



Neil Young, left, and record producer Daniel Lanois worked on the new album, "Le Noise." They were both photographed among the redwood trees near the Mountain House Restaurant in Woodside, Calif. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

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## Neil Young and Daniel Lanois click on 'Le Noise'

**The singer-songwriter performs all eight songs on the album with just voice and guitar, crafted by the producer.**

By Randy Lewis, Los Angeles Times

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WOODSIDE, Calif. —It's a pronounced climb up a winding road to the hilltop restaurant where [Neil Young](#) and [Daniel Lanois](#) have ensconced themselves for an afternoon to talk about their singular new collaboration, "Le Noise."

Sitting on an enclosed deck 2,000 feet above the San Francisco Bay to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west, this pair of newfound musical kindred spirits can gaze out into a dense grove of towering coastal redwoods. The air is thick with the rich scent of natural mulch and moss; the remote quiet is broken only occasionally, if jarringly, by the roar of a passing motorcycle.

This location seems less the result of coincidence than design: It's a geographical counterpart to the rarefied musical ground Young and Lanois have staked out together through the eight songs that make up "Le Noise."

"Very early on," Lanois said, "I realized that my favorite songs of this project all had a message. And I invented this idea that he had just come down from the mountaintop and he had the tablets with him. So I said, 'Neil, what's the message?'"

There are many. In various songs, Young mourns the loss of close friends — this year alone, that's included filmmaker [Larry "L.A." Johnson](#) and steel guitarist [Ben Keith](#) — and offers up thanks for those who remain within the tight-knit circle he's kept for much of his life; questions the country and the world outside that circle; and yearns for inner understanding that he still finds elusive even with nearly 65 years behind him.

Indefinable revolution is the undercurrent in the album's closing track, "Rumblin'," one of several politically minded songs in which Young now seems more concerned with asking the right questions than attempting to shove answers down anyone's throat.

"Something's going on right now," said Young, seated next to Lanois at one of the restaurant's white-clothed tables. "We're in the middle of a huge change or turnaround, but I don't know really what it is. But you can feel that something's going on. We've had enough of whatever it was. People have had enough of it. They've seen it over and over again. It defies real description of what's really going on. We won't know for a little while."

Young speaks softly and evenly, his hazel eyes revealing a hint of curiosity about what may be coming next. In Lanois' company, he's upbeat, even playful at times, but ever attentive to the task at hand. At one point, he breezes past a photographer who's being introduced to him without turning his head or batting an eye.

"Le Noise" is technically a solo recording, just Young and one guitar — an electric instrument on six, an acoustic on the other two, recorded live with no overdubs, no Crazy Horse, no Crosby, Stills, Nash or any of the other pals who've often accompanied Young over the last four decades. But he's found a band's worth of [assistance from Lanois](#), who thickens, deepens, amplifies, echoes, magnifies and otherwise enhances the basics of what Young picked, strummed and slashed during recording sessions at the producer's home in Silver Lake.

Young, outfitted rock-veteran comfortable in a weathered straw fedora, a black T-shirt, military green jacket, faded blue jeans and black western boots, elucidated the ways that Lanois has sliced, diced, julienned and reconfigured the live performances that Young laid down. The effect reaches well beyond the sonic atmospherics the seven-time Grammy-winning producer wove into highly regarded albums he's made with U2, Bob Dylan, Peter Dinklage and Emmylou Harris.

"It's one guy singing and playing," Young said, "except it's decomposing and falling apart and all the pieces are coming back upside-down and huge and small and blown up and coming back and being mixed back in with where they came from. It's like you throw all the pieces up in the air and run through and they all stick to you. But the pieces he chose to do this with, that's the magic."

A lifelong believer in the nexus of film and rock music who has enlisted filmmakers Jim Jarmusch and Jonathan Demme to direct some of his concert movies, Young was drawn to team up with Lanois after viewing several atmospheric, black-and-white [YouTube videos of Lanois' own band, Black Dub](#). He invited Lanois to record and film him working on a solo album. Although they began with an acoustic guitar that Lanois had specially prepared for Young with enhanced sonic capabilities, they quickly switched the primary focus to the electric guitar.

"Everybody associates 'acoustic' with 'solo,'" Young said. "But once we heard solo electric, we started associating electric with solo.... The reason why it seems so original is because it has a perimeter. It's enclosed. It's like a wild animal in a corral. No other animals can get to it, and it can't get out to the other animals. So you're dealing with this one thing: the electric guitar. Not 10 electric guitars and a bunch of overdubs; just one performance with one guitar."

That's a succinct summation of this collection of ferocious rockers and reflective ballads, which will be released Sept. 28. (One edition will include a DVD with the films.)

"All this technology Dan brings is really old," Young said. "And he's capturing all these things that are old: The instrument itself is old. I'm old," he said with a laugh, then added, "Dan is young."

### **Rough months**

Actually, Lanois is 59 on Sunday — nearly six years Young's junior — and has recovered from an incident that nearly cut his life short.

Three months ago, Lanois took a nasty spill on his motorcycle, just down the road from his home of seven years overlooking Silver Lake, after swerving to avoid hitting a car that had turned in front of him. He missed the car, but not a sidewalk electrical box that sent him flying about 150 feet, and landed him a three-week stay in intensive care with broken ribs, collarbone and pelvis.

It was almost more than Young could take when he first got word of the accident, which came just six months after filmmaker Larry Johnson, a close friend of Young's for 40 years, died suddenly. While Lanois was still recuperating, Young's longtime musical collaborator Ben Keith died of a heart attack. Young himself underwent brain surgery in 2005 to repair a potentially life-threatening aneurysm.

"Here we are, we're going along, we're making a great record," Young said. "I finally found a new compadre that I can work with and I feel really good about it. Then the first reports I hear are that he's just *splat!* That's it."

### **True collaborators**

Both men appear to have found some measure of healing in collaborating on "Le Noise."

"My accident, the lost friends — I think all of that's gone into the record," Lanois said. "Record making is not absent of life. I don't want to get all mystical about it, but whatever's been happening to Neil, it might be a more passionate record consequently."

It's arguably Young's most consistently potent work in the last decade, and another stylistic departure for the ever-restless artist who in recent years has zig-zagged from the reassuring folk setting of 2005's "Prairie Wind" album and its companion [Demme-directed concert film "Heart of Gold"](#) to the bristling anger of 2006's ["Living With War"](#) to the jumbled blue-collar charm of last year's ["Fork in the Road."](#)

"Le Noise" certainly fed Young's lifelong passion for toying with technology, which surfaced in a big way on his synthesizer-laden 1982 album, "Trans"; on last year's massive ["Archives, Vol. 1"](#) box set; and remains at the forefront today with his LincVolt project for converting a gas-guzzling 1959 Lincoln Continental into a clean-burning electric vehicle.

But what Young seems to prize most is the deeper dimension Lanois has brought to his songs. "He's grabbing the spiritual part of things, the soulful part of things — not just the ... strong and the weak parts," Young said. "He's grabbing the spirit of it and accelerating it.... Now you're zooming in on things, but you're still in the song because it's a

piece of the song. Now it can be seen, and felt, and that's what keeps hitting you as you're going through this."

It's no surprise to hear Young and Lanois predict that they'll work together again at some point, and for both artists, "Le Noise" represents something of a passing of the same torch they picked up as rock-music-obsessed fans growing up in different regions of Canada in the 1950s.

"At one point, I said to him, 'Think back: Why did we get into all this to begin with?'" Lanois said. "We did it because we thought that our heroes knew something that we didn't. And the music held a message; it held the promise of another kind of life. So given that we came into this because we thought that our heroes were speaking to us, and they were giving out information that we couldn't get from our neighborhoods or from our friends or our parents, we have a certain responsibility — even at this point in our lives — to provide that to somebody else who might not have the gift to receive information on their own.

"We're not saying we're better than anybody," Lanois stressed, "just that some people have the gift to receive information, and it's their job as troubadours to pass it on and let the word be heard."

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