

"One Last Dive Roll, for now . . ."

A Rockality story by Nils Lofgren

Little bit of history here on the stage dive roll with guitar.

Back in 1984 on the **"Born In The USA"** tour, I'd been doing my backflip off a mini-tramp with the guitar every night during the band intros in **"Rosalita"** (see *youtube video: Nils on the Trampoline*).

About 65 shows in, we stopped playing "Rosy" for a while. I remember one late night after a gig on plane flight somewhere in the US, Bruce told me he was probably going to pull "Rosy" from the set for a while and asked me if I'd miss doing the flip bit. Basically I'd been doing it nightly since 1969 (in my own shows of course, until now). Thinking about it, I realized it would be a relief not to have that crazy stunt in the back of my mind during the show. It's a good bit that really shouldn't be done early in any show when you're fresh, strong, and in most cases, dry! No, you gotta do it late in the night, or in the case of my shows, as a finale, when you're dripping sweat, exhausted and crazed, preferably delirious from a great night of performing music in front of a fired up crowd, equilibrium a bit hazy.

So hey, I thought it'd be great to take a break from the flip and that I did and that it was. "Rosy" left the set for a while. Don't remember the specifics, but there was still a band introduction by Bruce late in the E Street shows and with the flip out and me being used to creating some physical outburst at this point, I started sprinting across the stage and diving with my guitar into a dive roll and up, in front of Bruce during my introduction. It seemed an acceptable bit to all (except my neck and back, as my hands were holding my guitar, not cushioning the impact or assisting in the roll up of the stunt) and I kept it up every night. Bruce, ever the consummate showman, brought his natural gift for stage drama and flair to the bit by "clearing" out the area and giving me a "something's coming!" visual setup with his body language. So, another good bit that fit right into the circus nature of our grand shows.

Anyway, one night as I'm about to tear off into my sprint across stage, Bruce (without any warning or discussion, of course) stops me with a dramatic "wait a minute, hold up" gesture with a hand and wagging finger. Now all attention is on him and I'm especially surprised because no one knows what's coming next. A little "deer in the headlights" feeling starts creeping in to me as we all watch our bandleader for the next surprise cue out of this unexpected moment. With great miming drama, Bruce purposefully shuffles out into my runway path, still signaling me to hold on with that "wait, I got a better idea" inspired dramatic flair of his, and proceeds to make a great show of getting down on his hands and knees, telecaster hanging on the floor, still around his neck, and takes a few moments to alternate his gaze from audience to me and back, not that he doesn't already have our undivided attention but he builds the suspense anyway. Then he gives me my instructions.

Now Bruce is center stage, on hands and knees directly aimed and facing the audience. I'm all the way to his left, facing across stage. With his left hand on the floor for support, Bruce uses his right hand to point and motion to me that he's now ready for me to run and do the dive roll. He just makes sure we all know I'm now supposed to dive over him in the process. *Are you kidding me?! Do I look like Evil Knievel?!* Now, I've managed to do this for a number of nights with enough velocity to dive roll with my guitar, landing on my neck and back with enough momentum to hit and roll up out of it without too much damage. Diving and clearing an obstacle like our band-leader on all fours, presents some new, unexpected issues. First, it will require more speed and height to clear Bruce. This means a harder impact which is not good. Cutting this added height close to the obstacle to lessen the additional impact would be acceptable with an inanimate object but certainly not with our singer! God forbid I clip him with my guitar at high speed. I mean, I know I'm a decent guitarist, background singer, showman and all but let's face it—if the whole dang band went down, Bruce would finish the show with his guitar and voice and not only make it work, he'd make it a memorable, albeit unusual, inspired night for the audience. We're all veterans and

disciples of “the show must go on” school of thought and as long as Bruce is standing, the show will roar on until he decides to call it a night. However, if I take Bruce out with a guitar to the head, show over! (not to mention, potentially, job, life as I now know it, honorary New Jersey status, etc!). Maybe overly dramatic thoughts, but not out of the realm of possibilities.

So anyway, there’s a show, band and audience waiting. Being a ham myself, I do an *“Oh my God, I don’t know about this”* head shake and take off for my dive roll over the **“human Camero,”** our bandleader and master of ceremonies for the night, **Bruce Springsteen.** I manage the speed and height needed, launch as high as possible to avoid any contact with Bruce and land hard and roll back up, elated the task is complete and Bruce is unscathed. Audience loves it, Bruce approves and crashes us back into the show. So this continues as a nightly bit for a while. Bruce’s trainer Phil Dunphy, who’s become a good friend and my basketball partner on the occasional off days, grumbles once in a while that the dive roll’s not a very safe thing to do for me or Bruce for reasons mentioned above but hey, we’re on the “Born In The USA” tour, we’ve moved in to stadiums successfully and of course, we’re a little full of ourselves which actually is good for the show in reasonable doses.

As the dive roll bit continues, Bruce becomes more and more animated with his part of the bit, *“Stop! I got a great idea. Instead of a mere, no hands dive roll with guitar on—I’ll play the human Camero car part and let’s see you clear that!”* Being the amazing performer he is, he gets so good at his part that I start feeling almost secondary to the bit, even though I’m the one diving and crashing down on my neck and back. This I know has more to do with my *“egomaniac stage performer with a bit of an inferiority complex”* than reality. Nevertheless, one night as we’re approaching the band intros, I walk over to my bandmate and dear friend **Clarence “Big Man” Clemons** and ask him to please pay close attention to me and follow along with a surprise idea I’ve got in mind. Always a gamer, Clarence gives me a knowing nod of consent as I walk back over to my side of the stage although we both know he has no clue what I’ve got in mind. Thanks “C,” I know I can always count on you. So, Bruce begins the band intros, we do our bit, Bruce is now down on all fours and gives me the dive roll go ahead. I do a false start, pull up shaking my head and wave a finger at Bruce with a “not quite ready yet” expression. Bruce, needless to say, is taken by surprise in addition to being on all fours, center stage. Hopefully, before he gets annoyed, I dramatically signal Clarence who has kindly been watching intently and call him over, motioning for him to get down on all fours next to Bruce. Although challenging and inappropriately ambitious, I’ve decided tonight that in addition to diving over the “human Camero,” I will attempt to dive roll over the **“human tour bus”** parked next to the “human Camero.” Well, not to be upstaged by his bandmates, Clarence plays the part dramatically and with a “my friend’s not right” trepidation, illustrated beautifully, he gets down on all fours, side to side with Bruce. Bruce plays along, resets himself and the audience for this crazy turn of events and finally gives me the go ahead.

Well I asked for it, so off I go and with massive adrenaline and not a small amount of fear. I tear across the stage (in basketball shoes of course, thank God) and dive for my life over Bruce and Clarence. Brutal yet successful landing, clearing Bruce and Clarence requires a height not conducive to landing on the back of my neck. I pop up, relieved as hell. Bruce and “C” get up and we crash back into the show with everyone laughing at this silly, joyous entertainment. Of course, now this becomes the new nightly bit at this point in the band introductions and Bruce, Clarence and I milk it for all it’s worth. I’m noticing a new level of unwanted pain in my back and neck but hey, it’s show biz and this thing is working!

One afternoon at a gig, maybe after a half dozen shows or so in with this latest dive roll bit, Phil Dunphy calls me into Bruce’s dressing room for a chat. In uncharacteristically harsh terms Phil tells us the dive roll bit is irresponsibly dangerous, even for us and will inevitably lead to serious injury. I could get paralyzed with the beating my neck and back were taking on landing impact. With the inevitable fatigue that is part of marathon shows on a long tour, disguised by the massive stage adrenaline, I could accidentally collide with Bruce or Clarence and hurt one or both of them. Only bad awaits this stunt in Phil’s professional eyes. He counsels Bruce strongly that we’ve had our fun and it’s now time to call it quits in regard to this bit, for all our sakes. Bruce, ever thoughtful and analytical, agrees to give this information some thought and we all carry on with our day. Shortly after Phil’s talk, we might

have done it a few more times, I can't remember, Bruce stops the dive roll routine and I go back to some other "knee walk" bit I was doing during my introduction prior to the dive roll. Gotta admit, my back and neck were happy about that! In hindsight though, the laughs and camaraderie with band and audience were well worth the discomfort. So, that's the dive roll chapter from the "Born In The USA" tour, 1984-85.

Now, let's fast forward, what is it?, 23 years?! We're on the "**Magic**" tour, 2008. Three shows at Giants Stadium are approaching. I'm beyond thrilled and grateful to still be touring on stage with this extraordinary band and leader, doing what I consider to be the best shows we've ever done. We're all in to it, with more experience, musical and personal, along with more wisdom and gratitude collectively than we've ever had.

Meanwhile, I've had osteoarthritis for about 15 years and my hips are killing me. Too much city court basketball and trampoline flips, leaping off drum risers, pounding stages, basically having way too much fun. There's no cartilage left in either hip and they're both bone on bone. I'm pissed at the doctors that they can't just shoot a ball of cartilage in there with some "flubber" for additional leaping height. They assure me we're 30 years away from that and the only solution for me is full hip replacement so I've been reluctantly researching it for many months. Thank God for the shows. What a beautiful distraction from the pain. I feel I did a good job of not letting it affect my contribution and performance on stage with E Street. Anyway, I was commuting home to Scottsdale, Arizona whenever possible to be with my fabulous Jersey girl wife Amy, and enjoy our wonderful desert home she's created for us.

Part of being in a great band like E Street is the freedom to use your instincts and experience to improve your playing and performing. I had long since accepted, reluctantly, that the trampoline flip was not an option due to my bad hips. However, I'd started day dreaming about the dive roll and if and how I could use it again, especially with the Giants Stadium shows coming up. I knew my hips were shot but the main stress of that stunt is on the neck and back of course, and since the hips always hurt and there was no more cartilage left to destroy, maybe they could handle some dive rolls. It's also likely I'm in the midst of a low grade, mid-life crisis, exacerbated by my dang hips falling apart and exploring the dive roll seemed more therapeutic and certainly cheaper than buying a Porshe, getting hair plugs, or whatever!

I laid out a tumbling mat in the adobe garage studio Amy had put together for me when we moved here to our current home and decided to cautiously and carefully "research" the possibility and merits of potentially resurrecting the dive roll. Bruce had been giving me a long "**Because The Night**" solo at the end of the song regularly on the tour and I figured somewhere in that solo if I could dive roll and keep playing, it could be a nice bit of added drama to an already dramatic piece. What a great, great song! One of my favorites regardless of who's playing the solo. I figured it would probably make an appearance at least once during three shows at Giants Stadium. So in small, careful increments, I begin slow, forward rolls on the mat and eventually work up to a small dive roll without the guitar to see how my hips, neck and back feel about it. Not too bad. Next step, I try it with the strat on and bit of a run. Yikes! That bites a little but still feels like it might be doable in the heat of the show, with enough adrenaline and energy from the crowd. So, research complete enough, I'm back off to the tour with the knowledge that the dive roll is now an idea with potential.

The tour and great shows continue until we finally pull in to NYC for the run at Giants Stadium. The shows are as reckless and improv as ever and we all have a lot on our plates. All fun stuff mind you but it does keep you challenged and jumpin'. I like to go over to the gigs a few hours ahead of Bruce and the band to have some time to myself. Ease in to the show, work with the crew, mess with my instruments, warm up physically and musically – whatever I need to address personally that day to prepare. So the first show goes great and I decide that I'll never have a more dramatic setting for the dive roll resurrection and I start psyching myself up and preparing to be ready should "Because The Night" be called in the next two shows. At this point, Bruce is improvising the show to such a great degree that the setlist is almost useless, so I need to put a plan in place for if and when the opportunity arises. Due to my overall health, age and hip pain issue, I realize this is not even a "game day" decision, it's a "*heat of the*

moment, mid-solo” decision. So, I come up with a plan to navigate having the option for the dive roll and if I decide to do it, having it be effective. Knowing I may not ever feel comfortable doing it, there’s no reason to mention it to anyone. Bruce, band, crew—everybody’s really busy and that kind of “what if” daydreaming is too self-centered and not appropriate in regards to the big picture of the shows we’re presenting.

I set off from NYC to Giants Stadium for show #2. I arrive, dump my bags in the dressing room and set off on my cool little bike for the stage. Roy “Boomer” Witte, my guitar, amp, everything tech extraordinaire, gave me this neat, sturdy little two wheeler to get around these arenas and stadiums. Walking five miles a day on these no-cartilage hips before the show even starts, would be devastating and demoralizing. I know, I’ve tried it. I used the bike the whole tour and it saved my hips and spirit for the shows which is why we’re all here. So, I pull up to the back of the massive stadium stage and inquire where I can find Chris Hilson, our great video director. Chris has great musical and video instincts and has always been available to interact with the musicians about improving our ever-evolving show.

I found Chris in a makeshift “mad scientist” video tent off the left side of the stage with tons of equipment and TV monitors I know nothing about and ask him for some time to go over a potential dive roll idea in the middle of the “Because The Night” solo. He likes the sound of that and it’s possibilities so we sit down to discuss. Now Chris has these giant 42 feet high, 30 feet wide video screens on each side of the stage that he uses occasionally to highlight special moments throughout the show. Near the end of the solo I go into a pirouette-type spin for a while to give emphasis to a flurry of notes as the solo is peaking. This is a visual move I’ve been doing for a while that benefits from the big screens. The dive roll I have in mind would happen before and then into the spin, so it would need to be thrown to the big screens earlier so people could see it. Chris and I talk it through. At one point prior to the pirouette, I’ve been hopping back on one foot while pushing back and steering with the other and I usually travel back from the front of the stage back toward Max’s drum riser, and then break into the spin.

Not knowing whether or not I’ll feel comfortable or heated up enough to throw the dive roll we decide this: if during my “hopping back,” I continue straight back toward Max, this means I’m not doing the dive roll and it’s “business as usual” till the pirouette. If during my “hopping back” I take an obvious veer ‘cross stage and sideways over to Clarence, this means I’m gonna do the dive roll. My plan is to run from Clarence towards Bruce, dive roll at him and pop up right in front of him, going then immediately into the pirouette spin. Thus, Chris will make sure to cue the camera/video crew early, to make sure they’ve got the entire hop and run, takeoff and dive roll, and that he throws the image to the giant screens as I’m taking off airborne in order to get the most out of the stunt and share it with the audience. I tell Chris we are now the only two people in the stadium that know of this potential plan and we agree to keep it quiet except for a “need to know” basis for crew that have to implement it with us. We both agree that it’ll be a great moment if it happens and we both do our part. So off I go on my bike to carry on with my day of preparation, now excited the plan is in place.

Band and Bruce arrive later, we soundcheck and get ready for another great night. Sure enough, in the middle of the show Bruce calls “Because The Night” and off we go!

A few minutes in he gives me the solo nod and I launch into my solo at deafening volume in front of this screaming, beautiful band. Mid solo—I fall on my knees, center stage and at this point I realize that between Bruce and the band and the electric adrenaline of the audience, I’m heated up enough, feeling no pain, inspired and ready to go for it. Falling on my knees was easy and felt right. Getting up with my non-existent hips is something I hadn’t thought through but it’s time to get it done and it can’t be graceful. I lurch up as best I can and start playing into the musical movement that leads to the solo flurry where I’ll try the dive. I flail around with the energy of the crowd and music, making sure I stay heated and psyched up. I start the hopping back directly toward Max and quickly veer toward Clarence, picking up speed and real estate. I stop the hop near “C” and immediately take off running at Bruce. Trying to continue playing with some accuracy, I launch up, forward and over into my first dive roll on stage in 23 years. Well, it’s an exhilarating adventure! I manage it, roll up in front of a surprised and smiling singer

and thanks to decent timing, launch immediately into the pirouette. The roar of the crowd tells me Chris has done a fine job capturing it on the giant screens and as we finish the song, I'm certainly elated and relieved. The show roars on to a memorable finish. The dive roll's a success. It was a hoot to my bandmates and the audience loved it. I wind up doing it the third show also.

Of course, word spreads through the grapevine and I start getting frantic calls from family who mistakenly had been told, "*Nils did the flip at Giants Stadium! Nils is doing the flip again!*" Of course my family knows that would be crippling and insane, what with my shot hips, but I do have a significant history of irresponsible stage antics so it took a bit of work to explain the difference between a flip (which I was not doing) and the dive roll. Always will be a "**Rocklete**" at heart and this is a good example of that.

Now I know many of you must be thinking that this could've been a two paragraph story and it would take an obsessed lunatic to get this deep into a few seconds of stage performing. Well, for better or worse, I'm guilty as charged. A live show with an amazing band is an arena I love and thrive in. Having the freedom and experience to explore, create and take advantage of special moments is a gift and a joy, whether the ideas are big or small.

Both dive rolls from nights 2 and 3 at Giants Stadium are available to view at the **Rocklete Page** in larger format. The first clip (2nd show) begins mid-solo, just before I fall on my knees. The second clip (3rd show) is the entire solo. Both nights you can see the stunt brings a smile to Bruce's face which is great to see. As bandmates we are all able to do that for each other thanks to the freedom we are given to express ourselves in this great band. Of course, Bruce has us smiling, laughing and shaking our heads in wonder and joy at his gift for music and performance every night, as do my bandmates. That is a miracle I'm honored to continue to share and partake in as a bandmate and a fan. Hope you enjoy this first "Rockality" story of mine. Thanks for taking the time to wade through it!

By the way, anyone who is interested in learning the "Because The Night" solo on guitar can find it at the Intermediate Guitar School in three parts. I continued to tweak it on tour and I believe it got a bit better. I break it down lick by lick, very slowly and clearly.

Peace and Believe, *Nils*