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Neil Young releases what Geffen Records didn't consider 'A Treasure'

The collection of live performances from around 1984 and 1985 of Neil Young with the International Harvesters showcases the sound that led the label to sue him.

By Randy Lewis, Los Angeles Times

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The recent news that country singer Tim McGraw's record company is suing him over his latest album is just the latest of many stranger-than-fiction examples of artist-label relations going south.

In 1993, the head of John Fogerty's record label sued him for sounding too much like ... John Fogerty, arguing that his single "The Old Man Down the Road" was merely a remake of Fogerty's old Creedence Clearwater Revival hit "Run Through the Jungle." (Fogerty won.)

That had followed an equally surreal case from 1984, when Neil Young was sued by his label at the time, Geffen Records, for not sounding enough like himself.

That's the backdrop for the release of a collection out of the Canadian rocker's archive, "A Treasure," a batch of live performances circa 1984-85 when he'd assembled a country-rock band that toured as the International Harvesters. The group included fiddler Rufus Thibodeaux, pianist Hargus "Pig" Robbins, steel guitarist Ben Keith and producer-keyboardist Spooner Oldham, all of whom had played on many of the biggest hits that ever came out of Nashville. But Young, long celebrated for his iconoclastic artistic spirit, never got to record the album he had in mind at the time.

"It was the first time in my life I'd been locked out of the studio by my record company," Young said recently from the road while doing solo shows before the current Buffalo Springfield reunion tour.

"They thought I was all over the map and didn't understand why I was out there playing country, although to me it sounded like B.B. King more than country," he said. "To me it didn't make any difference. They could call it whatever they wanted. But I'd already been making records a long time and I knew what I wanted to do. They could call it whatever they wanted."

Except that what Geffen executives decided to call it was "off," even though the International Harvesters was for the most part the same band with which he recorded the 1983 retro-rockabilly album "Everybody's Rockin'."

"They told me they wanted me to play rock 'n' roll, and told me I didn't sound like Neil Young," he said. "So I gave them 'Everybody's Rockin'' and said, 'This is a rock 'n' roll album by Neil Young after someone tells him what to do; this is exactly what you said you wanted.' And we got way into it. I really liked it. As long as it's good music and I'm playing with my friends, I don't care what genre it is. All my music comes from all music — I'm not country, I'm not rock 'n' roll, I'm just me, and all these things are what I like."

"A Treasure," which came out June 7 in a vinyl edition and Tuesday on CD, mines a different back 40 of American roots music. It brings together several tradition-minded country songs Young wrote including "Amber Jean," "It Might Have Been," "Let Your Fingers Do The Walking" and "Nothing Is Perfect."

The last is a country waltz in which Young sings of gratitude for the blessings of domestic life of America as a land of plenty, then shifts into territory few songs out of Nashville dare to tread:

There's plenty of wheat on the prairie

Lots of coal in the mine

We've got soldiers so strong they can bury their dead

And still not go back shooting blind

He also crafted country-skewed arrangements of some then-recent vintage songs such as "Are You Ready For the Country?" and "Southern Pacific." The album culminates in the genre-defying Crazy Horse-rampaging-through-the-Grand-Ole-Opry track "Grey Riders," one of about a half-dozen International Harvesters songs Young never re-recorded.

"Once you do something really well, you really don't want to do it again. The natural thing is to keep on going and find something else to do," the 65-year-old, two-time Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee said. "The way we did those songs, there's nothing that makes me want to do them again. If I could play them with the same band again I would, but I can't do that. That's what this whole record is about."

Label founder David Geffen had signed Young in the early 1980s as he was building his nascent label, after he'd inked deals with the likes of John Lennon and Elton John to prove he was serious about giving more established labels a run for their money.

"The only musical person in the whole organization was the guy who owned it," Young said. "He was going farther and farther down his own path; he was a media mogul and had other things on his mind.... None of the other people there were music people. They would send people out on the road, listen to the [Harvesters] band and go back to the record company and say I was not ready to record. They wouldn't talk to me, then I'd hear they'd been there. They'd make suggestions on what they thought I ought to record. That's not the way I work...."

"The record company did everything it could to stop me from doing what I did, but I look at it as some of the best work I ever did," he said. "Up until that point I'd had a very supportive relationship with them."

"Eventually they let me out of the contract," he said. "They had to. They sued me, and I still didn't stop."

After nearly a decade with Geffen, he returned to his previous home at Reprise Records, for which he continues to record and which is issuing "A Treasure," a package that is accompanied by patchwork performance videos assembled from whatever Young and his archival crew were able to locate on YouTube and elsewhere, as they had not filmed many performances by the Harvesters.

"I wish they were still here today, I would be doing more work with them," Young said. "But so many important elements of the band are gone. It's like playing 'Harvest' songs without Ben Keith — I just can't go back there...."

"The only thing I can do is go forward," he said. "It's the only place that doesn't have any ghosts and shadows from the past."

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