

Undercover – Greendale (interview with poncho)

Sometime in the 90's Neil Young was christened the Godfather of Grunge but the title really belonged to his band Crazy Horse. While Young has jumped through various styles from hard rock to country to rhythm and blues and AC, Crazy Horse have remained focused as one of the greatest rock bands on the planet.

Crazy Horse don't play with Young on every album but a quick scan at titles like 'Ragged Glory', 'Rust Never Sleeps', 'Zuma' and 'Sleeps With Angels' makes for some of the greatest rock records of all time.

The man behind the Crazy Horse sound is Frank 'Poncho' Sampedro. Poncho plays an axe from raw power through to emotion without every changing intensity.

On the eve of the Neil Young and Crazy Horse Australian tour, he spoke with Undercover's Paul Cashmere.

Paul Cashmere: I am going to start by asking you the same question I have asked everyone since the Greendale album came out and that is. Where is Poncho?

Frank 'Poncho' Sampedro: Well, I wasn't there for the initial recordings and there were a few different circumstances that led up to that. They were all positive and it really turned out to be a good thing. Then once the album was released, Neil wanted to go on tour and called me up. I picked up my guitar and started playing. He said "try acoustic" so I tried it but then he said "play keyboards". I wasn't that happy with it at first. I sat there and I was playing all this stuff. We played for about three days when he gave me the CD that he made. It wasn't out yet. He said "take this home and listen to it" and when I listened to it I heard all these small bits of rhythm he was doing. I realized if I played my rhythm I would be playing over him a lot and then I heard what he wanted to hear and I found places to play on a keyboard. It has really turned out to be the way to do it. At first he just wanted a stripped down version of the band. At the same time my mom was ill and just about to pass away and I was traveling a lot to Florida so it all kind of worked out.

PC: That's sad about your mother.

Poncho: She had a really great life. It was good when she passed because for the last nine months she felt her life wasn't good quality of life stuff.

PC: When you perform the Greendale album on stage do you feel somewhat removed from it because you weren't on the record?

Poncho: No, not at all. I found parts that really compliment what they are doing. As we continue playing it, it has become different. If you hear it now live then you hear the record you'll think "well, why didn't they do that on the record".

PC: Is it tougher live?

Poncho: No, it's not a lot tougher. It just adds another texture and colour to the painting of the songs. The songs are really about the story and the cast and the play that go along with it. The music is just a foundation and a background to the whole setting. It just adds a little bit more and at the same time for us to get to this point we had to take away an instrument and get small before we could get bigger.

PC: Apart from Crazy Horse, I can only find two other notations of you on other people's albums. You obviously don't do a lot of session work or outside work when Crazy Horse is not working.

Poncho: No, I turn everything down (laughs). Musically I like to play with friends and anyone who comes over. I really enjoy playing with people and teaching them how to have fun and get off with each other. Actually, playing with another band or doing other sessions I think just takes away from the special thing we have with Crazy Horse. I think it is better to save it for what counts.

PC: Do you still live in Los Angeles?

Poncho: Yes, just outside Los Angeles. You know I work at The Tonight Show?

PC: Is that right?

Poncho: Yeah, I work under Kevin Eubanks. He and I share an office together. I am with Kevin every day.

PC: What do you do at The Tonight Show?

Poncho: I support the band. I take care of all the band's endorsements, their equipment and Kevin's bookings. I also repair Macintosh computers there.

PC: You are multitalented then.

Poncho: Well, you know, when you have kids you have to have jobs.

PC: I can't say I've every seen you walk out with The Tonight Show band. Do you ever play with them on camera?

Poncho: No, no. The good thing about that is that I don't have the need to do that because I have a band. I love my band and I don't want to play in another band.

PC: It must be strange when people come in and find the great Frank 'Poncho' Sampedro sitting in an office.

Poncho: I carry Kevin's guitars around and change the strings and people say "what are you doing". I tell them "you ought to stop and listen to this guy play. I'll carry his guitar anywhere".

PC: Are people surprised when they recognize you?

Poncho: Well, when the bands come on the show I know a lot of them. I walk out and say "hi" and they go "what the hell are you doing here" (laughs). It is a good job and a lot of them say it is nice I can have a job here because they know life on the road is really tough and it is a good thing.

PC: It must be tough for poor old Kevin at the moment with you being on this side of the planet.

Poncho Yeah, I just got an email from him saying "well, yeah" but on the other hand he always tells me "go out, have fun". He feels whenever I go out with Neil or go to record with Neil I always bring something back. A new part of something I learned or some new energy. He is really supportive of it. He has had a band all his life and toured all his life. He knows it is part of a musician's heart and soul and he would never want to take that away from anybody.

PC: A Neil Young and Crazy Horse set-list changes every night. When is a set-list decided and how is it decided?

Poncho: It's decided as we are sitting around. We play a few songs and then go "do you want to play this or do you want to do that". Then Neil some nights will start calling off songs right on stage. We never really decide it until we are playing.

PC: My all time favourite song is 'Like A Hurricane'. Can you tell me a bit about how you felt when you first heard it and how it feels to perform?

Poncho: I love that song. It is a funny thing because we were recording that song and I was playing guitar at the time and Neil was saying "no, it doesn't go like that, it goes like this, play lighter". We kind of played it for about half a day and it was very frustrating. I was walking by the strings and the keyboards I play on it and started playing the chords and Neil said "hey, let's try it like that, let's just do this". So we played it and the one that you hear on the record all the time, if you hear the end of the take, it is the first time we played it with that configuration. We played it all the way through just the way you hear it on the record and at the end of the take Neil puts down his guitar and he goes "that's kind of the way it goes" (laughs).

PC: That song was from 'American Stars 'n' Bars' which has just now come out on CD. Why has it taken so long for that record to become a CD?

Poncho: I'm not completely positive but I think it is because Neil always wants to have the top of the food chain when it comes to technology. He doesn't want to lose any of the sound that we had from our analog tapes when it comes out digitally. I think as technology kept changing he kept holding on to it hoping to get a better sound and a better sound and he did. So now it finally came out. I'd like to see all the records out.

PC: 'Hawks and Doves', 'Reactor' and 'On The Beach' are the other ones just released? Do you have copies yourself yet?

Poncho: Yes I do.

PC: What about 'Journey Through The Past' and 'Time Fades Away'. Do you think we'll ever see them on CD?

Poncho: I hope so. They should.

PC: What about the status of the never ending Decade 2 or Neil Young boxed set that has been talked about for ... well decades.

Poncho: (laughs) It has s been longer than that, hasn't it?

PC: I think so.

Poncho: You know, I think Neil (and he would never say it) just has a feeling that putting out a boxed set like that is kind of like marking the end of your career and it is like a tribute to yourself. He would never say that but he just doesn't want to do that until he is done. That is what I feel. He has never said that to me. There is too much time to spend making new music than focusing on all your old stuff.

PC Well, what about old stuff that hasn't been released. How many old Crazy Horse tracks are still in the vaults?

Poncho: God, I don't know. I would say upwards of say 150.

PC: So you could be releasing albums for the next 200 years quite easily.

Poncho: (laughs) It is funny, just before this tour I was looking on the Internet and saw this old list of songs and I saw names of songs I had forgotten and I went "oh yeah, I remember that song".

PC: Here's my prediction, Crazy Horse will be like Jimi Hendrix and Elvis.

Poncho: Well, I wouldn't mind being like Jimi Hendrix anytime, anywhere, anyplace.

PC: We could call the 90s the Decade of the Horse starting off with Ragged Glory. That album became quite influential on what became the grunge era influencing Nirvana and Pearl Jam. Were you aware when recording that album of the longevity it was going to have and the influence it was going to have on people?

Poncho: No, we weren't. I would have to say that for me personally 'Rust Never Sleeps' and that record, when we recorded them at the time I was thinking I don't know if people are going to like this (laughs). I was telling Neil "there's no ballads" but it turned out. You know, I hadn't listened to 'Ragged Glory' in maybe 10 years and I put it on when we were on the last tour, just Billy (Talbot) and I. I went "oh my God, we were rocking head to toe".

PC: Not long after that Neil recorded the Mirror Ball album with Pearl Jam which I thought was a bad move for Pearl Jam because when we compared them directly with Crazy Horse we could hear how much energy they lacked.

Poncho: It's a funny thing and I hate to say anything about Neil but I think all of us are not great, great musicians but as a whole when we play with each other we play better than what we can play individually. We have a certain kind of chemistry and energy when we come together. People say our songs are so simple, two chords or four chords or whatever but we don't know that much about music. When we play it is like the first time we have ever played and we put it into our heart. We just can't stop ourselves from becoming that. It just becomes big when everybody does that and has the same feeling a certain amount of energy gets out there that is hard to look away from.

PC: It's all one song as Neil said on Year of the Horse.

Poncho: Yes it is (laughs).

PC: 'Sleeps With Angels' is one of my favourite Crazy Horse albums but I think the songs have rarely, if ever, been played live.

Poncho: Yeah, I know. Right after we did it we played a bunch of them and that era was broken up by Pearl Jam and when we got back together we skipped over it but we still play 'Piece of Crap'. We don't play 'Sleeps With Angels' very often. We have done it acoustic and it was really good.

PC: 'Broken Arrow' was next and it was a return to the extended guitar breaks. Did it feel like a return to the old formula for you?

Poncho: That was for us a really emotional album. Our producer David Briggs had just passed away. We all felt his presence quite a bit when we were recording that. To me it was probably closest to 'Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere' which I wasn't there for. I had listened to the record a lot people I ever met these people. We pulled that out of the hat because it was David's big record and Neil's first one. We just had that feeling in the air and that emotion around us. 'Broken Arrow' just happened; I don't know how it did. We did it without thinking. A lot of them were first takes. It was amazing how that happened really. It was all for David.

PC: You came in at 'Zuma'.

Poncho: Yes.

PC: That was the first album after Danny Whitten had passed away. Did you feel like a replacement or did you come in with a fresh approach?

Poncho: I never felt I could replace Danny and to this day I can't play like Danny. Every once in a while Neil will say "you should listen to the record" or Billy will say "just listen to what Danny did". I try not to. Danny had what he did and I think it is very special. He was a great singer and a great songwriter and he played guitar a certain way. That's just not what I do. I play the way I play. I remember when I first met Neil. 'On The Beach' had just come out. It had 'Turnstile Blues', 'Vampire Blues' and I remember telling Neil (and I don't know how I had the balls to say it) but I said "you know, you've got a lot of blues on your record. You should be rockin' and having fun and seeing chick's asses swaying in the audience" (laughs). So that is the kind of approach I brought.

PC: You must have thought you were joining the Blues Brothers.

Poncho: (laughs).

PC: 'Are You Passionate' was another interesting album. We never got to see you guys tour it down here and I don't think you are playing any of it on the current tour but the track 'Going Home' is an interesting track.

Poncho: I think we played it in Las Vegas on the last tour. That is a great song.

PC: Are you aware of an Australian band called Powderfinger?

Poncho: Not really. I have heard of them but I don't know much about them.

PC: They named themselves after the Crazy Horse song. They told me they were performing at the Fuji Festival in Japan and so were you and they got to stand side of side and watch you perform the song with their name.

Poncho: Oh, that's great. I hope we get a chance to meet them. That came out of a dream that Neil had.

PC: That's a very profitable dream. I look forward to the tour down this way.

Poncho: I hope the people know we appreciate their support and when we are down there I hope they are jumping around and having a good time and throwing their bras on stage and going crazy.

PC: Melbourne is your last scheduled show for this year. Is that it?

Poncho: I think they may be brewing up something for February.

PC: Kevin Eubanks will be pleased to hear that because that means in December and January his guitars will be looked after.

Poncho: That's right. You know, it is really a shame that we don't get to go to Darwin and Adelaide and Perth ...

PC: ... and Tasmania.

Poncho: And Tasmania, that's right. I really wanted to go to Darwin again. It is shame we don't get to go there again.

PC: You performed in Darwin?

Poncho: Yeah, not with Crazy Horse. We were called The Lost Dogs. I caught a 22 pound barramundi up there.

PC: And I'm sure you still have the photos.

Poncho: I certainly do. I have a smile that goes from ear to ear.

PC: Get it blown up, take it into your office and stick it on the wall in front of Eubanks.

Poncho: It would only make him hungry.

#### NEIL YOUNG AND CRAZY HORSE AUSTRALIAN TOUR DATES

19-Nov-03 Neil Young Brisbane Entertainment Centre

21-Nov-03 Neil Young Sydney Entertainment Centre

22-Nov-03 Neil Young Melbourne Myer Music Bowl