

Michael Waddacor's
Strange BrewTM

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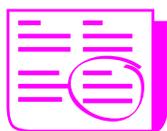
Long may you run!

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

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.

In this second part of an in-depth tribute to the Canadian-born singer-songwriter, Michael Waddacor reviews Neil Young's new album, explores his guitar playing, re-evaluates the overlooked classic album from 1974, *On the Beach*, and briefly revisits the 1990 grunge classic, *Ragged Glory*. This edition also lists the Neil Young discography, rates his top albums and highlights a few pieces of trivia about the artist, his associates and his interests.

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Living with War (2006)

A damningly fine protest album with good melodies

Rating: ★★★★★

Produced by Neil Young and Niko Bolas (The Volume Dealers) with co-producer L A Johnson. Featured musicians: Neil Young (vocals, guitar, harmonica and piano), Rick Bosas (bass guitar), Chad Cromwell (drums) and Tommy Bray (trumpet) with a choir led by Darrell Brown.

Songs: *After the Garden / Living with War / The Restless Consumer / Shock and Awe / Families / Flags of Freedom / Let's Impeach the President / Lookin' for a Leader / Roger and Out / America the Beautiful.*

Back on track

The new Neil Young album, *Living with War*, marks not only his return to fine (though slightly flawed) musical form, but also his revisiting of familiar ground as a protest songwriter with some potent, unambiguous messages on topical maladies. This may well be his best album since his 1989-1994 creative resurgence that

commenced with *Freedom* and closed with *Sleeps with Angels*. What makes this thought-provoking, anti-war and anti-Bush album more compelling is the swiftness with which it was made: a mere six days according to one source and 10 days states another.

There are no production frills and no extravagance when it comes to lyrics, melody writing and arrangements. This is perhaps what most endears one to *Living with War* right from the first listening: it demonstrates how well Young comes across as a musician and lyricist when he keeps the music pared, the lyrics simple and the overall arrangements and final production rough-edged.

It sounds like the demo tapes – or initial home-studio sonic sketches – for what is intended to be a serious double album devoted to the cause of world pacificism and the final demise of political corruption, greed and deception.

One senses he made this album with greater urgency than ever before – almost if it is the final, desperate apocalyptic call for the end of the Bush regime, American imperialism and the idea that a few dark men cloistered in The White House and other alcoves of power take comfort in trying to hoodwink more than 300-million Americans.

It is a strong, muscular and pointed work. It is the poignant polemics of an eager-eyed, sharp-witted veteran who has not lost his streetwise sensibility of 1979 when he proclaimed “it is better to burn out than it is to rust”.

On his official website (www.neilyoung.com), the musician refers to his new album as a collection of “folk-metal protest songs” – and that is a fair encapsulation. We sense Young is stretching out, with time pressures, to reach a wider audience and be heard more closely than ever before. He sounds more populist and outreaching on this protest album, so he has abandoned his quirky allegorical approach that typified many of his earlier albums.

No scorching beauty

On the downside, for the serious Young aficionados, *Living with War* tends to lack the emotional depth, melodic and instrumental scope and the production novelty of his five-star masterpieces. While many of us adore his savage guitar playing and roughly hewn arrangements and productions, this album may have benefited from a little more finessing in places.

There is no *Harvest*-era or *Sleeps with Angel*-era personalised gloom and deep introspection set against stirring and often surprising arrangements and keenly crafted musical performances. There are no adventurous and hypnotic guitar solos as on *Like a Hurricane*. There is no desperado crying out from the fringes of desolation as he did so convincingly in *On the Beach* and *Tonight's the Night*.

Even more disappointing against the backdrop of the post 9/11 political quagmire that has beset America, there is none of the scorching beauty and raging lyricism of those two classic Young political songs of 1970: *Ohio* and *Southern Man*.

Yet, Young seems to have brought a spectre of his best musical moments of the last 35 years or so into the spirit of *Living with War*, and he can still sound poignant, imploring and relevant. Significantly, just as much as he chosen to dispense with fine musical arrangements and production, he has abandoned his characteristic penchant for enigma and ambiguity in favour of messages that are plain, pointed and (in many countries) patently treasonous.

Some countries would have hung a musician publicly after expediting a pseudo-trial for making an album that is so vehemently anti-government and anti-president. *Let's Impeach the President* is the one track that comes to mind – and we cannot help knowing he his right, no matter how far George W Bush tries to persuade the world otherwise that he is the saviour of the human race and our innate thirst for civil liberties and the milk of human kindness.

Warm media response

The American and British music critics, in general, responded warmly to *Living with War*, with most giving it either a three- or four-star rating. Writing in the July 2006 edition of *Q* (★★★★), **Tom Doyle** enthuses: "... *Living with War* is a revelation, brimming with passion and some of the best melodies Young has penned in the last 30 years." He concludes: "A defiant, admirable album that lets its freak flag fly."

In the July 2006 edition of *Uncut* (★★★★), **John Mulvey** writes: "*Living with War* is confirmation that Young is in a profoundly sentimental phase: nostalgic for a late-'60s concept of community; cloyingly affectionate towards his family; pondering his own mortality; idealistic about the country where he lives. ... But for all its emotional crudeness, *Living with War* may prove to be Young's salvation. If only it could prove to be America's salvation, too."

Writing in the May 2006 online edition of *Rolling Stone* (★★★★), **David Fricke** focuses primarily on the hard-hitting political messaging of the album. He notes: "*Living with War* is one man's opinion: Young reports, you decide. But it is an indictment of the sorry state of open debate in this country (*the USA*) – and it is rock & roll – that the most direct, public and inspiring challenge to the Bush presidency this year has been made by a 60-year-old, Canadian-born singer-songwriter who, even at his most apoplectic, can't resist a line like "trippin' down the old hippie highway" (*Roger and Out*). It is also an impressive measure of Young's refusal to burn out or fade away that he states his case with clarity as well as dirty garage-trio momentum."

Writing in the July 2006 edition of *Mojo* (★★★), **Sylvie Simons** is less generous in her rating, but notes: "Sonically, it sticks with Young's pattern of following a gentle, acoustic record with something loud and electric, in this case an even more ragged *Ragged Glory*. The three-piece band – Young plus *Prairie Wind* rhythm section Rick Bosas and Chad

Cromwell – sound like a garage band doing a Crazy Horse tribute: raw and grungy, but lacking Crazy Horse's solid, murky groove."

Sense of futility

The album opens with a touching lament about destruction and the loss of innocence, decency and other hallowed qualities in the medium-paced, fuzz-toned *After the Garden*. The sense of lament and atrophy worsens as he shifts into the title track that smacks of disillusionment and personal disempowerment when one most needs the power to act and make a positive difference. In the wake of *Ohio* 36 years ago, the ageing pacifist relents that "I'm living with war". When night falls, he prays for peace, yet you sense this is a frail man's song of futility and heart-stabbing surrender when he sings: "I'm living with war every day / I'm living with war in my heart every day."

The third song, *The Restless Consumer*, proclaims some Young perspectives on another war he visits periodically: the scramble for Earth's diminishing resources, mass-production and all that makes mockery of environmental custodianship in a neon-signed consumer world where the insatiable thirst is for more, bigger and better. He implies the question: "Do the rich give a damn?" We reply, inwardly, in silent chorus: "No, they don't give a shit!" Against the heart-rending images of Third World starvation, disease and misery, Young reminds us dryly there are important folk with a mission to accomplish:

"The restless consumer flies
Around the world each day
With such an appetite for efficiency
And pace."

The avarice and indifference of the rich supposedly insulate them from the world's countless poor and marginalised – and Young reminds us that we are inherently frail and doomed if we remain myopic to the plight of the Third World. The album steps up into one of its finest songs, *Shock and Awe*, another stirring paean to the futility of war and the heartless

numbers game. This is the first song in which he brings to prominence the emotive, but never compelling trumpet playing of Tommy Bray. Young alludes to the tragic irony of the conveniently forgotten victims of war versus the celebrated heroes in their camouflaged uniforms:

“Thousands buried in the ground
Thousands of children scarred for life.
Millions of tears shed for a soldier’s wife.”

The pace and mood of the album is set as he launches into yet another disconsolate song, *Families*, and the idea that American soldiers far from home are yearning to return home after a sordid sojourn on foreign soils, supposedly on some important mission for the Bush Administration.

Unfurling his freak flag

The sixth song, *Flags of Freedom*, is one of the album’s best and has a lovely bittersweet mood. Set against a cheerful, but basic foot-stomping rock track, Young sings about flags of freedom flying and sons going off to war. Yet patriotism has rarely sounded this hollow and disturbing. The trumpets open the scathing *Let’s Impeach the President* and Young wastes no time in unfurling his freak flag when he opens with:

“Let’s impeach the President for lyin’
And misleading our country into war
Abusing all the power that we gave him
And shipping all our money out the door.”

Later, he enters the song’s flip-flop section featuring recordings of some of Bush’s infamous lines about Al-Qaeda and Iran, while Young has his say – with his 100-voice choir to make the message more evocative – by retorting “where”, “why” and so forth. Veteran *Rolling Stone* writer David Fricke highlights the song’s most disconcerting content with these words: “For me, the most damning lines in *Let’s Impeach the President* have nothing to do with Iraq and everything to do with Washington’s shameful delinquency at home: “What if Al-Qaeda blew up the levees? / Would New Orleans have been

safer that way / Sheltered by our government’s protection?”

Young’s indictment of Bush raises another delicate American and global issue – the lack of inspired and inspiring leaders, so it is no surprise when he slips into the next song, *Looking for a Leader*: “America is beautiful / But she has an ugly side / We’re lookin’ for a leader / In this country far and wide / We’re lookin’ for leader / With The Great Spirit on his side.”

He implores for a leader who can “make the country strong” – and he exaggerates his plea by referring to The Great Spirit. Previously, Young has not shown any palpable inclination towards religion, spirituality or transpersonal themes, so this reference to the traditional Native American concept of the Universal Being gets one pondering if Young’s vision of a true American leader should not be more soul-centred, holistic and all-embracing in his or her orchestration of democracy.

Wistful touches

The pace drops and the mood saddens as Young becomes more personal and wistful on *Roger and Out*, as he travels down “that old hippie highway” and recalls fond memories of a friend who, we surmise, died in the Vietnam War – or some similar event. An ordinary rendition of *America the Beautiful*, sung by the 100-voice choir, brings the album to a disappointing close. If anything, the uninspiring ending gets one thinking: Why didn’t Young write and sing his own anthem, as he did in closing *Ragged Glory* with *Mother Earth (Natural Anthem)*?

If you are a die-hard Neil Young fan, *Living with War* is worth exploring – perhaps even buying on impulse. It is melodic, touching, simple and vitriolic, but poorer for not having Frank Sampedro and the rest of Crazy Horse bringing their distinctively distorted and grunged-out rock pyrotechnics to the fore. Nevertheless, along with a rare and diminishing cluster of ageing singer-songwriters (Bob Dylan included), Young sounds like he still has plenty of gas in his tank.

Guitar player of note

Ragged glory

With little doubt, Neil Young has proven himself as an adroit and adventurous songwriter with some meaningful and enduring messages. For many of us, he is an acquired taste as a singer – and not your typical “good, big-voice rock singer” with a more universal, radio-friendly appeal, as one might think of people as varied as Grace Slick, Ian Gillan, Freddie Mercury, David Lee Roth, Steve Perry or David Byron.

But you get to appreciate his frail, whiney and sometimes shaky, nasal tenor (and sometimes alto) voice because it belongs to that broad and liberal idiosyncratic tradition associated with many of those great singer-songwriters who defined the genre of the 1970s. Here, the likes of Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Laura Nyro, Tim Hardin, Michael Chapman, Roy Harper and John Martyn spring to mind. Each is an acquired taste, but who else could have rendered their songs with greater conviction?

But let us not overlook Neil Young’s profound appeal as a guitarist. As an instinctive and emotionally gifted guitarist, he can shift from quiet and gently picked acoustic pieces that draw on folk, country and other forms of traditional Americana, and then step out into incendiary electric-guitar assaults, keeping the volume, fuzz tones and playing periods maxed out as if there is no tomorrow.

Many of us, no doubt, will agree that Young often is underacknowledged as a guitarist. He may not be as technically skilled or stylistically versatile as Jimmy Hendrix, Eddie van Halen, Neal Schon, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, David Gilmour, Steve Vai, John McLaughlin, Carlos Santana or Eric Clapton, for example, but he has a distinctly raw sound that makes him more compelling and memorable than most rock guitarists. In this regard, he reminds one of a few other underrated rock guitarists who play by heart and instinct, preferring not to get too

intricate, like Peter Green, Pete Townshend, Paul Kossoff and Paul Weller.

Primitive power

In essence, Neil Young is a primitive and passionate player. As a singer-songwriter and guitarist, he is naturally and enviably adept at defying fad and fashion, able to embrace country and rockabilly with as much joy as grunge, hard rock and punk – and pull it off with credibility and charm. His emotional, straight-from-the-heart simplicity of guitar playing has made his sound enduring.

Rooted mostly in American rock ‘n roll and folk sensibilities, Young is one of those guitarists who is largely self-taught and who admits candidly, as he once did in a *Guitar Player* magazine interview, that he plays some bad notes – and is not proficient with scales and other technical matters that intrigue the guitar geeks. He has also admitted in interviews that his guitar playing is largely a mess, but sometimes has clarity – and he enjoys that juxtapositioning. In one interview, he says his guitar improvisations with Crazy Horse have been influenced by the approach of the legendary freeform jazz saxophonist, John Coltrane.

Young is one of those guitarists who is happy to flow from one simple chord to the next – and one basic note to the next. He is comfortable about paring his guitar solos down to garage-band basics, keeping raw and rudimentary riffs and motifs flowing hypnotically. Whereas other lead guitarists will play intricate lead motifs in between verses, Young will keep his lead pieces simpler, sometime relying on his devilishly good ability to sustain one good note that comes with such instinctive beauty.

There is that distinctive Neil Young magic – a savagely raw, elemental power: stark, cutting notes and blazing, overly distorted chords. This makes him more emotionally appealing than listening to someone like Joe Satriani on a good night.

High ranking

Intriguingly, in a recent special edition of Britain's *Uncut* magazine, *Uncut Legends: The 100 Greatest Guitar Heroes* (volume one, issue six), Neil Young was ranked fourth after Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page and Keith Richards. The ratings were based on votes by *Uncut* writers and readers.

Neil Young is also known to have a penchant for old guitars (as he does for veteran cars), one of which is a 1953 Gibson R6 Les Paul Gold Top nicknamed Old Black. He also owns a veteran 1950s Gretsch White Falcon. On the acoustic front, he owns a Martin D-28 that once belonged to country star, Hank Williams, as well as Martin D-45 steel-string guitar. One of his great curiosity pieces is his 1927 six-string Gibson Mastertone banjo that is tuned like a guitar. For the more technically minded, Young favours D-modal tuning (dating back to his time with Buffalo Springfield) and he uses a vast array of customised pedals to derive his distinctively savage and adventurous guitar sounds. He owns a collection of almost 450 veteran Fender Deluxe amplifiers. Some of these feature a Whizzer, an electronic device that enables him to change amplifier settings to preset combinations.

Twenty great picks

For a taste of Young as the Great Primitive Axeman, listen to songs like:

- *Down by the River* – from *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere*
- *Cowgirl in the Sand* – from *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere*
- *Southern Man* – from *After the Gold Rush*
- *Revolution Blues* – from *On the Beach*
- *Cortez the Killer* – from *Zuma*
- *Like a Hurricane* – from *American Stars*
- *Powderfinger* – from *Rust Never Sleeps*
- *Like and Hurricane* – from *Live Rust*
- *Tonight's the Night* – from *Live Rust*
- *Rapid Transit* – from *Re-ac-tor*
- *Shots* – from *Re-ac-tor*

- *Rockin' in the Free World* – from *Freedom*
- *Country Home* – from *Ragged Glory*
- *White Line* – from *Ragged Glory*
- *Over and Over* – from *Ragged Glory*
- *Love to Burn* – from *Ragged Glory*
- *Change Your Mind* – from *Sleeps with Angels*
- *Blue Eden* – from *Sleeps with Angels*
- *Throw Your Hatred Down* – from *Mirror Ball*
- *Scenery* – from *Mirror Ball*

Highlights and lowlights

1945: Born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada on November 12.

1952: Stricken with polio at the age of six.

1958/1959: Moves to Winnipeg, Manitoba, with his mother.

1961/1962: Quits high school to concentrate on playing music professionally.

1966: Leaves Canada for California and forms Buffalo Springfield.

1967: Buffalo Springfield releases its most compelling work, *Buffalo Springfield Again*, featuring the Young classics, *Broken Arrow* and *Mr Soul*.

1968: Quits Buffalo Springfield, signs record deal with Reprise Records and goes solo under the management of Elliot Roberts. Marries his first wife, Susan Acevedo.

1969: Forms Crazy Horse and releases the first of his many critically acclaimed, groundbreaking albums, *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere*. Joins Crosby, Stills and Nash and appears at Woodstock music festival, but evades the camera, as requested of director Michael Wadleigh.

1970: Shines on the first CSN&Y album, *Déjà Vu*, releases his remarkable third album, *After the Gold Rush*, buys Broken Arrow ranch south of San Francisco and meets actress Carrie Snodgrass.

1972: Releases *Harvest*, his biggest-selling and most-loved album. Birth of his first son, Zeke, with partner Carrie Snodgrass.

1974: Reunites with CS&N and releases his landmark, but much-maligned, introspective album, *On the Beach*.

1975: Releases one of his most critically acclaimed and emotionally compelling albums, *Tonight's the Night*.

1976: Releases *Long May You Run*, his lukewarm Florida collaboration with Stephen Stills, and performs with The Band in *The Last Waltz* farewell concert at San Francisco's Winterland.

1977: Dazzles fans with his majestic song, *Like a Hurricane*, from *American Stars 'n Bars*, and releases a magnificent anthology, *Decade*.

1978: Releases his understated country-rock album, *Comes a Time*, and celebrates the birth of his second son, Ben, with his second wife, Pegi Young (nee Morton).

1979: Releases the excellent *Rust Never Sleeps* album and builds a new fan base.

1981: Releases last Reprise album, *Re-ac-tor*, before signing to Geffen Records.

1982: Newfound fascination with synthesisers and vocoders captured on his much-maligned, but definitely not-brilliant *Trans* album.

1984: Birth of Neil and Pegi Young's daughter, Amber Jean, in May.

1985: Performs at Live Aid benefit concert in the USA and later co-founds, and performs at, Farm Aid, helping to raise US\$10-million for the cause after the first show.

1986: He and Pegi found San Francisco's Bridge School for handicapped children with communication problems – and starts the annual Bridge School fundraising concerts.

1988: Short-lived reunion with Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young and the release of their *American Dream* album.

1989: Young silences his critics with a splendid rebirth album, *Freedom*, with its strong contender for global anthem, *Rockin' in the Free World*.

1990: Consolidates his resurgence with his imploring and excellent *Ragged Glory* album that sees Young and Crazy Horse firing on all cylinders.

1992: Having sojourned in Nashville, Tennessee, again with The Stray Gators, he releases his mellow, celebration-of-love album, *Harvest Moon*, to critical acclaim. Young also appears at

the fiftieth-birthday celebration for Bob Dylan and covers *Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues* and *All Along the Watchtower*.

1994: Contributes a haunting title song to the soundtrack of Jonathan Demme's Oscar-winning film, *Philadelphia*, and releases his critically acclaimed *Sleeps with Angels* album.

1995: Induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and releases grunge-fest album, *Mirror Ball*, with Pearl Jam as his band.

1997: Releases another live album, *Year of the Horse*.

1999: Rejoins CSN&Y to record *Looking Forward*.

2000: Tours with CSN&Y and returns to country/folk-rock with a fine, but not startling, end-of-millennium album, *Silver and Gold*.

2002: Strikes another career bum note with a lacklustre soul/R&B album made with Booker T and the MGs, *Are You Passionate?*

2003: Releases an eccentric, concept album, *Greendale*, and a self-directed film of the same name.

2005: Mourns the death of his father and the loss of his childhood with another touching, country-tinged acoustic album, *Prairie Wind*.

2006: Releases return-to-form album, *Living with War*, and heads out on the road with CSN&Y on their North American *Freedom of Speech '06* tour (July-September).

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M i s c e l l a n e a

I need a crowd of people

Joel Bernstein

Born in the early 1950s, West Coast photographer Joel Bernstein has taken thousands of photographs of Neil Young since the late 1960s. Many of these have found their way on to Neil Young album covers, the first of which was *After the Gold Rush* (1970). He made his breakthrough as a teenager by photographing Joni Mitchell. So impressed was she with Bernstein's vision and technique, it was not long before he was documenting artists like Laura Nyro, Crosby, Stills & Nash, Leonard Cohen and Neil Young.

David Briggs

Wyoming-born record producer (1944-1995) whom Young met in 1968 when the latter was hitchhiking in Malibu, California. David Briggs would subsequently co-produce 18 Young studio albums, with 1994's *Sleeps with Angels* being the last. Briggs commenced his career as a staff producer for Bill Cosby's Tetragrammaton Records and went on to produce artists as diverse as Nick Cave, Alice Cooper, Nils Lofgren and Grin, Tom Rush and Spirit.

Broken Arrow

The Woodside-area ranch in redwood hills between San Francisco and Santa Cruz that Young bought towards the end of 1970. It remains his main home – and home of his own studio, Broken Arrow, as well as his collection of classic cars and his 4,000-square-foot barn that houses his model-train collection. It also is the name of his music publishing company and his tepid studio album of 1996.

Buffalo Springfield

The band Young co-founded with fellow Canadian, Bruce Palmer, and three Americans, Stephen Stills, Ritchie Furay and Dewey Martin, in Los Angeles in 1966. They rose to prominence as one of the best West Coast rock bands with the release of their first two albums by Atco Records, *Buffalo Springfield* (1966) and *Buffalo Springfield Again* (1967). Their third and final album, *Last Time Around*, was released in 1968 after their dissolution. Buffalo Springfield was celebrated afresh in 2001 with the release of their 88-song box set.

Crazy Horse

Neil Young's primary band, used mostly for his harder rock albums, since 1969. The original band featured guitarist Danny Whitten, bassist Billy Talbot and drummer Ralph Molina. They are featured on *After the Gold Rush*, *Tonight's the Night*, *Rust Never Sleeps*, *Re-ac-tor*, *Ragged Glory* and *Sleeps with Angels*, for example. After his death from a heroin overdose in 1972, Whitten was later replaced by Frank "Poncho" Sampedro in 1974.

Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young

The supergroup Young first joined in 1969 and 1970. David Crosby had been with The Byrds and Graham Nash with The Hollies, while Stephen Stills had been with Young in Buffalo Springfield. They played at Woodstock and Altamont in 1969 and released the *Déjà Vu* album in 1970. They toured again in 1974 and regrouped twice thereafter to record two albums: 1988's *American Dream*; and 1999's *Looking Forward*. At the time of writing (September 2006), they had just completed their two-month *Freedom of Speech '06* tour of North America.

Jack Nitzsche

Eccentric musician and arranger (1937-2000) who is best remembered for arranging much of the *Harvest* album. Nitzsche also worked with The Ronettes, The Crystals, Ike and Tina Turner, Lou Christie, The Monkees, Buffalo Springfield, The Rolling Stones, Tim Buckley, Marianne Faithfull, Stevie Wonder and Graham Parker.

Elliot Roberts

Born in New York City in 1943, Elliot Roberts (birth name, Rabinowitz) has been Neil Young's manager and confidant since the latter left Buffalo Springfield in 1968. Roberts started his career in 1965 working in New York City for William Morris Agency, where he met David Geffen (later a founder of Geffen Records and then DreamWorks SKG). After meeting Joni Mitchell playing at the Café Au Go Go in Greenwich Village in 1967, he quit the agency business, signed Joni Mitchell and left to settle in Los Angeles where he formed Lookout Management. He also managed CS&N.

Pegi Young

Neil Young met his second (and current) wife, Pegi Morton, in the mid-1970s when she was working as a waitress on the West Coast. They started seeing each other romantically in late 1976 after the demise of Young's short-lived relationship with singer Nicolette Larson. He married Pegi in August 1978 in his Zuma beach house (two months before it was razed by fire). Towards the end of November 1978, she gave birth to their son, Ben. Their daughter, Amber, was born in 1984.

Forgotten classic

On the Beach (1974)

See the sky about to rain

Rating: ★★★★★

Produced by Neil Young with David Briggs, Mark Harman and Al Schmitt. Featured musicians: Neil Young (vocals, guitar and piano), David Crosby (guitar), Rick Danko (bass guitar), Tim Drummond (bass guitar and percussion), Levon Helm (drums), Ben Keith (guitars, dobro, organ, piano, hair drum, hand drum and vocals), Rusty Kershaw (slide guitar and fiddle), Ralph Molina (drums, hand drum and vocals), Graham Nash (piano), Billy Talbot (bass guitar), George Whitsell (guitar) and Joe Yankee (harp and tambourine).

Songs: *Walk On*, *See the Sky about to Rain*, *Revolution Blues*, *For the Turnstiles*, *Vampire Blues*, *On the Beach*, *Motion Pictures* (for *Carrie*) and *Ambulance Blues*.

Depression as art

Every other great rock band and artist with a prolific output has that one album (sometimes more) that provokes heated debate: is it really that good? More so, is it a five-star classic album that critics and fans panned unfairly or downplayed at the time of its original release? Here, one thinks of The Beatles' *Let It Be*, The Rolling Stones' *Between the Buttons*, Bob Dylan's *Oh, Mercy*, Pink Floyd's *Animals* and Led Zeppelin's *III*. In the case of Neil Young, the keenly debated lost – or overlooked – classic work has to be 1974's *On the Beach*, an album Young himself was reluctant to rerelease on compact disc (CD), but Reprise Records had the good sense to eventually release it on CD in 2003. The devoted Neil Young completists are all the better for having this stark masterpiece in their CD collection.

Shortly after the album's release, Young told *Rolling Stone* magazine it was "probably one of the most depressing records I've ever made" –

and today his sentiment remains relevant. Nevertheless, this does not mean *On the Beach* is a poorly conceived and executed work – or disconcertingly flawed and to be avoided. The album should be appreciated in the context of Young's own vision and art, as much as the wider times in which we wrote and recorded *On the Beach*. Richard Nixon was in the White House; the Vietnam War had not yet ended; the utopian dream of the Beat Generation lay splintered; and the 1973 oil crisis – besides its political connotations – had heightened thinking about environmental preservation and sustainability. In addition, he was still reeling from the impact of *Harvest*, his previous studio album, being such an MOR hit.

Apocalyptic beauty

Today – as in 1974 – *On the Beach* is an honest, candid, heartfelt album with Young laid bare, vulnerable and forlorn. The instrumentation is stark and sometimes eerie and disconcerting; his voice is shakier and frailer than usual; and the no-frills lyrics are kept to his personal and political concerns of the day. There is no extraneous guitar note or cymbal fill; there are no effusive lyrics; and there are no lushly layered arrangements. More than 30 years on, *On the Beach* remains one of Neil Young's most intimate, appealing and enduring works because of its pared and apocalyptic beauty, deep introspection, languid tempo and restrained melodies.

Among other topics, his lyrics cover or allude to his wilting relationship with actress Carrie Snodgrass, the dreaded Richard Nixon administration and the persisting Vietnam War, the post-Oil Crisis economy, the death throes of the shattered hippie dream, the dilemmas of fame and a sense of self-crisis and lost zeal. Then there is that scary allusion to Charles Manson in *Revolution Blues* – a foreboding song with enough apocalyptic intensity to challenge hippie idealism and naiveté – if not the hash-soaked irony of dropping out, but not tuning in.

On the Beach, symbolically, took Young to the waterfront to retreat, reflect and regenerate

himself. He escaped the city and, more significantly, the “crystal canyons” (eg, Laurel Canyon) he would later allude to on *Rust Never Sleeps*. Young was rebelling not just against The System but, perhaps, more significantly, the excesses of the hippie counterculture and, worst still, the hollow hedonism of his wealthy rock-star contemporaries – CS&N included.

Truth laid bare

To compound matters, Young had to deal with the dissolution of his relationship with Carrie Snodgrass – and the emotions of loss, regret and uncertainty. Like Dylan, a year later with *Blood on the Tracks*, the demise of Young’s once cherished romantic partnership provided the extra impetus he needed to plumb the depths of his psyche and his deeper musical talents, and create a masterpiece of timeless disenchantment, poignancy and urgency. It is also significant that he draws on the spirit of the blues more so than any of his 1970s albums and uses the word *Blues* in three of the eight songs. As with many of America’s great bluesmen, from early Robert Johnson through to latter-day Muddy Waters, Elmore James and John Lee Hooker, Young knows that blues is about being laid bare and telling the truth without sugar coating.

Young gets straight to the point on the opening track, *Walk On*, when he ruminates:

“I hear some people’ve been talking me down
Pick up my name, pass it around
They don’t mention the happy times.”

Here, we are assured – as we shall be over the next three decades – that Young defies the trends, traditions and the expectations of fans and the music industry. Change and adventure are intrinsic to his art. He has his own vision – and even if it gets clouded or confused at times, he is neither an apologist nor a sycophant. He has the gall to bid farewell to the idealism of the 1960s and proclaims with a gritty realism: “Sooner or later it all gets real / Walk on”.

On *See the Sky about to Rain*, he keeps the music restrained and forlorn to reinforce the idea

of some sort of impending deluge. Yet, we sense there is a form of personal catharsis concealed within his allegorical rain. To reinforce the message and mood, Ben Keith lets the steel guitar cry, while Young adds the requisite melancholy colouring on harmonica and Wurlitzer piano. One of the album’s most exciting and compelling songs, *Revolution Blues*, is a thinly veiled satire on Charles Manson and his crazed sidekicks in the wake of the Sharon Tate murders – and the sickening images of violence orchestrated by longhairs wearing peace symbols. To give it the otherworldly funkiness and subtle urgency, he enlists The Band’s rhythm aces – the late Rick Danko on bass guitar and Levon Helm on drums.

The cheap, tinny-sounding *For the Turnstiles* – with its hillbilly-styled banjo played by Young and dobro played by Ben Keith without further accompaniment – focuses his concerns on the relationship between the artist and his or her fans, and the growing impact of stadium rock in the 1970s. On the more urgent, ominous-sounding *Vampire Blues*, Young resorts to the standard, plodding 12-bar blues structure to reinforce his concerns about bloodsuckers in the form of oil moguls – and their counterparts in the music industry.

Seeking emancipation

The haunting, seven-minute title track, *On the Beach*, sees Young “ended up alone at the microphone” and it is the sparse vision of a disillusioned man facing himself, alone, and figuring out a way to emancipate himself from his outer inertia and inner turmoil. The opening lines capture his bleak mood: “The world is turnin’ / I hope it don’t turn away.”

This is one of the best angst songs of the 1970s – and is not far from the Primal Scream outbursts that shaped John Lennon’s masterful and sparse debut solo album of 1970, *John Lennon/Plastic One Band*. The song concludes with a great truism that may just be the emancipation he needs: “I head for the sticks with my bus and friends / I travel a road, though I don’t know where it ends.”

Most critics and fans tend to negate this song, dismissing it as being too self-pitying and indulgent. If anything, *On the Beach* is admirably honest and open for a fragile singer-songwriter who dares to bare his soul when so many of his mid-1970s contemporaries were concealing their drug-numbed inner demons behind clichéd counterculture platitudes.

Motion Pictures (For Carrie) is his most obvious love song of the album – and creates the impression that love, like a movie, is short-term, otherworldly interlude. Yet there is also that disconsolate feeling on this melancholic reflection on a disintegrating relationship that Young is simultaneously reviewing his eight-year career and pondering the burdens of fame and fickle friends.

Grand finale

On the final song, a nine-minute tour de force covering a potpourri of topics and a veritable spectrum of symbolism and allegory, *Ambulance Blues*, Young lashes out at his musical contemporaries, music critics, Nixon and others with the line “You’re all just pissin’ in the wind”.

The song turns full-circle from the wistful yearning for “the old folkie days” and ends with his scathing observation of disgraced American president, Richard Nixon:

“I never knew a man could tell so many lies
He had a different story for every set of eyes
How can he remember who he’s talkin’ to
‘Cause I know it ain’t me
And I hope it isn’t you.”

In September 1974, in his original review of the album for *Rolling Stone* (RS 170), Stephen Holden concluded about the final song: “In its appeal to a post-revolutionary, post-psychedelic generation of young Americans, *Ambulance Blues* stands as an epic lamentation, as irrefutable a piece of song-poetry as Paul Simon’s *American Tune* and Jackson Browne’s *For Everyman*. I could not imagine anyone but Young singing it.”



The symbolic cover had much to say ...

Other views

“The hard-edged sound of *On the Beach* is a contributing factor to its greatness, since the album poses aesthetic and political questions too serious to be treated prettily. Through various opposed personae, Young evokes primary social and psychic polarities that exemplify the deterioration of American culture. Though not named, the figures of Charles Manson and Patricia Hearst appear as emblems of apocalyptic social dislocation in the album’s two masterpieces, *Revolution Blues* and *Ambulance Blues*.

“In each song, by empathising with the emotions of both predators and victims, Young has dared what no other major white rock artist (except John Lennon) has – to embrace, expose and perhaps help purge the collective paranoia and guilt of an insane society, acting it out without apology or explanation,” **Stephen Holden**, reviewing the album in a September 1974 edition of *Rolling Stone* (RS 170).

“It was a therapeutic album, signalling Young’s emergence from a dark night of the soul, and analysing his past like a man three times his age, offering a fresh perspective on his future,” from *The Mojo Music Collection: The Ultimate Music Companion* (Canongate, 2003), edited by Jim Irvin and Colin McLearn.

★★★★★ “Maybe once in an artist’s life, he can become a clear-sighted visionary who can see around corners and through the bullshit. *On the Beach* was the product of exactly that moment,” **Peter Doggett**, *Mojo Classic: Neil Young* (volume one, issue four, 2005).

“... This is one of Young’s finest works, melodic, intense yet light, played exquisitely,” **Colin Larkin** in *All-Time Top 1,000 Albums* (Virgin, 2000).

“... This remarkable record ... remains, in many respects, the pinnacle of his achievement as a singer-songwriter,” **Johnny Rogan**, *The Complete Guide to the Music of Neil Young* (Omnibus Press, 1996).

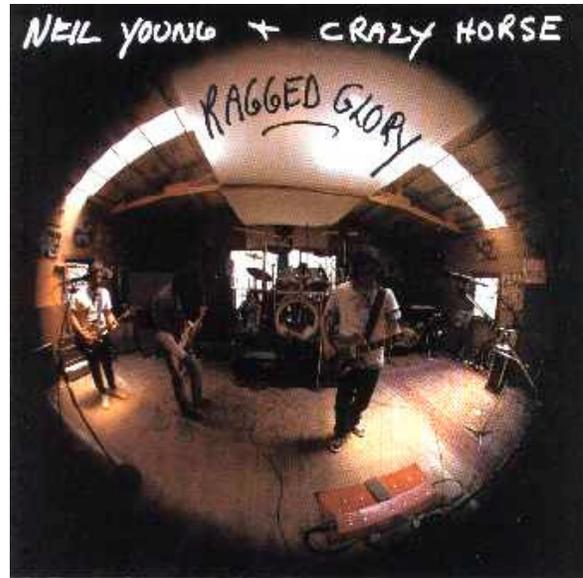
“Even by Neil Young’s melancholic standards, *On the Beach* is one bleak trip. An odyssey of regret, disgust and disappointment, the album marked the end of a love-in,” **Theunis Bates** from *1,001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die* (general editor: Robert Dimery; Cassell Illustrated, 2005).

★★★★ “*On the Beach* ... is weirder [than *Time* ...] but sharper, with harrowing lows and an amazing high in the off-the-cuff, apparently improvised eight-minute folk song, *Ambulance Blues*,” **Rob Sheffield** in *The Rolling Stone Album Guide*, fourth edition (Fireside, 2004).

★★★ “... but *On the Beach* was again unsatisfying. Perhaps trying to free himself from the ‘hitmaker’ expectations that dogged him ever since commercial success of *Harvest*, Young retreated into dissonance and strangeness,” **Paul Evans** in *The Rolling Stone Album Guide*, third edition (Virgin, 1992).

★★ “... this album’s apocalyptic prophecy is rendered all but unlistenable by Young’s grating, whining delivery,” **Dave Marsh** in *The Rolling Stone Record Guide*, second edition (Random House, 1979).

Notice how *The Rolling Stone* star ratings increase with time. Perhaps the fifth edition of *The Rolling Stone Album Guide* will award *On the Beach* five stars.



Ragged Glory (1990) – revisited

Burning ... over and over

Rating: ★★★★★½

Produced by Neil Young with David Briggs. Featured musicians: Neil Young (vocals and guitar), Frank Sampedro (guitar and vocals), Billy Talbot (bass guitar and vocals) and Ralph Molina (drums and vocals).

Songs: *Country Home*, *White Line, F*!#in’ Up*, *Over and Over*, *Love to Burn*, *Farmer John*, *Mansion on the Hill*, *Days That Used to Be*, *Love and Only Love*, and *Mother Earth*.

Neil Young’s 1990s grunge-fest album, *Ragged Glory*, made a bold statement right from the opening track, *Country Home*. This is Young’s eulogy about his privilege and joy of being able to live in a country home – and the photograph of him with a horse and his band, Crazy Horse, with rolling northern California hills in the background underscores his glee. This seven-minute, country-hued song dates back to the 1970s (originally as *Spud Blues*) and proves here to be the perfect garage-jam, workout song to get Crazy Horse in the mood for a romp.

This splendid opening song segues into his open-road song, *White Line*, which Young had recorded for his aborted *Homegrown* album. From here, a warmed-up Young and Crazy Horse move on to his deliciously self-deprecating *F*!#n' Up*, one of those songs that shows the mischievous, light-hearted side of Young – and what he does best: keeping his music raw, primitive, spontaneous and unselfconscious.

It doesn't stop there as Young and Frank Sampedro keep the burning guitar riffs rolling on *Over and Over*, which sounds like down-home, no-frills love song to his wife, Pegi – and, so, he is forgiven for not keeping his vocals finely tuned. He keeps the groove going (over and over) for almost eight-and-a-half minutes before extending the blaze with the appropriately titled *Love to Burn* – 10 minutes of mellowed passion about going through “the valley of hearts” and “taking a chance on love”.

Love to Burn is followed by a surprise rendition of a 1959 rock song by The Premiers, *Farmer John*, written by Don Harris and Dewey Terry. Young and Crazy Horse give this cover a plodding, medium-paced treatment with tongue-in-cheek vocals about being love with Farmer John's daughter – “the one with the champagne eyes”. *Mansion on the Hill* follows and sounds like a part-wistful, part-mocking paean to the days of 1960s hippiedom and psychedelic music. The heartfelt nostalgia flows over to the tenderer *Days That Used to Be*, with its hints of Bob Dylan's *My Back Pages*, before he shifts back into overdrive and returns to love on *Love and Only Love* with its reassuring line that “Love and only love will endure”.

Hendrix inspiration

By the time they are into the eighth minute of the song, its sounds like Young and Sampedro, guitar-wise, are stuck on cruise control with another 100 miles of trans-desert tarmac to traverse. *Ragged Glory* is an apt encapsulation of how he feels and sounds. Fittingly, he drops the tempo, takes a dash of inspiration from Jimi Hendrix's Woodstock rendering of *Star-Spangled Banner* and returns to terra firma with

his aching paean to Gaia, *Mother Earth (Natural Anthem)*, which he recorded live at the Hoosier Dome Farm Aid benefit at Indianapolis. In what sounds like a Greenpeace anthem, Young reminds us for all his concerns and passions about love, family, friendship and the “good old days”, he has his serious side intact as he implores us to “Respect Mother Earth and her healing ways” and to rethink the ways in which we use our host planet's resources.

If anything, Young is relaxed, assured, comfortable and in control of his muse. His songs are built around basic rock arrangements, straightforward, but alluring melodies and that inimitable, incendiary grunge guitar interplay he has developed in partnership with Sampedro. The picture of him sitting on a worn couch with torn jeans in what appears to be his home studio, Broken Arrow, says it all.

Other views

“Young teamed up with Crazy Horse and together they created a deliciously exhilarating barrage of incendiary sound, where noisy, brash guitars intersected with intelligent lyrical snaps and growls, and structures fitted comfortably from country-flavoured rock songs to 10-minute distorted jams,” **Lois Wilson**, from *Q Mojo Classic*, volume one, issue four (Neil Young).

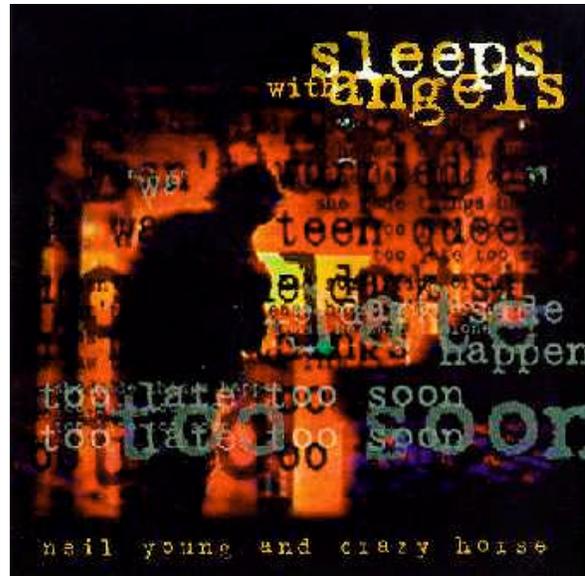
“*Ragged Glory* revealed Crazy Horse at the most raucous, playing no-holds-barred rock that made them such favourites to a generation of Young fans. With their grunge style now the height of fashion, the album was perfectly timed. It was the classic example of raw excitement overcoming substance,” **Johnny Rogan**, from *The Complete Guide to the Music of Neil Young* (Omnibus Press, 1996).

“*Ragged Glory* established Young as rock's elder statesman, the one '60s veteran who was learning and teaching new tricks, sounding relaxed and affable with his hipness level at an all-time high. No rocker this old [*then 44*] had ever been this relevant, and Young kept his creative roll going all decade long,” **Rob Sheffield**, from *The Rolling Stone Album Guide*, fourth edition (Fireside, 2004).

Discography

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, SG] ★★
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



Sleeps with Angels ... the mid-1990s classic

Neil Young with other artists

Buffalo Springfield: *Buffalo Springfield*, 1966 ★
Buffalo Springfield: *Buffalo Springfield Again*,
1967 ★★
Buffalo Springfield: *Last Time Around*, 1968 ★
Buffalo Springfield: *Retrospective*, 1969 [c] ★
Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young: *Déjà Vu*, 1970
★★
Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young: *Four Way
Street*, 1971 [I] ★
Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young: *So Far*, 1974
[c] ★★
The Stills-Young Band: *Long May You Run*,
1976
Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young: *American
Dream*, 1988
Crosby, Stills and Nash: *CSN*, 1991 [two-CD
anthology] ★★
Crosby, Stills and Nash: *CSN*, 1991 [four-CD,
76-song boxed anthology] ★★
Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young: *Looking
Forward*, 1999
Buffalo Springfield: *Box Set*, 2001 [88-song
boxed anthology] ★★

Waddacor's Top 10 LPs

Everybody Knows This is Nowhere, 1969
After the Gold Rush, 1970
Harvest, 1972
On the Beach, 1974
Tonight's the Night, 1975
Rust Never Sleeps, 1979
Freedom, 1989
Ragged Glory, 1990
Sleeps with Angels, 1994
Living with War, 2006

Bubbling under (the next five)

Zuma, 1975
Comes a Time, 1978
Harvest Moon, 1992
Mirror Ball, 1995
Prairie Wind, 2005

Proceed with caution

Trans, 1982
Everybody's Rockin', 1983
Landing on Water, 1986
Life, 1987
Broken Arrow, 1996
Are You Passionate?, 2002

Colin Larkin' Harvest of 11

Based on extensive worldwide research and voting by more than 200,000 music enthusiasts, this is how 11 Neil Young albums fared in the third edition of Colin Larkin's *All-Time Top 1,000 Albums* (Virgin, 2000):

- (1) *After the Gold Rush* [62]
- (2) *Harvest* [93]
- (3) *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere* [124]
- (4) *On the Beach* [195]
- (5) *Rust Never Sleeps* [240]
- (6) *Zuma* [410]
- (7) *Harvest Moon* [755]
- (8) *Tonight's the Night* [888]
- (9) *Live Rust* [918]
- (10) *Weld* [949]
- (11) *Freedom* [996]

Getting 11 albums featured in a top 1,000 list is an impressive feat. In Larkin's book, The Beatles and Miles Davis were both acknowledged for 14 albums each, Bob Dylan for 13, REM for 12, The Rolling Stones for 11 and Pink Floyd for 10. David Bowie, Grateful Dead, Bob Marley and Van Morrison each had nine of their albums featured in the top 1,000, as were eight albums by Led Zeppelin and seven albums each by Elvis Costello and Metallica.

Larkin personally rates these as the five best Young albums:

- (1) *After the Gold Rush*
- (2) *On the Beach*
- (3) *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere*
- (4) *Rust Never Sleeps*
- (5) *Freedom*

Robert Dimery's Six Pack

Six of Neil Young's albums are featured in *1,001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die*, Robert Dimery (gen editor) (Cassell, 2005):

Everybody Knows This is Nowhere
After the Gold Rush
Harvest
On the Beach
Tonight's the Night
Rust Never Sleeps



Neil Young trivia

- Neil Young has been inducted into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in the USA (as a former member of Buffalo Springfield and as Neil Young). He has also won scores of awards for best artist, best album and other categories from numerous American, British, Canadian and other publications, radio and television stations, and other organisations, the details of which are listed on some of his fan-run websites.
- He has directed or co-directed four films as Bernard Shakey: *Journey through the Past* (1972); *Rust Never Sleeps* (1979); *Human Highway* (1982); and *Greendale* (2002).
- Young is the proud owner and restorer of several veteran cars and is said to keep every car he buys, including Mort, the 1953 Cadillac hearse he used to travel from Toronto to Los Angeles in 1966 to establish his American-based music career.
- He is a pro-environmentalist and operates his trans-America tour bus on biodiesel derived from renewable biotic sources. He also owns a Hummer developed to run on alternative fuel, which is said to burn 90% cleaner than a standard General Motors Hummer.
- Young owns a 101-foot wooden schooner built in 1913, the *WN Ragland*, named after his maternal grandfather, William Ragland.
- He is a model-train enthusiast and maintains a vast “train barn” at his Broken Arrow ranch. He and wife Pegi are also part-owners of Lionel Corporation (visit www.lionel.com), the American model-train manufacturing and marketing company to which he has contributed several technological ideas.

- Young is an ice hockey fan and likes to watch San Jose ice hockey games with his younger son, Ben.
- Two of his domesticated buffalo were used in the production of the Kevin Costner film, *Dances with Wolves*.
- When the American rock band, Iron Butterfly, re-formed in 1968, Neil Young expressed interest in being the new guitarist, but Doug Ingle opted for a young Erik Brann over the choice of Jeff Beck, Michael Monarch (Steppenwolf) and Neil Young.

.....

How do you rate Neil Young?

What do you consider to be the eight best Neil Young albums – and which are his four worst records? Please send your lists to Soul Star Publishing before October 31 2006 We’d like to feature a readers’ list during November 2006.

Websites

- www.neilyoung.com
- www.thebuffalospringfield.com
- csny.com
- human-highway.com (fan site)
- hyperrust.org (fan site)
- www.thrasherswheat.org (fan site)
- www.rollingstone.com

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