

# HARD AS NILS

**Nils Lofgren still faces the music almost 50 years on. By Rush Evans**

**IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE** a better job for a musician than being in Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band. But in order to get there, you have to be good. Really good. And players that good must have drive, stamina and ambition. That's why these musicians do other creative projects between E Street tours, everything from session work and producing records to hosting a radio show and fronting a band on late night television. And in the case of Nils Lofgren, you make Nils Lofgren music, writing and performing your own songs in the same parallel career that led Springsteen to hire you in the first place. Springsteen had already been a longtime fan of Nils before bringing him into the E Street fold in 1984, and there's a reason for that.

Lofgren was a seasoned musical pro long before E Street, working with Neil Young during the "After the Gold Rush" era, fronting his legendary band Grin and recording a number of stellar solo records. And getting on E Street has not taken him off every other musical road, as he's still pursuing that magical solo career.

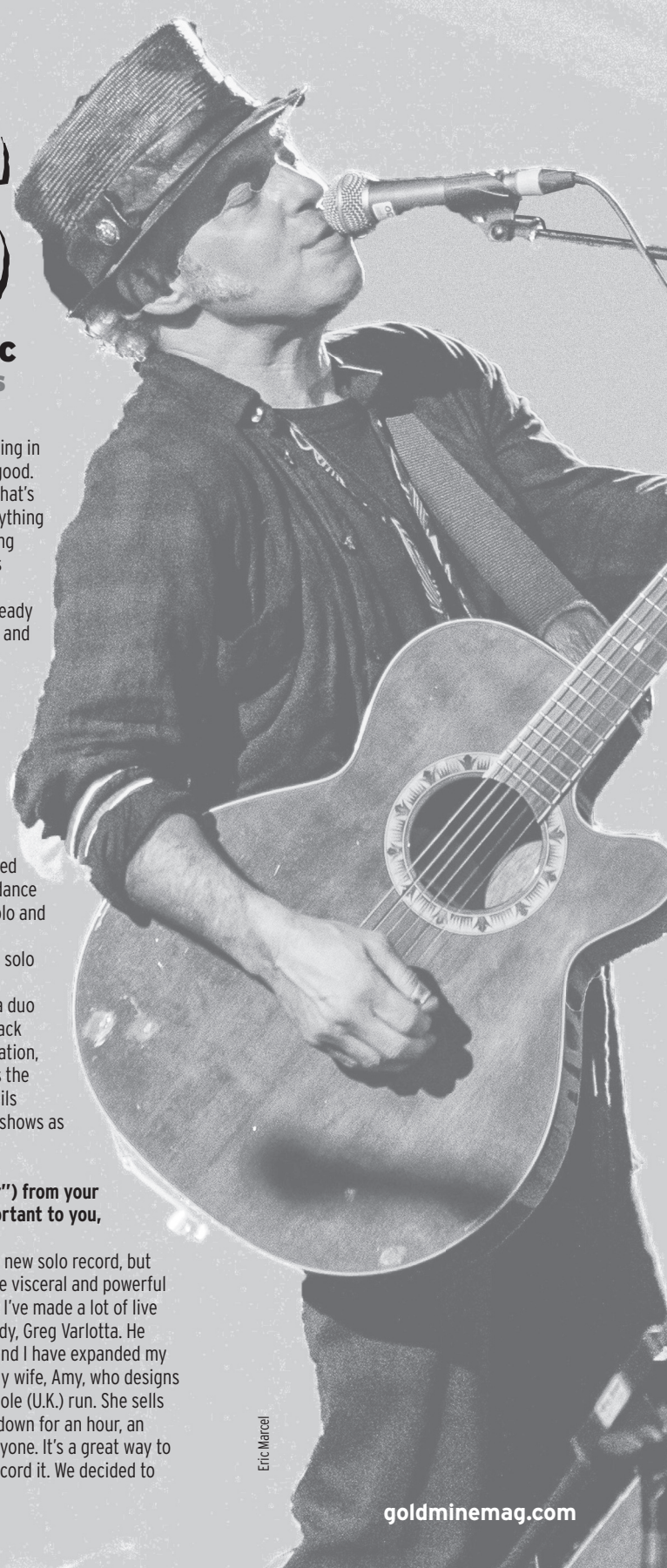
Nils has long been known for his soaring guitar solos and soulful voice, but his acrobatics on stage have drawn a lot of attention, too - his gymnastic abilities lending a celebratory enthusiasm to the musical proceedings at both solo and Bruce shows. And now, at 64, he has two metal hips, which have slowed down this renaissance rocker not one bit, as he has begun incorporating tap dance and harp (not harmonica, but the real deal, like Harpo Marx played) into his solo and duo shows.

Goldmine caught up with Nils recently as he was celebrating an upcoming solo tour, an expansive studio box set including five decades of sounds (available through [www.nilslofgren.com](http://www.nilslofgren.com)), and the recent release of a live record (from a duo show that included some of his most beloved songs, like "Shine Silently," "Black Books," "Walkin' Nerve" and "No Mercy"). Just a few weeks after our conversation, he would get that E Street call that comes every year or two, in which he hits the road hard as a member of the hardest working band in show business. And Nils Lofgren is still just as fulfilled by playing smaller theaters on his solo or duo shows as he is playing stadiums and arenas with the E Street Band.

**GOLDMINE:** The new record is a live one ("UK 2015, Face the Music Tour") from your annual trip to the U.K., and you have other live records. Are those important to you, since performing live is such a significant part of your life?

**NILS LOFGREN:** I hope to get enough songs next year to take up recording a new solo record, but just speaking for myself, there's some quality of when I perform live, it's more visceral and powerful and off-the-cuff and kind of reckless in a good way, and emotional. And thus, I've made a lot of live records. For the last bit of time, I've been doing an acoustic duo with my buddy, Greg Varlotta. He tap dances as percussion, he plays trumpet, a lot of keyboards and guitars, and I have expanded my jamming on the acoustic and even the electric, so it's a very colorful show. My wife, Amy, who designs these great T-shirts and produced the box set with me, she comes for the whole (U.K.) run. She sells the T-shirts at the end of the night; we call it the show after the show. I'll sit down for an hour, an hour-and-a-half, and sign anything and everything and have a chat with everyone. It's a great way to stay in touch with your audience. She said the show is so great; we should record it. We decided to

Eric Marcel



record the last half of the tour, and thought there's a great live record here, with some different touches to it, between the tap-dancing, the trumpet, I even started playing a little lever harp in the show. Amy gave me one for Christmas. It's like an exercise machine: you either hang clothes on it or you figure out how to use it. It's a newer version of one of my live shows. We got a great CD out of it, live in the U.K.

Last month was 47 years on the road, and it's really a second home for me, and it's what I love most about being a musician, the live performance. Not a big fan of leaving home anymore, but Amy calls that a champagne problem: when you have a home you love and dogs you don't want to leave. But once I get out there, it gives me a deeper focus on the show and it's the lifeblood of what I do.

**GM: Most folks in your line of work facing hip replacement surgery would surely decide that it's time to make music from a chair, but you've always been an acrobatic guy. So you found new avenues for keeping that element in your show. How did you come up with incorporating tap and harp?**

**NL:** I started on accordion when I was 5, and after the waltzes and polkas, you briefly move into classical music. So I've kind of spent a lifetime studying with great teachers. In '99, when we finally got Stevie Van Zandt back in the (E Street) band, which was great, you don't need four guitar players, so I challenged myself to take some lessons, crash courses if you will, and learn some pedal steel and bottleneck and lap steel and dobro and six-string banjo and broke the ice and finally learn how to pick with the damn metal picks on your fingers, which was kind of traumatic for me, after finger-picking with my flesh for 40 years.

When I had both hips replaced, between the trampoline flips on stage – which came from my junior high gymnastic things – the surgeon said you can't do that anymore.

Even way back to Shirley Temple movies, I used to love tap, so I thought I would just do this for myself, learn it for fun. Originally, tap was just a hobby, and now it's in my show. There's a video called Dream Big, it's me tap-dancing, playing the harp backward with one hand, singing with a headset, and then in the middle of the show, while I tap, I play a guitar solo with my teeth. That was a performance piece that took quite a while to put together. It's at a club a few years back, The Lamb's Head, and it's quite a hilarious piece. I'm always very physical and trying to figure out how to fit that in without it being gratuitous. So now we've got a couple of performance pieces that I tap in. Greg is always a fabulous percussive player; he's great every night. I'm hit and miss, but it's still a hoot for the audience to see me having a go at it.

**GM: When writing and performing, do you ever think of your pure and pretty voice and frequently gritty guitar playing as counter-balancing each other? Is there a plan there, or do you just sound like you sound?**

**NL:** The plan was more make the most of what you got. As a kid, I always wanted to sound like Muddy Waters or Paul Rodgers or Rod Stewart. I kept shouting, and that wasn't how you do it! Finally, I realized, you know what? I do have a voice that's pretty unique, why don't I just work with what I have and then marry it all together? I just try to embrace what I have and then go.

**GM: I have asked both Little Steven and Ringo this same question for this magazine. I have always seen those guys as zealots on a mission to keep rock 'n' roll alive, between Little Steven's evangelical passion for the history of rock 'n' roll through his radio channel**

**and Ringo's revival of classic rock artists on his All-Starr Band tours. Do you see yourself the same way, since you work the road and recording so hard this far in, and it's still rock 'n' roll? Is this a sort of mission for you, keeping this form alive?**

**NL:** It's funny you mention those two guys, who I have such a great history with. Many a night, going to a hotel room, I'd hear Steve's door cracked, hard at work listening to, like, 400 new bands. It's exhausting work putting those (Underground Garage radio) shows together, and it's so great, probably the greatest radio channel that's ever been. And getting to be in those first two All-Starr bands, too, there's a lot of power in what Ringo does and having this round robin of great hits. But for me, it's more the imprint on me, from seeing Muddy Waters, the Stones, The Beatles, Ray Charles, all these people I saw live in the '60s, there was a visceral imprint of the power of what rock 'n' roll could be. And, of course, I'm on the stage every night with Bruce; he's one of the greatest ever. It's more keeping that alive in myself as I get older and recognizing that whatever that was, it led to a life with some degree of sanity and wonder and something I couldn't be more grateful for.

I remember the first All-Starr band. I'd befriended Ringo for a number of years, and I was honored to be invited. We'd sit around, and he'd say, "I was in The Beatles (and I'd always remind him I thought it was the greatest body of recorded music in history), and I've got money, but I'm a drummer! I got sick from not drumming, and I need to go play in a band." You can't follow The Beatles, so instead of trying, he put together these round robin All-Starr bands. It left me an imprint. And also being mentored by Neil Young and his producer, David Briggs, from 17 on, I just have a healthy respect for the power of all music, in particular rock 'n' roll; it has such a visceral, healing element to it. It can deal with anything: tragedy, rage, joy. It's all jumbled in there. I need to keep that alive in my own soul and spirit or else I'm going to wither. Music is ageless and timeless and it's the universal language. Rock 'n' roll covers everything. I'm passionate about sharing it and keeping it alive in myself and anyone who will walk through the door when I sing and play.

**GM: How hard was it enter the E Street Band at a point in your career in which you had your own rich catalog? Was it tough learning the material quickly? It was pretty quick between joining and performing, right?**

**NL:** It was about a month before opening night, which, of course, isn't enough time. Everybody knew it. I moved into Bruce's Rumson (New Jersey) home. He was a bachelor and so was I. I holed up in this room upstairs. I had this boom box next to me, and literally through the night, I'd push the button if I woke up. And I had this crazy notebook with these big charts of not just the music but singing parts, where you stand, the show itself. He knew and I knew and the band knew that there was no way I was going to assimilate all of it before opening night. It was about 20 shows in. I remember the first night of a 10-night run at Meadowlands, I walked out and felt like I'd reached a level of comfort now in this band that only comes from osmosis and doing it. It was quite hairy for a while, but I studied my face off. I banned all other music, day and night. Bruce used to come up and laugh at me and say, "OK, look, I'm telling you to put the guitar down and get out of this room and let's go to dinner!" Every morning, we'd get up and have a small breakfast and go jog five miles through Jersey, just to start the day. Of course, now we joke that maybe that wasn't the best thing for our knees and hips. I got two friggin' metal hips! It was such a beautiful thing to be in a band and assimilate. It was an ideal music team.

**GM: It's been 30 years since you joined the E Street Band. When you were first invited, were you concerned that you wouldn't be able to dedicate time to your solo career? Has working with Bruce, Ringo and Neil ever been in the way of your solo work?**

**NL:** I remember when I was 18 and going to work on (Neil Young's) "After the Gold Rush" album. I remember how panicked I was about playing piano, because I wasn't a professional piano player. I thought, "Wow, it's nice to go to work and not be the bandleader!" It's fun not being the boss and being on this great team of people and making a great musical project come to life. Even then, I recognized – for me – how good it was to be in a great band

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and not always be the leader. There are a lot of non-musical issues as a bandleader. I'm happy to do them, but when they go away and you're just in a great team of people making great music, I love that. I embrace it. So, no, when Ringo asked me to play in his band or all the times with Neil Young or Bruce and the E Street Band, there was no political worry about "is it good for my solo career?" Look, I never had a hit record! What solo career? If you do your job right, it can be a magical night every night.

**GM: Well, it's an extraordinary solo career, as documented in the "Face the Music" box set you mentioned. Tell us about that project.**

**NL:** Fantasy Records let me pick every single track, and they went and got the rights to them. I was kind of amazed that without a big hit record ever, I could work with all these people and have all these people contribute to my records. I don't know if a 45-year career could ever exist like that again without some hit records, but it happened, and it's still happening.

I was shocked when Fantasy approached me. We agreed on a 10-disc package, which allowed me to put 40 bonus tracks in there, which is a big part of any box set - unreleased material. I had a wealth of it. There's a DVD and nine CDs, a 138-page book. Dave Marsh helped me; he insisted I write it and he edit it. It's the closest thing to a book I'll ever write. We spent two years putting it together. Fantasy went and got the rights; it's not easy! They got every track I wanted. It turned into a great box set we're very proud of. The box set gave a wealth of ideas for songs that I'd kind of forgotten about, because I'm so focused on today and tomorrow. This is a great stroll down memory lane in a professional sense to remind me that I have done quite a bit. There's some of it there that I'll fire up again and perform live.

**GM: I have to ask you about meeting Hendrix. How big a deal was that to a teenage guitar player?**

**NL:** I was playing guitar for fun as a hobby in middle America in the mid-'60s. Nobody thought you could do that for a living. One night I saw The Who at Constitution Hall, and we all ran over to Ambassador Theater (Washington, D.C.) to see Jimi Hendrix Experience's late show. Pete Townshend came over; he was in the audience. That night, watching Jimi, it was so great, he touched me, and I was so - almost uncomfortably - possessed with the notion that I think I need to do that for a living. It had never entered my mind, but sure enough, a year later, at 17, I was on the road with Grin. Fast forward, a couple years later, now Grin has made a record, we're on the road, and on my 19th birthday, we opened for the Jimi Hendrix Experience. We did three shows: Sacramento, Ventura, San Bernardino. I thought, "I'm never gonna have a chance like this again," so I walked back to the Winnebago trailer that was Jimi's dressing room. I knocked on the door, and he answers the door. I just grabbed his hand, shook it and said, "Look man, you're the reason I'm doing this and I couldn't be more grateful to be your opening act. Have a great show." It was just so cool to meet him and shake his hand and look him in the eye and thank him.

A while later, at the Baltimore Civic Center, I snuck backstage, and he was coming down a hallway. He was all alone. He had one of those beautiful outfits and his guitar on, of course. He looked pretty beat up. I said, "Hey Jimi, have a great show. Hey, are you OK?" He said, "Yeah, I'm kind of run down. They've got me doing 64 shows in 66 days." I said, "Have a great show, you're the best." He sauntered onto the stage, and I thought to myself, being naïve at that point, who the hell is having Jimi Hendrix play 64 shows in 66 days? Even if you're a ruthless manager and you see him as an investment, why the hell would you jeopardize his health like that? But look, I was young and naïve. Now I'm older and not quite as ignorant to the ways of the planet, getting used and abused. And it's not just in music. But I felt bad for Jimi.

**GM: And that story hasn't seemed to slow down your enthusiasm for road work.**

**NL:** It's been a great ride, and it's still going. Knock on wood, health permitting, I'll be doing some form of performing the rest of my life, which I love to do. I've worked fairly hard, but the actual core of the gift didn't come from me. It's kind of like a lottery ticket. I've got this musical gift, and if I work hard at it, I can walk out in front of a group of people and have a pretty great night and go talk to them afterward and sell some T-shirts and CDs and get on the bus, head down the road and do it again. It's really a beautiful dream come true. **GM**

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