

NEIL YOUNG

IT WAS WHILE WAITING for a certain balladeer to play an outdoor concert in Boulder, Colorado, that I first heard Neil Young's "After the Gold Rush." It was a brand-new song in that fall of 1970, sent out over a big sound system to a gathering in a field on a sunny late afternoon. The striking thing was that for all the virtues of the balladeer to come, the crowd's peak unifying moment had come and gone with the song. What was left of hippie tribalism was summoned up, along with that perennially muscular engagement with issues that Young has always brought to his music. As Young sang, "Look at Mother Nature on the run in the nine . . . teen . . . seventies," syllable by syllable in that voice like someone etching glass with a diamond, the bandannaed hitchhikers and square-tied chemistry professors alike stopped their chatter and simply listened. Rocker, folkie, saint, country singer, reprobate — whatever he is, one has always had to say of Neil Young that he's the *only* one of what he is.

What other performer of any vintage could so irreproachably and lovingly incorporate what Johnny Rotten ("My, My, Hey Hey [Out of the Blue]") and Kurt Cobain ("Sleeps With Angels") have to tell us? Did rock & roll stardom have any wiser and timelier vivisection than Young's "Mr. Soul" on *Buffalo Springfield Again*?

Among the songs Young had been best known for prior to that day in 1970 was "The Loner," which seemed to depict his own singular, ever-watchful presence. Over the years he has proved his own best biographer, though it wasn't till 1973 that he really delved into such childhood disruptions as his family's move from Toronto to Winnipeg with the stark, unguarded verses of "Don't Be Denied": "The punches came fast and hard/Lyin' on my back in the schoolyard. . . ."

As the song's title implies, Young was not intending to be among music's beautiful losers, and for all his maverick stature, in his lyrics — most especially on the recent *Sleeps With Angels* — he's always celebrated and insisted upon the search for family and community togetherness. That's the strong spine his work shares with close contemporary Bruce Springsteen — the undying sense that even if rock & roll is an outsider's game, perhaps learned best alone in the cellar, it's a hollow art until it engages not only your own demons but those of society at large. The machine gun that "sings" in the new album's "Driveby" — like the "Safeway Cart" that rolls down the street in a ghetto dawn — is simply the latest image in a 35-album career that has never shrunk from the issues. If Young's politics have migrated toward a lonely libertarianism, he'll live in the pantheon of protest songwriters for "Ohio" alone. He cranked it out with band mates Crosby, Stills and Nash just days after the 1970 killings of four Kent State University students by National Guardsmen. From his march-time drawing of the battle line with "Tin soldiers and Nixon's coming/We're finally on our own," through the outraged howls of the outro, it was a catalyzing bugle call we wouldn't hear the like of until — well, Young's "Southern Man" a few months later.

However fervent his message songs have been, love songs of the most determined simplicity have always been near the heart of Young's work. From "Cinnamon Girl" to his first hit single, "Only Love Can Break Your Heart," to 1972's ubiquitous "Heart of Gold" to the hit (No. 1, no less) *Harvest* album and the 13-plus minutes of his latest album's "Change Your Mind," he's been on the side of fighting for love against any odds.

Bored with the mainstream he had entered with *Harvest*, Young soon "headed for the ditch," where he "saw more interesting people." Beyond the brilliance of 1975's *Tonight's the Night*, it was a desultorily successful few years. No matter; he was headed for the brawling masterpiece that was 1979's *Rust Never Sleeps*, featuring Crazy Horse, the band with which he makes up a quartet. Its ethic is to jam, not overdub, and to hear the musicians on the 1991 *Weld* tour so to hear how Young's guitar work with Frank Sampedro is not so much lead and rhythm as much as it's like watching the two halves of a split firecracker blazing away. A stage-stalking Young showed on that tour that he's still got plenty of Elvis in him.

Those who argue that *War and Peace* might not be as great a novel if it lacked its boring stretches may cherish a fondness for the *Re-actor* and *Trans* albums of the early '80s; the latter's computerized sound derived partly from the artist's computer-aided efforts to communicate with his son Ben, a cerebral-palsy sufferer. Through every shunt, turn, sidetrack and triumph, Young has been relentlessly prolific — one of the few artists whose mistakes we're willing to hear. Later in the '80s (marked by the rude wit of *Everybody's Rockin'*, Neil Young and Crazy Horse's *In a Rusted-Out Garage Tour* and *Freedom's* yowling "On Broadway"), the rebel proudly wore his hair shirt, nursing such aggravations as a lawsuit from a new label where he'd stayed but briefly and, in 1988, MTV's decision not to air his scorching "This Note's for You" video (MTV later anointed it Best Video of the year).

Freedom's "Rockin' in the Free World" — many call it the best rock performance ever seen on *Saturday Night Live* — set the stage for 1990's *Ragged Glory* and its signature tune, "F*!#in' Up." The album's cover showed Young and Crazy Horse playing live in his California ranch's hardwood studio: just bass, drums and two guitars wailing hard enough to reach a whole new generation of grunge rockers and reclaim the crown. The telling question is how many among that generation could segue immediately into the feedback-soaked lyricism of a love song like "Over and Over." One thing we know about Neil Young is, he'll be rooting as hard as anyone for those who try. He has the generosity and the curiosity of an artist determined to renew himself — and us with him. John Updike, writing of Ted Williams' last, undemonstrative home-run trot, said, "Gods do not answer letters." This one does — 25 years' worth — and who's to say the next answer won't be the best of all? — FRED SCHRUERS

Neil Young on the set of his film "Human Highway," Hollywood, 1980

