in Detroit in the USA that was not released. Before long, James was arrested as a deserter from the US Army and Young and Palmer headed south to Los Angeles (LA), California, in Young’s black hearse, a 1953 Pontiac nicknamed Mort, in search of their rock ‘n roll dreams. Shortly after their arrival in LA in February 1966, they rekindled their friendship with Stephen Stills. Within weeks, Buffalo Springfield was born and signed to Atco Records, a division of Atlantic Records.

### **Tempestuous Springfield**

After two largely tempestuous years and three mostly good albums (*Buffalo Springfield*, 1966; *Buffalo Springfield Again*, 1967; and the posthumously released *Last Time Around*, 1968), Buffalo Springfield disintegrated in May 1968 and Young opted for a solo career. To their benefit, he and his Springfield band mates left their mark as one of the West Coast’s seminal folk-rock bands (along with The Byrds). In his early 20s, Young had already established himself as a distinctive and inventive songwriter with such Buffalo Springfield classics as *Broken Arrow*, *Mr Soul*, *I Am a Child*, *Down to the Wire*, *Burned*, *Expecting to Fly*, *Out of My Mind* and *Nowadays Clancy Can’t Even Sing*.

Neil Young signed Joni Mitchell’s manager, Elliot Roberts, as his manager, secured a record deal with Reprise Records and retreated to Topanga Canyon (the canyon referred to by

Spirit in their song, *Topanga Windows*, from their eponymous album of 1968) near LA. Here, he wrote songs and escaped the limelight of pop-stardom. He took advantage of a US\$17,000 recording advance from Reprise Records and bought a home in the famed canyon. In December 1968, he married his first wife, a local hip-café owner, Susan Acevedo. It was in Topanga Canyon, too, that Young nurtured his long-standing friendship with David Briggs. He would become Young’s principal album co-producer and musical sounding board until his death in 1995. True to Young’s tenacity and loyalty, Elliot Roberts remains his manager 38 years later and Reprise his recording label, although he had a brief and controversial tenure with Geffen Records in the 1980s.

Neil Young’s sweetly gentle, eponymous debut album, rooted strongly in folk music, made little impact after its release in January 1969. His songwriting was weak by his Buffalo Springfield standards, the arrangements tended to be too finicky and his dominant mood seemed too subdued. But *Neil Young* did feature a few promising songs, notably *Loner*, *Old Laughing Lady* and *Here We Are in the Years*. It would also be his first collaboration with Jack Nitzsche, who helped Young to weave an elaborately well-crafted sound featuring of multitracked guitar work. Guest musicians and advisors at hand included Ry Cooder and both Jim Messina (former Buffalo Springfield recording engineer) and George Grantham from the newly formed West Coast folk-rock band, Poco.

### **TURNING POINT Breakthrough album**

Young’s music and luck would change when he met a loud, up-and-coming LA rock band, The Rockets, and invited them to jam on songs destined for his next album. The Rockets – Danny Whitten (guitar), Ralph Molina (bass) and Billy Talbot (drums) – would become Crazy Horse and feature on his startling, breakthrough second album, *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere* (produced by Young and David Briggs). Released to critical acclaim in May 1969, the album featured the first of his truly

landmark solo-era songs, *Down by the River*, *Cinnamon Girl* and *Cowgirl in the Sand*.

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In hindsight, one cannot help wishing this had been his debut album, with its gloriously rough-edged, fluid and well-written songs. Crazy Horse proved their worth on this album as ideal musicians who could empathise with Young and collaborate on a more spontaneous, intuitive level. Unsurprisingly, Crazy Horse would become his dominant backing band for the next three decades. It has often been emphasised by rock writers throughout Young's career that he could have used musicians with far greater technical skill. I agree, but who would have wanted to sacrifice that majestic rawness – the crude, staccato guitar riffs that are refrained mesmerisingly over that hypnotic, no-frills groove Billy Talbot and Ralph Molina sustain as the rhythm section?

*Everybody Knows This is Nowhere* is a strong, cohesive and compelling work. The album has only seven songs, but they create the illusion of being far greater in number – and leave the listener fulfilled. With little doubt, this remains a top five Young album. Recorded in two weeks, its songs are kept simple, but they are assured and the melodies are pronounced. In the quieter material, as on *Round and Round (It Won't Be Long)*, Young fuses folk, country and rock and articulates his lyrics. Another chill-out classic is the solemn, dirge-like *Running Dry (Requiem for the Rockets)* with its beautifully tender, but forlorn violin playing by Bobby Notkoff – one of the finest guest solo performances in his entire oeuvre. *Running Dry* was one of those key early songs that would hint of his potential as an artist with diverse interests, ideas, voices and musical styles.

The classic opening song, *Cinnamon Girl*, is the type of song you yearned to hear on the radio

back in 1969. It has adorably unusual changes to the structure and arrangement, including tempo changes. But, it is the longer, more fiery rock songs with their epic guitar adventures that allure us, as on *Down by the River* and *Cowgirl in the Sand*. Looking back, these epic guitar pieces were dazzling in 1969 – and these powerful songs remain among the best he has written.

### Birth of supergroup

In an ironic move, given the second album's superlative media attention and record sales, Young jumped ships again, made peace with an irascible Stephen Stills and joined CS&N in mid-1969. CSN&Y became the new darlings of the heady Woodstock-Altamont counterculture days of 1969 with their scraggly hair, angelic harmonies, marvellous songwriting skills and humorous onstage banter. In 1970, CSN&Y released a fine, but flawed studio album, *Déjà Vu*, featuring Young's heart-stirring *Helpless* and the touchingly anthemic *Country Girl*. Listening to *Déjà Vu* 36 years later, there is little doubting that Young is the dominant talent: the strongest songwriter, the most compelling (even if flawed) voice and the most distinctive vision.

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It became one of the top-selling American rock albums (at least seven-million copies in the USA alone) of 1970 – the year that also saw the release of many popular landmark albums. These works included The Beatles' *Let It Be*, The Who's *Live at Leeds*, Led Zeppelin's *III*, Jethro Tull's *Benefit*, Black Sabbath's *Paranoid*, Deep Purple's *In Rock*, Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge over Troubled Waters*, Van Morrison's *Moondance*, Santana's *Abraxas*, John Lennon's *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, Free's *Fire and Water*, The Doors' *Morison Hotel* and Grateful Dead's *Workingman's Dead*.

In July 1970, after an exhausting CSN&Y tour to promote *Déjà Vu*, Young and his first wife, Susan, separated. He bought the sprawling Broken Arrow ranch in rolling, redwood territory in the Woodside area of northern California, south of San Francisco halfway towards Santa Cruz, near the Pacific coastline. Young settled there in September 1970 and it since has remained his main home. While recuperating from a back injury during his first few weeks at Broken Arrow, “he fell in love with the actress” watching the film, *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (as he would later reveal in the *Harvest* song, *A Man Needs a Maid*). On hearing that the actress, Carrie Snodgrass, was starring in a play in LA, he asked his roadies to send her note, saying “Call Neil Young”. Before the end of 1970, Carrie Snodgrass was living with Young at Broken Arrow, but – in Young’s own words in a letter to his father, Scott Young – this relationship did not last much longer than Buffalo Springfield.

### Another masterpiece

During most of 1970 and 1971, Young divided his time between CSN&Y and his collaboration with Crazy Horse, the latter of which led to a mellower, but equally brilliant third album, *After the Gold Rush*, produced by Young, David Briggs and Kendall Pacios. Reprise Records released this album in September 1970 and it reached the top 10 of both the American (US) and British (UK) charts. Young largely abandoned the proto-grunge sound that shaped *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere* and, instead, opted for a more restrained, country-tinged sound, with a greater predominance of piano and other instruments.

*After the Gold Rush* is best remembered for the scathing and scorching urgency of its rock classic, *Southern Man*. This heartfelt cry for social justice, with its sharp stab at Southern bigotry, would become one of the enduring favourites on CSN&Y set lists. The album also featured the touching and wistful ballad, *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, and the exuberantly happy *When You Dance, You Can Really Love*. The album also featured a forlorn rendition of

the 1958 country hit by Don Gibson, *Oh Lonesome Me*.

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*After the Gold Rush* remains another idiosyncratic Young masterpiece – a work of remarkable cohesion, sonic adventure and skilful songwriting made more compelling by the fragility of his voice. It is one of his most enduringly excellent works – perhaps his crowning glory – partly because it is eclectic and explorative in content and spirit, and partly because the songwriting is consistently unique and excellent. Originally intended to be a soundtrack for a film based on a script of the same name written by Dean Stockwell, Young followed his own muse and recorded most of this album in his newly built home studio in Topanga Canyon with guest artists including a then 18-year-old Nils Lofgren on piano and accordion.

The start of the 1970s was a fertile period when many promising songwriters had entered the music scene in the wake of Bob Dylan’s highly masterful and prolific mid-1960s creative period that commenced with 1964’s *Another Side of Bob Dylan* and ended with 1968’s *John Wesley Harding*. While many of these talented singer-songwriters would lose their sheen and influence – as well as their lives in some cases, among them Tim Hardin, Phil Ochs, Tim Buckley and Nick Drake – Young would prove to be an enduring, albeit erratic talent. Young had defined his musical style and established the foundations of his talents with *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere* and *After the Gold Rush*. From here, he would build musical critical mass and become one of the most celebrated and seminal rock and folk-rock artists of the 1970s and beyond. More recently, Nirvana, Pearl Jam,

Sonic Youth, Teenage Fan Club, Oasis and Powderfinger are just a few of the more contemporary rock bands that have cited Young as a major influence or inspiration.

The massacre of four students by state troopers at Kent State University in Ohio during an anti-Vietnam War protest on May 4 1970 inspired Young to write one of his most memorable political songs, *Ohio*. This song was recorded with CSN&Y at the Record Plant on May 21 with Calvin Samuels on bass and Johnny Barbata on drums and released as an Atlantic Records single on June 4 1970. Today, *Ohio* appears on five compact-disc compilations: Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's *So Far* (1974); Crosby, Stills and Nash's two-disc *CSN* anthology and four-disc *CSN* box set (1991); and on Neil Young's *Decade* (1977) and *Greatest Hits* (2003). According to David Crosby, in notes to the aforementioned *CSN* box-set booklet, Neil Young wrote the song in 20 minutes after he had read the *Life* magazine account of the massacre.

### The big MOR hit

Breaking away from rock 'n roll, Crazy Horse and rural California, Young retreated in 1971 to write and record a mellower album, *Harvest*, with The Stray Gators in Nashville, Tennessee (earlier sessions) and then at Broken Arrow in California. The album was produced by Young with help from Elliot Mazer, Jack Nitzsche and Henry Lewy and released in March 1972.

While being a more subdued album, its mostly masterful and evocative songwriting, including the catchy poppiness of *Heart of Gold*, would endear him to a wider audience and become one of his top-selling albums. *Harvest* is said to have sold more than four-million copies in the USA, alone. For many fans, this remains his best album – and it is the one for which he is best remembered and enjoyed from a populist perspective. To Young's dismay, *Harvest* not only reached the top of the US and UK album charts, it spurned an overplayed and overly celebrated top 10 single, *Heart of Gold*.

*Harvest* has to be one of the most contentious albums in Young's portfolio. Is it a classic five-star masterpiece or an adorable four-star work with flawed production and a few disposable songs? Or is it a meagre three-star work that deserves a "good" label without much adulation? This album gets fans and critics flummoxed. Critics generally rate it from three to four stars, with some publications becoming more generous in their praise with the passing of time. This near-masterpiece is founded largely on cohesive and sometimes lush arrangements, mostly excellent songwriting and some of Young's most emotive and best-articulated lyrics of the 1970s (if you ignore a few of the throwaway lines that crept into songs like *A Man Needs a Maid*). *Harvest* is a subtle sonic taiji, shifting from songs of hope and optimism to ones of loss and angst. The plaintive, haunting and imploring songs reflecting Young's loneliness, fears and sensitivities are the works that endeared many of us to him in 1972.

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These touching works were epitomised by the cutting sadness (albeit a touch of male chauvinism) of *A Man Needs a Maid* and the pathos of his popular anti-heroin song, *The Needle and the Damage Done*. Other standout tracks include his second diatribe aimed at redneck Southern bigots, the masterfully disconsolate and acerbic *Alabama*, the more sanguine, mid-tempo *Out on the Weekend*, the sentimental, though evocative tribute to his ranch caretaker (Louis Avila), *Old Man*, and the oft-overlooked, but prolonged *Words (Between the Lines of Age)*, with its sardonic musings on fame and fortune.

A key element to the success of *Harvest* was the magical soundscapes devised by the adroit arranger, the late Jack Nitzsche, with sympathetic performances from The Stray Gators, as well as a small cluster of guest singers, including Linda Ronstadt, James Taylor, David Crosby and Graham Nash. *Heart of Gold*, however, had created an artistic problem for Young: he feared he had gone too mainstream. This issue was later alluded to in his own handwritten liner notes to the original *Decade* anthology released in 1977. Young wrote: “*Heart of Gold* put me in the middle of the road. Travelling there became a bore, so I headed for the ditch.”

In December 1972, he released his soundtrack to an autobiographical film, *Journey through the Past*. The album was largely panned by critics and fans and it remains one of his most forgettable albums, mostly because he seemed bereft of fresh musical ideas and compelling songs to sing.

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Matters didn't improve much for Young when he released 1973's *Time Fades Away*, a chaotic and flawed live album produced during a dark period, which included the death of the Crazy Horse guitarist, Danny Whitten (1972), and the Young-Crazy Horse roadie and friend, Bruce Berry (1973). The album, however, does feature some strong, enticing material, including the admirable *Don't Be Denied*. The touring band featured Jack Nitzsche (keyboards), Ben Keith (pedal steel guitars), Tim Drummond (bass) and John Barbata (drums – ex-The Turtles and Jefferson Starship), as well as guest performances from David Crosby and Graham Nash.

## DARK NIGHT Stark masterpiece

Young seemed to have fallen off the pedestal co-created by fans and critics – and when he released *On the Beach* in July 1974, it appeared that both Young and the pedestal had crumbled in the ears and eyes of many fans and critics. At the time, the album was largely dismissed because it seemed so dark, despairing, nihilistic and even self-loathing. There was even some irony in the cover picture, with Young abandoning his more familiar country setting and his far more familiar blue-jeans-and-checked-shirt garb for white slacks, white shoes and a pastel-yellow sports jacket. He stands alone, close to the sea, with his back to the camera; yet, somehow, we sense his mood of mockery, desolation and angst.

More than any other album, *On the Beach* was unfairly criticised and dismissed. Produced by Young with David Briggs, Mark Harman and Al Schmitt, *On the Beach* is a work of incredible simplicity, starkness and honesty and, for some fans, ranks as a top five Young album. Today, it merits a fresh listening and rediscovery, hence a fresh 2006 review in the third edition of *Strange Brew* (to follow).

Between May 1974 and February 1975, Young spent most of his time with CSN&Y for a prolonged American tour. As with the previous CSN&Y collaborations, Young's songs tended to outshine those of his CS&N colleagues.

### More doom and gloom

For us as fans, it seemed as if Young was deep into his dark night of the soul in the mid 1970s. The torturous images and sounds persisted on the follow-up album, *Tonight's the Night*, which Reprise released in June 1975. Many critics rate this album as Young's finest hour, although this writer disagrees. Produced by Young and David Briggs and featuring Crazy Horse, *Tonight's the Night* was recorded at LA's SIR studio before *On the Beach* – and frequently is regarded as a solemn and disconsolate public wake to

commiserate the deaths of Danny Whitten and Bruce Berry.

*Tonight's the Night* is probably the most difficult of the great Neil Young albums to enjoy and, for me at least, took many years to appreciate its subtle depth and wandering beauty beneath the out-of-tune vocals and sometimes dubious production. Back in 1975, Young remarked: "I don't think *Tonight's the Night* is a friendly album."

His voice is vulnerable and, at a times, out of tune. The album is so racked with pain and disillusionment, one wonders at one point if Young is not singing from "the other side", staging his own one-man wake. This is a harrowing journey deep into self-reflection and may be the most brutally honest and searching album in his portfolio, which is made more convincing because of its raw, dishevelled production.

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Even the bleak duotone cover with its hand-scrawled name and title has a jilting effect. Hidden behind sunglasses with one hand in a pocket and the other raised like a demented preacher, Young looks like a lonely, brooding bar-room troubadour – or maybe a post-stardom, lunatic-fringe cabaret artist – playing his dark art in vain to an indifferent and inebriated audience on the seedy fringes of some nameless city. The album's beauty lies in the frailty of the man's voice and his sound – not to forget the bleak and often menacing lyrics. Such qualities, however, would retard record sales, but strengthen his credibility with rock critics and fellow singer-songwriters.

Besides the fragile, elegiac title track that set the mood at the beginning with its ragged piano lines played by Nils Lofgren, other highlight songs include yet another of his pointed stabs at the hollowness of fame, *World on a String*, the mischievous, country-hued *Roll Another Number (For the Road)*, a sobered-up *Albuquerque* and another exploration of the futility of the drug-induced fringes of life in the form of *Tired Eyes*.

### More sanguine mood

If anything, both *Tonight's the Night* and *On the Beach* helped Neil Young to exorcise some of his inner demons and turn towards lighter, more comforting subjects and sounds, as he did with the release of a more accessible and upbeat *Zuma* in November 1975. (*Zuma* is the name of a California beach where Young and David Briggs each owned a beach house). Produced by Young and Briggs, *Zuma* saw Young return to wider commentaries about death, despair, futility and injustice, as he did on the album's eerie *Cortez the Killer*, a barbed song about the greed and injustice of the Spanish Conquistadors against the Aztecs.

*Zuma* suggested Young was feeling more sanguine and tired of grieving in public. He brought Crazy Horse back into the studio with a new guitarist, Frank "Poncho" Sampedro. Crazy Horse brought some outlandish rock 'n roll verve and spiritual merriment to the album, but a dark undertow continued to lurk in the lyrics, as if to ensure there would be a continuing thread to link *Zuma* to *On the Beach* and *Tonight's the Night*. It is a strong album, but too flawed by Young's best standards to merit a five-star rating. Critics tend to allocate three or four stars to *Zuma*.

Other standout songs include *Don't Cry No Tears* (a song he wrote in Canada with The Squires), the upbeat *Lookin' for a Love* and the raunchy, hair-of-the-dog *Barstool Blues*, a track that marks Young and Crazy Horse's return to ragged guitar rambles, some of their best since *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere*. *Barstool Blues* would be the nexus to Young's next studio album, *American Stars 'n Bars*.

## Miami vice

Young kept his mid-1970s workload running high, having also rejoined CSN&Y for concerts in 1974. This later inspired a post-Springfield collaboration with Stephen Stills in Florida, which led to the release in September 1976 of The Stills-Young Band's nine-track *Long May You Run* album. It received mixed, but largely unenthusiastic reviews, but it should not be dismissed as a mere one- or two-star album.

Yes, *Long May You Run* is flawed: the endless-summer Miami vibe and the salty smell of the Atlantic Ocean seem to have made Stills and Young complacent. The songwriting is erratic; the mood is too slick; and the raunchy, improvisational sounds of Crazy Horse have made way for what sounds like overly competent, let's-not-veer-from-the-score Southern session musicians. Besides Stills' bluesy and imploring barstool thoughts of drunken seduction that form the promising, but underdeveloped *Make Love to You*, the Young songs tended to have the edge, with the gem being his lament to his beloved, but ageing hearse, Mort, in the title track.

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In 1976, Young also performed on stage at The Band's farewell concert, *The Last Waltz*, at San Francisco's Winterland. Young played a strong version of his CSN&Y classic, *Helpless*. That same year, he also toured with Stephen Stills to promote their new Stills-Young Band album, but Young quit the tour before the end because of tensions between him and Stills. Young sent Stills his infamously worded telegram to confirm his departure: "Funny how things that start spontaneously end that way. Eat a peach. Neil."

The great year of punk, 1977, saw the release of an eagerly awaited anthology, the three-record *Decade*, spanning his work from 1966 to 1976. This 35-song anthology remains a definitive introduction to the early Neil Young. It is available on double CD. To date, this is the best Young anthology, but it reminds us, almost 30 years on, we are still waiting for the much-touted and long-overdue Neil Young *Archives* box set he has mentioned in media interviews since the 1990s. Besides featuring some of his obvious great songs from his earlier solo albums, such as *Cinnamon Girl*, *Southern Man*, *Heart of Gold*, *Tonight's the Night*, *Cortez the Killer* and *Like a Hurricane*, *Decade* features Buffalo Springfield classics like *Mr Soul*, as well as Young's potent *Ohio* protest song from his time with CSN&Y in 1970.

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## GREATER EXPERIMENTATION Magnificent Hurricane

That same year (June 1977), he released a comparatively tepid, but surprisingly different album, *American Stars 'n Bars*, which was saved by featuring the magnificent *Like a Hurricane*, one of the best rock songs of his career. It also featured *Star of Bethlehem* (with Emmylou Harris) and *Homegrown*. In many ways, *American Stars 'n Bars* issued a warning that Young would become more unpredictable and, in many respects, far weirder in the decade ahead. The introduction to the album must have stunned many fans back in 1977, with the first tracks – including *The Old Country Waltz* and *Hey Babe* – being boisterous bar-room sing-along songs with a boozy, country-hick feel emphasised by some odd lyrics and the pedal-steel guitar playing of Ben Keith.

Again, the cover – one of the best-designed ones of his career – is telling with a booze-drenched Young’s face pressed up against the camera with a high-heeled barmaid clutching a partly filled whiskey bottle. In this sense, *American Stars ‘n Bars* seems to be an offshoot of *Tonight’s the Night* with its darker, intoxicating themes and allusions to a twilight world.

### **Time to mellow**

In September 1978, Young released another laidback country-inflected album, *Comes a Time*, featuring the title track, the top 10 US hit, *Lotta Love* (starring singer Nicolette Larson) and *Look out for My Love*, as well as *Human Highway* and *Already One*. Produced by Young with Ben Keith, Tim Mulligan and David Briggs, this album saw Young re-exploring the country and folk part of his musical roots and returning to popularity in the USA, where the album peaked at number seven in the charts.

Recorded in Nashville, Tennessee, it showcased a restrained Crazy Horse along with the Gone with the Wind Orchestra featuring J J Cale and Ben Keith. Steeped in country instrumentation and moods, it features generous use of banjo, dobro and fiddle, as well as alluring backup singing from Nicolette Larson.

What immediately distinguished *Comes a Time* from *American Stars ‘n Bars* was its more cohesive sound and structure, as well as stronger, though subtle songwriting. Perhaps more than most Young albums, this is the one that took the most time to appeal to many Young fans, but it has dated well and is well worth revisiting if you do not mind Young’s country style.

One also senses that Young draw on some of the production lessons learnt with *Harvest* because *Comes a Time* has pared arrangements and less finicky detailing, which contribute to its enduring appeal. If *Harvest* was lush, effusive and sometimes melodramatic for a laidback, country-inspired fare, *Comes a Time* was understated, subtle and unimposing.

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Young, too, seemed to be in excellent control of his singing and acoustic guitar playing, attributes that benefited from the notably good performances from the rest of the band, as well as the Larson’s superbly sympathetic vocal harmonies. More so than with *On the Beach*, *Comes a Time* may well be Young’s most frequently underrated or ignored masterpiece – the one great album that has endured, but not yet deserved the popular attention it deserves. It also featured some of his most skilful celebrations of love.

### **Back to folk-metal**

A year later, in July 1979, Neil Young reached another creative peak with his stunning and dichotomous *Rust Never Sleeps*, one of most memorable albums of that year and one of the best of his 40-year career. Voted as *Rolling Stone* magazine’s 1979 album of the year, Young produced the album with David Briggs and Tim Mulligan. The one side of the original album was devoted to a more laidback, live acoustic set featuring folk-based songs like *Pocahontas* and *Thrasher*. The other half featured the blistering power-rock side of Young and Crazy Horse with songs like *Powderfinger* and *Sedan Delivery*. This material prophesies the onslaught of grunge, hence the endearing epithet given to Young of The Grandfather of Grunge – or the Godfather of Grunge.

Intriguingly, Young opened and closed the album with different versions of *Hey Hey, My My (Into the Blue/Black)* and mixed studio recordings with live ones. But what makes *Rust Never Sleeps* a particularly indispensable work are those qualities that dominate most other desert-island rock albums: strong, memorable

melodies; splashings of great guitar hooks and motifs; an overall atmosphere that seems to transport the listener to a hitherto arcane world; and enough flow of simple, thought-provoking lyrics that seem to reflect worldly and personal issues and concerns that matter to us and keep us intrigued.

In the case of the lyrics, we sense on the surface a relatively calm, mundane world until we plumb their hidden and not always subtle meanings and nuances contained in allegories and metaphors. *Thrasher*, for example, is not just about the loss of innocence, but a reflection on, if not serious indictment of, the extravagant and wayward ways of the CSN&Y supergroup and rock stardom in general. This theme echoes back to *On the Beach*.

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In the case of the lyrics on *Rust Never Sleeps*, we sense on the surface a relatively calm, mundane world until we plumb their hidden and not always subtle meanings and nuances contained in allegories and metaphors.

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### **First good live album**

*Rust Never Sleeps* material had already been taken on tour, which led to the release in November 1979 of *Live Rust*, a 16-track, double live album produced by Young (aka Bernard Shakey) with David Briggs and Tim Mulligan. In general, this is a good, spirited album featuring some of his career-defining songs ranging from the gentle, acoustic ones to the raucous rock ragers.

Besides showcasing some of the *Rust Never Sleeps* songs like *Powderfinger* and *Sedan Delivery*, it featured other classics like *After the Gold Rush*, *Like a Hurricane*, *When You Dance, You Can Really Love*, *Cinnamon Girl* and *The Loner*. He lightens up notably well on *Cortez the Killer* – and one senses here, as well as

elsewhere in this record, that he is celebrating his first decade of post-Buffalo Springfield music. At the time, many fans and critics were annoyed that Young had released a live album so soon after a sister studio album, particularly considering that many thought the acoustic sets were weak and uninspired. More than 20 years later, however, we find this album has a special place of its own in the Young back catalogue because of the sheer sonic power and passionate playing of Young and Crazy Horse on the rock songs.

### **LOSING STEAM Shifting down**

Then came another surprise period – the release of his two last Reprise albums before committing to Geffen Records and, in many respects, the weirdest and weakest phase of his career. First came *Hawks and Doves* in November 1980 and then *Re-ac-tor* in November 1981.

For Young, *Hawks and Doves* (produced by Young with David Briggs and Tim Mulligan) is a lacklustre, 30-minute, light-medium-weight affair – a well-produced record with some good songs and competent playing, but it barely challenges the listener or threatens to redirect the future of rock.

Revisiting the spirit of *American Stars 'n Bars*, it features some bar-room-style country-rock songs before shifting towards a lighter, not-too-challenging acoustic set in the latter half. The beautiful *Little Wing*, a quirky *Captain Kennedy* and the seven-and-a-half minute *The Old Homestead* are the half-gleaming gems in a largely tarnished crown.

Its themes are obscure and vague – and one is not always sure what Young intended with messages and meanings. *Hawks and Doves* remains one of his most enigmatic works. He returns to his penchant for country music, but, unlike *Comes a Time* two years before, Young seems to be too light-hearted, nonchalant and uninspired to be taken seriously.

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### Shock rock

Then came a real shocker – a record that challenged and tested Neil Young fans and seemed to rekindle old debates about what constitutes a good album: the cacophonous and boisterous *Re-ac-tor* with its stark red and black cover. Released in October 1981 and produced by Young with David Briggs and Tim Mulligan, this album was dismissed by rock critics and writers at the time (this writer included). In hindsight, it remains a controversial and challenging work, but seems more enjoyable today with its pubescent garage-band antics of *T-Bone* and some other good material. The overamped thrash-and-trash minimalism of *T-Bone* got fans and critics either amused or exasperated with Young’s repeating two lines throughout the nine-and-a-half-minute romp: “Got mashed potatoes / Ain’t got no T-bone.”

The better songs include the opener, *Opera Star*, along with the hard-rolling, steam-train song of *Southern Pacific* and *Rapid Transit*. (Young is a train enthusiast and has a 4,000-square foot model-train barn at Broken Arrow). The closing track, *Shots*, was also a favourite for many fans at the time. This boisterous, if not cacophonous, seven-and-a-half minute romp gets a hell-bent, duelling Young and Sampedro trading guitar shots like modern-day gangsters. It is absurd, amusing and, yet, also compelling and among the most bizarre album tracks of his 40-year recording career.

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The *Re-ac-tor* closing song, *Shots*, is absurd, amusing and, yet, also compelling and among the most bizarre album tracks of his 40-year recording career.  
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### Techno affair

More shock would follow in 1982 with the release of Young’s largely dismissed and much-criticised experimentation with synthesisers and vocoders, *Trans*. After all the raunchy and unbridled pre-grunge guitar indulgences of *Rust Never Sleeps* and *Re-ac-tor*, had Young grown tired of burning, overamped Gibson and Fender sounds? Some fans admire *Trans* and eagerly cite his electronic dabblings as being apt expressions of the growing concerns at the time about the deepening influence of computers and automation on human life. Young himself said he was looking for an outlet to communicate with his younger son, Ben, who was stricken with cerebral palsy, unable to speak and confined to a wheelchair.

In a rare interview for *Mojo* magazine with British rock writer, Nick Kent, to mark his fiftieth birthday in 1995, Young was quick to defend this album: “Well, let’s say I don’t underrate *Trans*. I really like it, and think if anything is wrong, then it’s down to the mixing. We had a lot of technical problems on that record, but the content of that record is great.”

Again, Young had entered another fickle, unpredictable phase – one that would become progressively clearer as the 1980s unfolded. Within a handful of years, he would shift to:

- recycled rockabilly on 1983’s *Everybody’s Rockin’*;
- down-home country music on 1985’s *Old Ways*;
- bland automation and bizarre electronic dabbling on 1986’s disappointing rock outing, *Landing on Water*;
- tepid rock on 1987’s *Life*; and
- a seemingly newfound love of blues that just was not blue enough on 1988’s *This Note’s for You*.

Nevertheless, Young’s contentious musical portfolio of the time should be seen in the context of his personal life – and his devotion to his family in extraordinary circumstances. His first son, from his partnership with Carrie

Snodgrass, Zeke, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Then, not long after the birth of his second son, Ben, with his second wife, Pegi Young, he had to deal with the emotional upset of having another son diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

To compound matters, Pegi had a brain tumour and was given a 50:50 chance of surviving surgery. Young also admitted in a 1990s interview that he, as with compatriot Joni Mitchell, suffered in the 1980s from post-polio syndrome, a condition that could render him too weak even to lift a guitar. The latter condition inspired him to start lifting weights and exercising more regularly.

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Young suffered in the 1980s from post-polio syndrome, a condition that could render him too weak even to lift a guitar.

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Neil and Pegi Young spent most of the early 1980s isolated at Broken Arrow ranch taking special care of their son, Ben. They enrolled for a programme run by the Institute for the Achievement of Human Potential and devoted at least 15 hours of their waking day to support and help Ben, who could neither walk nor talk. Even when Crazy Horse was summonsed to Broken Arrow to record the *Re-ac-tor* album, Young pared his recording sessions to ensure he could spend time with Pegi and their son, even if Crazy Horse demanded more recording time together.

### The '80s dilemma

Then there are other perspectives. Was Young itching to get through the 1980s without all his wits intact? Had he lost his muse – or did he really want to be flakier and more carefree than ever before? In hindsight, though he is largely forgiven when one considers that the '80s was the worst decade in rock music. It is difficult to surmise why the 1980s was such a disappointing period for music. Did the planets conspire to jinx the musical creative process; was it that we had

reached the nadir of the Me Generation and post-War materialism; was it the impact of the Reagan, Thatcher and other state administrations; or was it simply that all creative arts go through heightened periods of debilitation, disinterest or desolation?

Young, in a *Mojo* interview (published in December 1995), told British rock writer Nick Kent: "Maybe my '80s music should be looked at as one record."

*Everybody's Rockin'* is one of those dreaded albums that foreshadowed the infamous arrival of the quasi-nostalgic, revivalist and trite tribute covers albums that would come to prominence in the Nineties and Noughties. It takes a special gift and a highly imaginative approach to abandon your own superlative songwriting skills and to rework other (and often lesser) artists' material. On this album, Young returned to his rock 'n roll and rockabilly roots with lacklustre results by combining '50s-era covers with a few of his ordinary original songs.

In Young's defence, he admits that the album was incomplete and meant to have additional songs to complement his envisaged concept, but Geffen Records terminated the recording sessions ahead of schedule. This album, however, is strictly for Neil Young completists and die-hard fans of rock and rockabilly from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Most critics agree this is Young's most treacherous album deserving, at best, two stars. From here, it was axiomatic that his next album would be better.

### Crash landing

While 1985's *Old Ways* did not get critics and fans gushing, it was a welcome return to familiar musical ground – this time, country music. Approaching his fortieth birthday and perhaps wanting to slow the rock tempo for a while, Young found solace in his mellower country roots. The seeds of this album went back three years when Young first recorded the songs with Crazy Horse. Geffen Records rejected the tapes, citing country music as too unhip and uncommercial. Young's dalliance with country,

however, became more serious. Besides touring with American country artists like Waylon Jennings, he returned to the studio with a new band, The International Harvesters, and rerecorded *Old Ways*. Guest musicians, unsurprisingly, included Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson.

Enigmatic and erratic again, Young would leave many fans dumbfounded in August 1986 with the release of his largely pedestrian rock album, *Landing on Water*. Curiously, the album cover features an aircraft safety-sheet image of a passenger aircraft floating on water with its escape slides down. The once high-flying, inspired songwriter seemed to be running out of ideas and impetus. As with *Trans*, he returned to synthesiser doodling and dabbling in his rock sound – and some of this worked to good effect, as it did on one of the few good songs, *Bad News Beat*. Nevertheless, for all his love of change and exploration of technology, Young appeared to be treading water and in danger of drowning, artistically. What makes this album even more pitiful is the wider period in which it was conceived and produced.

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His final record for Geffen Records, the ever-so-slightly better *Life* of 1987 saw Young reunited with Crazy Horse, but still messing around with synthesisers. He had his dig at David Geffen and the music industry moguls with his reference to “record company clowns” in the song, *Prisoners of Rock ‘n Roll*. The Geffen-Young affair led to an acrimonious divorce, with Geffen taking him to court for making “unrepresentative” records.

### **Bluesy turning point**

Young’s muse and fortunes started to improve in 1988 when he signed to Reprise Records again

and released his bluesy, big-horn rock album, *This Note’s for You* – a title mocking the corporate sponsorship of music by big-brand names like Budweiser and Pepsi. In an ironic twist, MTV banned the video from its playlist, but it went on to win an MTV video of the year award. Produced by Young with Niko Bolas (The Volume Dealers), *This Note’s for You* featured a 10-piece band, The Bluenotes, that included a horn section that seemed to lack passion and shine. While this album received mixed reviews (and continues to), it hinted of improvement and better songs and sounds to come. The wry title track is memorable, as are a few others, such as *Hey Hey* and *Sunny Inside*.

Young later took the band and new material on tour, during which he was sued by soul singer, Harold Melvin, for using the name of his former backing band, The Bluenotes. Young changed the band’s name to that of the new album’s opening song, *Ten Men Working*.

The musician hardly endeared himself to fans and critics when he returned to the CSN&Y fold in 1988 to record the competent, but pedestrian *American Dream*, the follow up to 1970’s *Déjà Vu*. Each of the key players, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, fell below par – and one doubts if this album created any CSN&Y neophytes. Young’s songs, however, tended to have the edge over those of his compadres.

## **BUILDING STEAM**

### **Return to form**

With the short-lived CSN&Y reunion behind him, Young returned to peak form with the release in October 1989 of his foot-stomping, happy-go-lucky *Freedom* album. Produced by Young with Niko Bolas and Tim Mulligan, *Freedom* would prove to be his best work since *Rust Never Sleeps*. Even the cover hints of what is in store. Looking like part-Chairman Mao on ecstasy with his star-studded worker’s cap and part-rock ‘n rock renegade troubadour, he’s strumming an acoustic guitar and appears to be moving out of the cover and into your living room.

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*Freedom* reflects the real Neil Young: up close and personal – and he makes the point all too well on the dazzling, floor-thudding opening track, *Rockin' in the Free World*, the closest Young has come to writing a true-blue rock anthem – perhaps even the idea for a global “freedom” anthem.  
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This is the real Neil Young: up close and personal – and he makes the point all too well on the dazzling, floor-thudding opening track, *Rockin' in the Free World*, the closest Young has come to writing a true-blue rock anthem – perhaps even the idea for a global “freedom” anthem. Reborn, reinspired and reunited with Crazy Horse guitarist, Frank Sampedro, Young rocks as though there is no tomorrow – and we join him as crazed comrades of his New Revolution.

As with *Rust Never Sleeps*, he used two different versions of a powerful song to bookend an album, with an eclectic, but cohesive assortment of songs sandwiched in between and moving from lighter, more introspective acoustic pieces to heavier, stepping-out electric rockers. He found his songwriting skills again – along with a sense of balance and fun. Does Young love those years ending with a nine? He closed the 1960s with the devastatingly good *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere* in 1969 and he bade farewell to the 1970s with his deeply inspired *Rust Never Sleeps* in 1979. Now he was saying goodbye to his weird 1980s and seeking absolution with *Freedom*. The title said it all!

Without doubt, the fiery, part-cynical sing-along, *Rockin' in the Free World*, alluded to the pitiful state of America and the idea that if there ever had been an American Dream, well, it was just a dream long spent. To make his point, Young and Sampedro render some of their most savagely raw and adventurous guitar work, sending shock waves all the way to Seattle, Washington, to

provide impetus to the city's budding grunge movement.

Young even delved back into his youth and amped up a splendid version of The Drifters' 1963 hit, *On Broadway*, written by Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil. (George Benson had a massive hit in 1978 with his version of this song). Young brings a sneering, mocking air to the old song – and sounds as though he's swaggering down New York City's famed theatrical street, laughing at the folly of humankind and our endless preoccupation with the dramatic and foolish.

But there are plenty of other good songs on *Freedom*, including songs from his limited-edition *Eldorado* EP sold in Japan and Australia. Other notable songs include his acoustic-driven, heart-stirring duet with Linda Ronstadt, *Hangin' on a Limb*, the languid, spacey rock ballad, *Wrecking Ball* and the epic, almost-Dylanesque *Crime in the City (Sixty to Zero, Part One)*.

### Joyfully alive

The return to Reprise Records was paying dividends – and fans and critics, alike, were warming fondly to Neil Young again. His follow-up album to *Freedom*, the raunchy, unrestrained rock classic, *Ragged Glory*, was released in October 1990. This is a sizzling work, alive with spontaneity and adventure – even if the album's best songs do not rival the glorious standards he set on albums like *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere* and *After the Gold Rush*. Produced by Young with David Briggs, he and Crazy Horse rediscovered their quintessential hard-rocking, tight and fluid Electric Equine sound that is joyfully alive – the type of flaming live sound you hone by being on the road playing for appreciative audiences, rather than self-indulging in seemingly endless and fastidious studio sessions with too much technology and time on your hands.

As with *On the Beach*, this masterpiece merits a fresh appraisal and it is revisited in more detail in the third edition of *Strange Brew* (to follow).

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flowing, particularly on his studio albums. First, however, came two live albums in 1991, the sizzling, grunge-fest in the form of *Weld* and the disposable 35 minutes of cacophonous outtakes of stage feedback in the form of *Arc*. The two albums were originally released together. *Weld* is often rated as Young’s most dynamic live album, with tracks culled from his *Ragged Glory/Smell the Horse Tour*. The featured songs include *Cinnamon Girl*, *Like a Hurricane*, *Cortez the Killer*, *Powderfinger*, *Rockin’ in the Free World* and *Mansion on the Hill*.

### **Wistful sojourn**

After the heavier sounds of *Ragged Glory* and *Weld*, Young mellowed, returned to Nashville and recorded the exquisitely gentle and wistful *Harvest Moon*, a subdued celebration of the twentieth anniversary of *Harvest*. Once again, Young partnered with The Stray Gators: Kenny Buttrey, Tim Drummond, Ben Keith and Spooner Oldham. Linda Ronstadt, James Taylor and Nicolette Larson were among the featured guest singers, as was his half-sister, Astrid Young.

Some critics have tended to regard *Harvest Moon* (produced by Young with Ben Keith) as a competent, but tepid work not worthy of much celebration, but it ranks as one of his finest works of the 1990s – if not a must-have Young album. Compared with *Harvest*, it is a more

mature, subtle and cohesive work. It also has more acoustic instrumentation and a more fluid and laidback atmosphere. *Harvest Moon* embraces some of the spirit of *Harvest*, but, thankfully, it makes no effort to mimic or revive it. *Harvest Moon* has its own atmosphere and personality, and, again, we see Young escaping the hectic rock circuit to return to his quintessential self as the reflective songwriter. To its discredit, *Harvest Moon* suffered from a dearth of passion and inventiveness.

The album opens with *Unknown Legend*, a heartfelt eulogy to a blonde Harley-Davidson rider, before shifting into his delightful trip down memory lane in the form of the luscious *From Hank to Hendrix*, an acknowledgement of one marriage that did not endure. From there, it rolls gently from one song to the next, never threatening to rock out and make outrageous statements. Instead, he intensifies his preoccupation with love – and the listener is left with no doubts that this is his long-overdue celebration of his marriage to Pegi Young. This is best encapsulated in *Such a Woman*, with its words “Our love will live / Until the end of time” – the one song he set aside for Jack Nitzsche to work his magic with on the string arrangements as one of America’s finest rock-era arrangers. The title track is another tribute to his wife, Pegi – and the one marriage that has endured many musical phases and life passages.

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*Harvest Moon* embraces some of the spirit of *Harvest*, but, thankfully, it makes no effort to mimic or revive it.

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Yet Young finds inspiration to comment on environmental degradation and concerns, as he does on *Natural Beauty* (a 10-minute song recorded live at the Civic Auditorium in Portland, Oregon) and *War of Man* (inspired by The Gulf War).

In the wake of the commercially successful *Harvest Moon*, Young returned to the road and the MTV studios for more live work in 1993.

Apart from touring with Pearl Jam and Booker T and the MGs, he recorded and released *Unplugged*, a warmly received live album that displayed his more personable and charming side. Besides rendering a stunning acoustic version of *Like a Hurricane*, complete with some thrilling pump-organ motifs, he revisited Buffalo Springfield days with a prosaic and disappointing rendition of *Mr Soul*. He also played a tepid version of *Long May You Run* from his 1976 collaboration with Stephen Stills.

As a live album, *Unplugged* shows another, more intimate view of Neil Young. The songs are mostly good and the performances fine within the context of acoustic instrumentation, but some of the material, such as *Mr Soul* and *Pocahontas*, did not lend itself to the MTV *Unplugged* format. In some respects, the overall *Unplugged* performances are too light and restrained. It is fine to unplug the instruments, but not the musicians' zest. In hindsight, the best songs were those from *Harvest Moon: Unknown Legend* and *From Hank to Hendrix*.

### **Idiosyncratic and introspective**

The mellower mood – but, this time, with refreshingly unusual originality – was extended to embrace his excellent 1994 studio album, *Sleeps with Angels*. This is his finest work of the mid-1990s and came close to rivalling the songwriting strength of *Ragged Glory*, but with a more subdued, introspective atmosphere and a more idiosyncratic approach to songwriting, instrumentation and arrangements. The highlight songs include his elegy to Kurt Cobain, the title track, along with the elegantly restrained *Trans Am*, inspired by his love of trains.

Starring Crazy Horse and produced by David Briggs (his last collaboration) and Neil Young, *Sleeps with Angels* also features the light-hearted, but disposable tirade against junk-product consumerism, *Piece of Crap*, and the haunting, 15-minute epic, *Change Your Mind*, which harps back to his pioneering days of grunge guitar and abandon. To create a new ambience distinct from some of his other 1990s albums, Young and his band exploited the tack

piano, bass marimba, vibes, flute and accordion, all of which sculpted one of his most unusually arranged and sounding albums of his career – along with one of the most sadly underrated works.

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*On Sleeps with Angels*, Young and his band exploited the tack piano, bass marimba, vibes, flute and accordion, all of which sculpted one of his most unusually arranged and sounding albums of his career – along with one of the most sadly underrated works.

### **Grunged-out in Seattle**

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As The Godfather of Grunge and having toured with one of Seattle's finest grunge bands, it was no surprise when Young released his grunge-soaked, off-the-cuff *Mirror Ball* album in 1995 with Pearl Jam as his band not long after being inducted into The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in January 1995. *Mirror Ball* has been much maligned, primarily because it lacks strong melodies, as well as contrasting lights and shade, and because it is regarded as little more than an indulgent studio jam with Pearl Jam. Yes, the songs could have been more melodic and adventurous, but the adolescent, garage-band spontaneity and extreme vivacity and rawness are what make this album so attractive when you are in the mood for a dose of solid, no-frills rock that is not meant to be taken too seriously. *Mirror Ball* reminds us of the importance of Young's lighter, more childlike side. The album was recorded at Seattle's Bad Animals studio over two intense sessions in four days – and it shows.

The standout song is *I'm the Ocean*, a blistering, stream-of-consciousness hard-rocker about a weird nightmare that ranks among his finest works since the *Rust Never Sleeps* album. Another great song is the slow-burning, bluesy grunged-out *Scenery*, a cynical stab at the shallowness of American patriotism and

idealism. This song is made even more compelling by the larger-than-life guitar fireworks interspersed with some crazed, honky-tonk piano patterns and backed by thunderous drumming. Rarely cited by critics as a song of any worth (some critics loathe it), *Throw Your Weapons Down* is a hypnotic, muscular romp that is so delightfully indulgent. Young and Pearl Jam's Stone Gossard and Mike McCready torch their guitars and create a grunge-meets-psychedelic pyrotechnics that is mind-blowing as it blazes upwards, threatening to get seriously stratospheric. The notion of old rockers on steroids has seldom sounded so wonderfully indulgent and inspirational.

As much as *Mirror Ball* has flaws and limitations, it reveals the younger, more spontaneous side of the musician and his great ability to improvise and create some of his most searing and gut-tugging guitar solos. This album is an indulgent celebration of music across two generations of rockers – and it is worth having in your Neil Young album collection if you are close to being a completists. If Young is often celebrated as one of rock's great Primitives, then he makes a strong case by jamming with such abandon with Pearl Jam.

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*Mirror Ball* is an indulgent celebration of music across two generations of rockers.

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## ANOTHER WEIRD PHASE

### The next nadir

The remainder of Neil Young's 1990s paled from an outsider's perspective with the release of fewer and weaker albums than usual:

- the surreal, otherworldly and sketchy guitar solos that formed the soundtrack for the Jim Jarmusch-directed cult movie about the afterlife, *Dead Man Walking* (1995), starring Johnny Depp;
- the mostly anaemic 1996 album of *Broken Arrow* with Crazy Horse; and

- the noisy romp of a live album, 1997's *Year of the Horse*.

While being a largely disappointing work, *Broken Arrow* is not unlistenable – and was shortlisted for a Best Album Grammy in 1996. The best track, the touching, ethereal song of reflection, *Slip Away*, is a kindred song to *Sleeps with Angels*. The album also features the 10-minute fuzz-fest of distraction and disconsolation in the form of *Loose Change*.

These below-par works were followed in 1999 by the third CSN&Y studio album, *Looking Forward*, to which he contributed three good (but far from classic) songs. Their subsequent *Looking Forward* North American tour grossed slightly more than US\$42-million, making it one of the highest-grossing rock tours of 2000.

Young shifted up a gear, creatively and quality-wise, at the end of the millennium with the release of warm and promising *Silver and Gold* (2000), a light, country-rock affair that marked his return to pastoral moods and themes. Mature and content, Young reflects, with some fondness and honesty, on his musical and personal past. The highlight songs of *Silver and Gold* (produced by Young with Ben Keith) include the obviously nostalgic *Buffalo Springfield Again*, *Razor Love*, *The Great Divide* and the title track.

After a rebirth in the 1990s, the early Noughties proved to be a bit too weird for us as Neil Young fans. His disappointing live album, *Road Rock* (2001), proved just one point: artists need to limit their output of live albums, especially when these recordings do not reflect them at their best on stage.

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To add salt to our wounds, he released a dull studio album, *Are You Passionate?*, in March 2002. The tacky cover – probably the worst in the Young back-catalogue – says it all. This should have been a passionate, soul-infused album considering that Young used one of the best bands from the Atlantic-Motown-Stax soul heydays to back him, Booker T and the MGs.

## ANOTHER COMEBACK A new weirdness

After a dismal and largely soulless experimentation with soul and R&B, Young came the closest to making a concept album with the release in August 2003 of the much-overlooked *Greendale* (produced by Young with L A Johnson). It is a competent work, but it does not stretch his songwriting talents or guitar playing. The album revolves around a fringe community of 20,000 or so arty, eco-psychedelic back-to-Nature types and, more specifically, the experiences of the Green family.

In essence, this is a gently paced country-blues, slow boogie, soft grunge album that stretches over 78 minutes with the emphasis being on Young as the narrator of Greendale vignettes. The melodies are low-key and Young and Crazy Horse (minus Frank Sampedro) slide into – and sustain – a hypnotic groove with Young delivering eccentric tales about grandpa, drug stashes, Satan in the local jail, cop killing and painting psychedelic art. There is some flaky philosophising – and we can only hope Young was expressing some of his thoughts with his tongue in cheek.

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*Greendale* is a gently paced country-blues, slow boogie, soft grunge album that stretches over 78 minutes with the emphasis being on Young as the narrator of Greendale vignettes.

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A tasteful, but near-predictable, single-disc *Greatest Hits* was released in 2004, but brought nothing new or surprising to Young fans. If anything, besides being a much-needed income booster for Reprise Records in the light of Young's weaker album sales of recent years, the anthology might serve as a lightning version of *A Young Person's Introduction to Neil Young*. It has obvious choices, such as *Cinnamon Girl*, *Ohio* (the great CSN&Y single), *Heart of Gold*, *Like a Hurricane* and *From Hank to Hendrix*, but it ignores some of his essential albums and creative periods – and is far too biased towards his 1969-1979 period. Compiled by Young, he admits that his final choice was based on popularity – record sales, Internet downloads and airplay.

## Prairie recollections

*Prairie Wind* (2005) finds Young back in a lighter, more nostalgic mood, returning to his mellower country and folk roots, as he did on *Harvest Moon* and *Silver and Gold*. There is also a link between this album and one of his finest soft-rock albums, *Comes a Time*. This time around, much of his heart travels back to his childhood growing up on a windswept Canadian prairie, hence the title and the back-cover photograph of him as a prepubescent boy.

*Prairie Wind* provided Neil Young with a perfect channel to celebrate Elvis Presley, an old guitar, the windy prairies, conversations with his late father, boyhood fishing and the passing of good times. But there are also concerns about his own frailty and mortality. What makes *Prairie Wind* all the more poignant is knowing it was written and recorded mostly around the time he was diagnosed with having, and then undergoing surgery for, a potentially fatal cerebral aneurysm. Young was admitted to a New York City hospital at the end of March 2005 to have his aneurysm treated safely through a neuroradiological procedure. Around this time, Young also had to contend with the death of his 87-year-old father, Scott Young, and the departure of his grownup children from home.

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Recorded in Nashville, *Prairie Wind* carries a simple dedication for his late father: “For Daddy”. Superbly produced by Young and Ben Keith (who also plays dobro, pedal steel guitar and slide guitar), *Prairie Wind* features musicians who have been working with Young on his more recent acoustic albums: Spooner Oldham, Rick Rosas, Chad Cromwell and Karl Himmel. Emmylou Harris makes a special guest appearance on three of the 10 songs. If anything, the album sounds as if it was made out on the prairies, remote from city lights and noise.

On the rocking, good-times *Far From Home*, Young dreams of going to Nashville to become a big, wealthy star, but leaves us in no doubt about wanting to be returned to his roots when he dies:

“Bury me out on the prairie  
Where the buffalo used to roam  
Where the Canada geese once filled the sky  
And then I won’t be far from home.”

He is nostalgic, but not overly sentimental as he and an expanded band romp their way through a lovely piece of country-boogie featuring the Wayne Jackson Horns, as well as Emmylou Harris and Pegi Young on vocals. As he has done on many songs over the years, he alludes to the destruction of nature. On sleepy, string-infused songs like *It’s a Dream*, we are drawn irresistibly to Young’s tender, melancholy side. This is one of the most touching songs he has written and sung in recent years. One cannot help feeling his deep sense of loss knowing that the sweetness of childhood adventure and innocence has become little more than a fading memory.

Neil Young also played at the Canadian performance of the Live 8 benefit concert outside Toronto on July 2 2005. Earlier in 2006, before commencing work on his latest album, Neil Young worked with film director Jonathan Demme (eg, *Silence of the Lambs* and *Philadelphia*) to produce the musical documentary, *Neil Young: Heart of Gold*. The documentary was premiered at Robert Redford’s Sundance Film Festival.

### **Boxing time**

*Living with War* – the new album reviewed in detail in the third edition of *Strange Brew* (to follow) – sees Young in fine fettle, rediscovering his songwriting mettle. It is worth exploring – and leaves die-hard fans hoping he still has plenty of steam left in him to make a few more good albums. Recorded over a fortnight in April 2006, the album was first released through the Internet on April 28 and then on CD on May 5. The giant American chain store, Wal-Mart, prohibited sales of *Living with War* because of its (apparent) un-American messages.

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But, more than another album of original songs, many fans have become increasingly anxious about the continuing delay of the much-touted Neil Young box set. The Young back-catalogue stretches way beyond 30 hours and at least 500 original songs, many of them good ones. So it is not much to ask Neil Young, with a few close associates (among them, Elliot Roberts), to set aside some time to shortlist his best 60 or so songs and produce a boxed anthology over four or five discs? If he is looking for some inspiration, he need not look further than the sterling efforts of The Band’s Robbie Robertson (five-disc anthology from 2005, *A Musical*

*History*) and Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page (four-disc anthology from 1990, *Led Zeppelin*).

Sometimes flaky, sometimes superbly gifted, sometimes enigmatic and sometimes palpable, Neil Young has traversed more musical terrain than most rock artists have – and he deserves to be celebrated anew for his best melodies, his keenest lyrics and his most charmed moments of eccentricity. Long may he run!

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## NEIL YOUNG DISCOGRAPHY (SOLO)

- *Neil Young*, 1969 ★
- *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere*, 1969 ★★ [with Crazy Horse, w CH]
- *After the Gold Rush*, 1970 [w CH] ★★
- *Harvest*, 1972 [w The Stray Gators] ★★
- *Journey through the Past*, 1972
- *Time Fades Away*, 1973 [live] [I]
- *On the Beach*, 1974 ★★
- *Tonight's the Night*, 1975 [w CH] ★★
- *Zuma*, 1975 [w CH] ★★
- *American Stars 'n Bars*, 1977 ★
- *Decade*, 1977 [compilation] [c] ★★
- *Comes a Time*, 1978 ★★
- *Rust Never Sleeps*, 1979 [w CH] ★★
- *Live Rust*, 1979 [I] [w CH] ★★
- *Hawks and Doves*, 1980 ★
- *Re-ac-tor*, 1981 [w CH] ★
- *Trans*, 1982
- *Everybody's Rocking*, 1983 [mostly covers] [w The Shocking Pinks]
- *Old Ways*, 1985
- *Landing on Water*, 1986
- *Life*, 1987
- *This Note's for You*, 1988 [w The Bluenotes] ★
- *Freedom*, 1989 ★★
- *Ragged Glory*, 1990 [w CH] ★★
- *Weld*, 1991 [I] [w CH] ★
- *Arc*, 1991 [I] [w CH]
- *Harvest Moon*, 1992 [with SG] ★★
- *Lucky Thirteen*, 1992 [c] ★
- *Unplugged*, 1993 [I] ★
- *Sleeps with Angels*, 1994 [w CH] ★★
- *Mirror Ball*, 1995 [w Pearl Jam] ★

- *Dead Man*, 1995 [soundtrack]
- *Broken Arrow*, 1996 [w CH]
- *Year of the Horse*, 1997 [I] [w CH] ★
- *Silver and Gold*, 2000 ★
- *Road Rock*, 2001 [I]
- *Are You Passionate?*, 2002 [with Booker T and the MGs]
- *Greendale*, 2003 [w CH] ★
- *Greatest Hits*, 2004 [c] ★
- *Prairie Wind*, 2005 ★
- *Living with War*, 2006 ★★

★★ Essential ★ Nice to have

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TO BE CONTINUED ... Part two of the 40-year celebration of Neil Young will be featured in the third edition of *Strange Brew*, to be published on September 30 2006. Among other highlights, *Strange Brew 03* will feature reviews of *Living with War* and *On the Beach*, the Neil Young discography, a brief overview of Young as a guitarist and a few snippets of trivia.

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**Edited and published** by Michael Waddacor© of Soul Star™ Publishing  
1 Hocky Avenue, Northcliff, 2195,  
Johannesburg, South Africa

Phone: +27 11 888 1226 (office) or  
+27 84 457 7133 (mobile)  
Fax: +27 866 111 777  
Email: michael@thewritehouse.co.za

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