



*By Chip Lovitt - GJD Contributor*

A few columns back, I wrote a piece about [the troubadour tradition](#) -the idea that the combination of a great songwriter, a good guitar, and a distinctive voice never loses its appeal. While I was writing about James Taylor in that column, I got another reminder of that phenomenon when Neil Young pulled into New York City for a six-night stand at somewhat-new venue, the United Palace Theater. Certainly Neil Young is a great example of a songwriter-guitarist who's been able to not only survive, but thrive after more than forty years of making music.

I've been a Neil Young fan since 1967. Back then, I was a 14-year old guitar wannabee with a black Hagstrom III and Princeton Reverb amp playing along in the basement to the many cool riffs on the Buffalo Springfield's first album. I had been inspired by the Beatles and the Byrds a few years earlier, but I was instantly knocked out by the Springfield's three-guitar lineup of Stephen Stills, Neil, and Richie Furay. The guitar playing was great, but so was the songwriting. There was also something especially compelling, even haunting, about Neil's tunes—"Burned," "Out of My Mind," and "Nowadays Clancy Can't Even Sing."



When I saw the band on TV the few times they appeared on network television, they looked totally cool and in control. The image of Neil in his fringed leather jacket and playing a big Gretsch White Falcon was and still is indelibly etched into my musical memory.

When the band's second album, Buffalo Springfield Again, came out, I spent hours trying to

learn every lick in Neil's signature song, "Mr. Soul"; from the "Satisfaction"-like opening to the layers of overdubbed and fuzzed up lead guitar solos. Not that I could get those sounds on my Hagstrom, but it was like throwing gas on a fire. I was hooked on that sound.

Just as the Springfield peaked, however, they broke up, leaving a large, disappointed cult following in their wake, one that lasts till today. A year or so later, though, Neil came out with his first solo record, simply titled Neil Young. Neil didn't even put his name on the front of the first edition of that LP. (It's a valued collector's item now.) The LP kicked off with a country flavored instrumental called "The Emperor of Wyoming"; but it was the next cut, "The Loner"; that utterly floored me. The lyrics, the blend of electric and acoustic guitars, and Neil's edgy, haunting vocals all came together in what would be his first solo signature song.

After his second record, Everybody Knows This is Nowhere, came out, Neil and Crazy Horse came to the Fillmore East on March 6, 1970 in a triple bill with Miles Davis and the Steve Miller Band. I remember it like it was yesterday. Hiding a bulky Radio Shack recorder and microphone under my winter jacket, I made a bootleg recording of the concert, one of my all-time favorite Fillmore shows. It would be a tape I would treasure and trade for decades until Neil himself issued an official soundboard-based CD, Crazy Horse at the Fillmore East, in his Archives series in 2006. Like many of his shows I would later see, it began with an acoustic set, followed by a scorching electric set.

From then on, I caught Neil every chance I got. I saw him with the Horse, solo, with the Stray Gators, the Shocking Pinks, and in practically every incarnation of Neil's chameleon like career. So when I heard he was coming to New York in December 2007, I had to be there.

As usual, Neil kicked off the concert with a solo acoustic set, strumming a battered Martin D-28, and opening with "From Hank to Hendrix";

"From Hank to Hendrix, I walk these streets with you. Here I am with this old guitar, doin' what I do";

Neil's high tenor voice may be a bit shakier than it was way back when, but it still carries a lot of power and presence, even when he slips into a musical whisper. Surrounded by a half-dozen acoustic guitars (a Taylor 12-string and a Martin D-45 given to him in 1970 by Stephen Stills prior to the famous Four Way Street shows at the Fillmore East to name two), Neil demonstrated that distinctive acoustic guitar style for which he's so well known. And the crowd-as usual-loved it, whooping and hollering at every familiar riff or lyric.

Neil sampled a few tunes off the new Chrome Dreams II CD, but also delved deeply into his vast catalog of great songs, including "Harvest"; "After the Goldrush"; "Out on the Weekend"; and "A Man Needs a Maid";

But it was his electric set that set the house on fire. Playing "Old Black"; the '53 Bigsby-equipped Les Paul, through an old Fender tweed amp, Neil cranked out a killer set that kicked off with "The Loner"; and "Everybody Knows This is Nowhere";

Ably backed by longtime musical companions, Crazy Horse drummer Ralph Molina, Ben Keith on steel guitar and Tele, and Rick Rosas on bass, Neil delivered the high-voltage, high-volume, stinging and ringing guitar solos he's famous for. Neil's electric guitarwork has not only lost none of its fire, but in fact, it's gained even more presence and power.

"Spirit Road," off the new Chrome Dreams II CD turned into a 20-minute tour de force, with long snaking lead lines that were drenched in distortion, delay, and reverb. Neil can play a lot of notes when he wants to, but he doesn't have to. That's the beauty and appeal of his playing, and a reason why he is such an original and emulated guitar player. It was also a real joy watching him do his trademark electric guitar stomp on the stage. It's not the usual rock star posing or going through the motions. It's the real deal.

Neil's catalog of memorable songs is also so vast he can pull out all kinds of old crowd-pleasing favorites and lesser-known tunes, too. He sang two 1970s obscurities--"Winterlong," (featured on the Crazy Horse at the Fillmore set) and "Bad Fog of Loneliness," an often-bootlegged tune. He also trotted out the old chestnut, Don Gibson's "Oh, Lonesome Me," off After the Goldrush.

To cap it all off, after "Cinnamon Girl," Neil launched into a slow-building, but smoldering version of "Tonight's the Night," a rare song in his live repertoire. When "Tonight's the Night" first came out, it was criticized by some for its "sloppiness" and out-of-tune edginess. However, time has shown that the song is one of Neil's classic, essential tunes. At a Neil Young concert, tonight's always the night...if you know what I mean.

Neil didn't do anthems like "Rocking in the Free World" or "Down by the River," but he didn't have to. When he finally ended the show with a killer version of "Cortez the Killer," the crowd left, more than satisfied.

Like I said earlier, there are not many performers who can sustain the kind of 40-plus year career that Neil Young has, and still remain vital to the fans and rock â€˜n' roll. Neil may have once sung, "It's better to burn out than fade away." Judging from the show I saw, it's clear Neil Young isn't doing either