

http://www.songfacts.com/blog/interviews/pegi_young/

Pegi Young has been married to Neil Young since 1978. Their son Ben has cerebral palsy, and Pegi spent many years helping to establish the Bridge School, which is devoted to teaching kids like Ben with severe problems communicating and other special needs. In 2007, with Ben and their daughter Amber grown (Ben became a successful organic egg farmer), Pegi stepped into the spotlight and released her first solo album after many years singing backup for Neil. Her second album *Foul Deeds* was released in 2010, with 6 of the 10 tracks written by Pegi. Here's where you can [hear it on Amazon](#)

Pegi took some time on a break from her tour to tell us about how she makes music and what it's like being in the same profession as her famous husband. She also shared some insights on how to make a marriage stick for over 30 years.

Pegi was a waitress at the Bella Vista restaurant in Woodside, California when she met Neil, who used imagery from the restaurant in his 1981 song "[T-Bone](#)."

Carl Wiser (Songfacts): We got an email with some [great pictures from the '70s of the Bella Vista](#).



Pegi Young: Oh, wow. The Bella Vista restaurant in California?

Songfacts: Yeah, it was the guy who used to work there as a dishwasher. His name is Mike Warner. And he said that there was a chef there named Art Morris.

Pegi: Yeah, yeah.

Songfacts: And he would scream out to the waitresses about how they had no t-bone, got mashed potatoes.

Pegi: (laughing)

Songfacts: Did that really happen?

Pegi: (laughing) Oh, shoot. Let me think back. We did have a porterhouse steak on the menu, so it's basically the same cut, right? (laughing) No, I remember Art yelling at me because I was a vegetarian and he was like, "You're eating bunny food. You eat like a rabbit." So Art was quite a character. We didn't have mashed potatoes, we had those little baked potatoes. But it's good urban legend, I guess.

Songfacts: Pegi, tell me about how you go about writing a song.

Pegi: Well, it really depends. I guess generally the lyrics come in first, but not always. I've written a few songs on piano and when I'd write the piano tunes, for some reason the melody comes in first. And sometimes I'll have a melody for a while before the words come in. I'm doing two new songs in the set. I wrote both of them on piano, although I'm playing one of them on guitar, because the great Spooner Oldham is with us and he plays the piano part.



But, you know, it's not formulaic. They just sort of appear sometimes. Something might spark the little thought or idea, and then sometimes it's almost like they just come in all written, in a way. It's kind of hard to explain, but they can just arrive. Like, I had this one piano song and I just had it for the longest time and was carrying it with me from city to city to city. It's one that's called "Broken Vows" on my *Foul Deeds* record and I was touring with my husband, and so we always have a piano in the room. I was just playing it and playing it and playing it, and then finally in Denver it just sort of went ah! and it came through.

Sometimes I just wake up out of a dream or I have a thought, like the song "Traveling," which is also on that record; I was driving down the street and saw this moving van and I had to pull over and write it down because it just came in. That one came in with pretty much the melody and everything. I'm grateful that I get them – maybe a more structured writer might sit down and just write. I'm not like that. They just pop in at will. Right now I have a lot of lyrics and I need some more melodies. I'm carrying some lyrics with me in hopes that the melody will decide to arrive.

Songfacts: Tell me about writing "Traveling." You see the moving van and something triggers in your head. What happened there?

Pegi: Well, it's really just the first line, something like, "Someone's always traveling, they're moving out, they're moving in." And it just kind of fell in. It doesn't bear much resemblance to the moving van anymore, but just maybe a person: why are they moving? What's going on? What's happened? What's their story? And then I probably observed something in somebody, myself, or something. Then, of course, they've had a fight and somebody's moving out.

Songfacts: A lot of your songs don't seem to be personal. Meaning, you didn't go through these experiences you're writing about. Is that correct?

Pegi: Well, I think there's little kernels of our lives in many of our songs, unless you're writing "[Cortez](#)" or something (laughing), it must have been in another life my husband was an Incan warrior. But I'm an observer, too, and I'm sensitive to what's going on around me. And so maybe it's something a friend told me, or maybe it's something I saw in a movie, or maybe it's something I read in a book. I draw from what's going on around me, as well as whatever I happen to be up to.

Songfacts: Do the songs on your album form a pattern? Like, "Broken Vows" could be the same person that becomes "Foul Deeds" that then goes into the next song, which is "Starting Over." Is that by design?

Pegi: Well, when I put together a record, I do still have this old time notion that there should be some kind of thread that goes between the songs so they tell the semblance of a story, even though most people, most listeners these days listen on shuffle or through an iPod or something, where it's not necessarily listening to an entire record, it's just a song here, a song there. But I like to put them together. It's like a little storybook, almost.

But those three songs that you mentioned in particular come from completely different things. "Broken Vows," if anything, is inspired by my parents' divorce, which was a hundred years ago. And "Starting Over" just came through really fast – the words. That was after I went to a memorial service for a friend of mine who had lost his wife after like 50-some years of marriage. He put together this beautiful thing, but then it was just too stunning to think, Well, now what? How do you go on? And my friend Anthony Crawford wrote the music for that one. I'd gone to L.A. for this event and then came home and the band was there. I showed him the words and the next day he had a melody for it. So that's how that one came about.

And then "Foul Deeds." That's one where I woke up out of a dream. I was actually dreaming of something else completely. I was dreaming about this guy, Reverend Ike, and this venue up in Harlem called the United Palace. It's a big beautiful old church they've converted into a musical venue. But it's Reverend Ike's church. And I was just thinking about Reverend Ike, and I woke up and I started to write this one song, and then this other one just arrived. I started thinking about foul deeds and I don't know, maybe when you go to church that's something you're supposed to think about. I was raised Catholic. (laughing)

Songfacts: You talked about how there's always a piano in the room and that's what you write on. Is there actually a piano in the hotel rooms or wherever you're staying?

Pegi: Well, when I travel with my husband, he's always got a piano in the room, because that's just part of his deal. But when I'm traveling, like I am now with my band, I do not have the luxury of having a piano in the room. But I have my guitar. And I write on the guitar, too. I've written much more on the guitar than I have on the piano. The piano was my first instrument. I used to be a lot better at it when I was a young girl and I practiced diligently. But I learned classical first, like most young kids when they're starting out. At least of my generation, you went to classical and then ragtime and then pop. And then I started playing guitar because I wanted to be more portable, and go to the be-ins and the events in the park and all the stuff that was happening in San Francisco Bay Area when I was a kid.

Songfacts: Yeah, it's certainly much more practical to write on guitar. I was speaking recently with [Gary Brooker of Procol Harum](#) and he can't write unless he sees a piano. And it makes it very difficult, because these days he can't just order up a piano in the hotel. But when you're traveling with your husband, it sounds like you can.

Pegi: Yeah. We've gotten pianos into some pretty interesting places. (laughing) But, when we're on the road with him, I do have a keyboard in the dressing room. So if we're learning a new song and we need to figure it out, our parts and everything, that's how we do it, is on the piano. A little keyboard.

Songfacts: And is that how he typically writes as well, or do you guys write differently?

Pegi: I would say we write differently, completely. But he writes on both. We've got a piano in the house, but he's got many guitars. And he doesn't always write at home. For instance, the *Prairie Wind* record was written pretty much in the hotel or the studio, because that was during the aneurysm time. And so he was writing quite prolifically and writing every day.

Songfacts: What is it like being married to Neil Young?

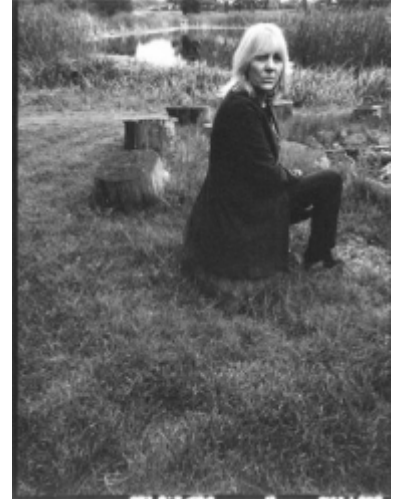
Pegi: Well, I have been asked that before and I really don't have anything to compare it to. (laughing) So I don't know. I mean, I've only been married to Neil Young, so I don't know what it's like to be married to

anybody else. He's an interesting character.

Songfacts: When you have a couple that both do the same thing, it's always been a very interesting dynamic for me. Because some people can do that. They can run a bed and breakfast together and they're happy as clams. But if I did the same thing as my wife, we would kill each other. So I'm wondering how it is that you can do the same profession and not drive each other crazy.

Pegi: Well, that's an interesting question, I guess. We didn't always do the same profession. I mean, for many years I put away music and focused on raising our kids and starting the Bridge School and keeping the home scene going. And then when I started touring with him, I get treated pretty much like any other band member. He certainly doesn't cut me any more slack than anybody else. If he wants to hear something a certain way, he's the clear boss, leader of the band.

When we got together, I was playing and writing. And we would just sit around and play some stuff from time to time just for fun. But it wasn't in front of people. It wasn't professional. It was just sitting around in our living room. It's just never been a problem. He is very clear about what he hears in his music and how he wants it to sound, and I am, too. So when he comes and sits in with us in the studio, he becomes one of the band members.



Songfacts: Do you critique each other's work?

Pegi: No, I don't think we do. I know he's helped me, like, if I need a passing note, and "Traveling" comes to mind, it's like, well, I've got this section, and I'm working on it, and he'll go, "Why don't you try this?" And then it's like, "Ah, genius. There we go. That ties it together." I mean, he supports my writing, he likes my writing, he supports my music, I certainly support and admire him. So I think it's actually more of a mutual admiration society.

Songfacts: So if you were to tell him, "Hey, I don't think that's the right word in that lyric," or if he was to do the same to you, in your relationship that would work out okay? Or do you not get into that kind of criticism territory?

Pegi: No, we don't go there. Because I think we both understand that songwriting, or writing - I mean, they're two different things, really. Songwriting is so personal and sometimes he's writing something else. He writes so much - his father was a writer and he's just got that writer gene. So he writes a lot for his website or his Lincvolt Gazette. He had the [N Y Times](#) when he was doing Greendale and I'm not entirely sure what all is still up. But occasionally I will suggest something. We just had this fire at our warehouse, so he wrote a piece for that. And I made a little suggestion in there. But they're not meant to be criticisms. They're just, "What do you think about trying it this way?"

Songfacts: How do you stay married to somebody for 30+ years and make it work?

Pegi: Well, the writing is part of our relationship. But there's lots of other aspects to our lives besides our songwriting and our music. That's a big part of it, but we have our family, we have a life. We have a normal life with a range of activities and things that we do, that together we enjoy each other's company. We're challenged by each other. We like to do things together, we hang out, we have fun together. I think that's the secret: we just enjoy each other, we respect each other, we admire each other. And I guess sometimes when, like, he's on tour and I'm at home, a little space is always good. You can't live in each other's back pocket all the time.

Songfacts: I think people that are in your position where you have been together that long sometimes

take it for granted what an accomplishment that is. But I always find that very impressive.

Pegi: Well, I really think keeping a sense of humor is important. Everybody goes through their challenges. This year's been a particularly challenging one for us. But everybody has their challenges. We're not unique in that way.

Songfacts: What was difficult this year?

Pegi: We lost some pretty major significant people in our lives. We lost Larry Johnson back in January - he was my husband's creative partner in Shakey Pictures, and he was a really, really close friend of our family. Then we lost our pedal steel player (Ben Keith). He'd played with Neil since 1970 and I had the joy of playing with him as part of Neil's band since 2000 – as part of my band since 2005. And we toured together and we were really close. He produced my record with me, both of my records, actually. Elliot Mazer was the producer on the first one, but Ben was with me through all the mixes. I just really trusted his ear. And he was also just a really, really close friend of our family.

And then my beloved dog died last week. So those are just a few of the things that kind of blows – but everybody has them. A lot of people have lost family members this year. It's been a bit of a rough year, I think, for a lot of people. Not to mention the economy.

Songfacts: This was Carl, right? The dog?

Pegi: Yeah, Carl the dog.

Songfacts: Yours was probably named after the rottweiler, though, not after me.

Pegi: No, he wasn't named after *Good Dog Carl*. His full name was Carlton and, well, you've probably seen him. He doesn't look like the old Good Dog Carl book. But he was a good dog Carl. He was an excellent dog.

Songfacts: I'm sorry to hear that.

Pegi: Well, if you're an animal person, it's not the same as losing a beloved human, of course, but it is a member of the family.

We spoke with Pegi Young on December 10, 2010

Her website is pegiyoung.com.

*You can get *Foul Deeds* at Amazon.*