

Neil Young Unearths 'A Treasure' -- Exclusive Video & Interview

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Neil Young's career has encompassed so many musical styles that it's impossible to define him by just one. But without a doubt, country fans have enthusiastically embraced much of the Canadian native's work throughout the years. His 1972 album, 'Harvest,' featuring the No. 1 pop single, 'Heart of Gold,' was the top-selling album in any genre that year and went a long way toward cementing his status as a true country-rock icon.

A decade after that classic album, Neil left his longtime label, Warner Bros., and signed with Geffen Records. His tenure there, however, was fraught with difficulty as he released a series of albums (including 'Trans' and 'Everybody's Rockin') that confounded critics and angered his record label enough to sue him for not producing material they deemed commercially viable.

One such album that emerged during this tenuous period was 'Old Ways,' a country collection intended for release in 1983 but ultimately not issued until 1985. Featuring 'Get Back to the Country,' which just barely cracked the country Top 40, the recording sessions drew special guests Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson (not to mention up-and-comer Marty Stuart on mandolin). 'Old Ways' also spotlighted some of Music City's most notable sidemen, including piano player Hargus "Pig" Robbins, bassist Joe Allen, Cajun fiddler Rufus Thibodeaux and pedal steel/Dobro picker Ben Keith. These musicians, as the International Harvesters, would tour with Neil throughout 1984-85.

In spite of (or perhaps due to?) the legal woes he was facing, Neil and his International Harvesters performed more than 80 shows during this period. The result (three decades later) is a sparkling document of the era, and Neil's latest CD, titled 'A Treasure.' It's a collection of 12 live recordings, just released as part of the Neil Young Archives Performance Series. The CD includes an exuberant performance of 'Amber Jean' -- a song written for Neil's daughter -- recorded September 20, 1984, for a live audience on the Nashville Network (TNN) show, 'Nashville Now,' hosted by Ralph Emery.

To celebrate the release of 'A Treasure,' which includes five never-before-released tunes, Neil Young visited the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, inviting The Boot to view a gallery of spectacular black-and-white photographs of the musicians who comprised the International Harvesters. The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame member also spoke exclusively with The Boot about his early days playing country music, his first trips to Nashville, and the special way his daughter thanked him for immortalizing her in song.

These recordings were made during a difficult time for you. How did you keep it all together and focused on the music?

I was touring with the International Harvesters. I had just been sued by my record company for playing this kind of music. I had been sued by the IRS because they said I had too much artistic control in my contract. Basically, I was selling music and not really working for the company, so I had to pay sales tax. And then I was told by my record

company that they would never play Neil Young doing country music on the radio. Even though all those things were happening at the time and my record company was telling me that country radio would never play me, because of the songs 'Southern Man' and 'Alabama,' and there was a line drawn that could never be crossed ... the musicians didn't apparently recognize the line at all and kept asking me to play those songs with them. We just went on and on and played every night for a long time. It really isn't that negative. What this is really about is the music and the people that played the music on this record.

You obviously have high regard for the musicians on this record, and a few of them, Ben Keith, Rufus Thibodeaux, are gone now. What did you learn from them?

These musicians are the greatest musicians ever that I played with ... as a collection. As accomplished musicians, both technically and soulfully, they are unequalled. I've played with some great musicians, but these guys were musicians on another level. I played with superstars and other singers and all kinds of people; that's been great and I'm not saying this to belittle them or anything. But these guys as musicians were so accomplished and they played together with with no friction, with absolutely no regard for anything other than the music. It was a happiness that came out of our time together. The experience of playing was just so great. They should all be in the Hall of Fame, every one of them. Karl Himmel [on drums], Anthony Crawford [guitar], Spooner Oldham [on piano], who wrote 'I'm Your Puppet,' and the great Ben Keith [pedal steel and Dobro], an excellent musician who has touched this town a great deal. Rufus Thibodeaux, probably the greatest Cajun fiddler of all time. He pulled notes out of places not of this earth and just kept coming up with them. That was a great moment for me just being with him.

Tim Drummond, who played bass, also had a lot to do with you meeting many of these musicians in the first place.

Tim was the one who introduced me to a lot of the great players when I first came to Nashville and did my first record here, which was 'Harvest.' Without Tim Drummond there wouldn't be a lot of the things that happened to me in the past. He was the architect, and a masterful musician. He played with James Brown and played with Conway Twitty. He introduced me to Ben Keith and introduced me to Kenny Buttrey, who introduced me to John Harris. Ben Keith introduced me to Rufus Thibodeaux. It was a great pleasure to play with all of these guys.

Ben Keith heard these tracks and called them 'a treasure,' which inspired the album title. But you were not just focused on country music at the time. How did these songs fit into what you were doing then?

In the middle of this, we went off to Australia with part of the Harvesters and part of Crazy Horse. As usual, what happens when I try to mix genres, trying to do two kinds of music at the same time, it doesn't work that well. So that was a short-lived experiment. When Ben Keith said this record was a treasure, I knew that was the title for it. This is a part of my life that was unmistakably the most satisfying from a musician standpoint. The interplay of these musicians among themselves on this record is just unbelievable. There was nothing other than just natural play going on; trading licks and solos and always having great support. These guys are the real deal. I'm here [at the Country Music Hall of

Fame and Museum] because I want to honor these guys. These guys are country music. You can say what you may about me. I was so lucky to play with them and so lucky to know them and to know their families and to share the times we had together. This is more than a record.

How early on did country music play a role in your life and your career?

It's been a big part of my life since the very beginning, growing up in Canada, in Winnipeg, especially. When I first started playing with my band, we played at a place called Patterson's Ranch House. At night, Bluegrass Bob and the Bobcats were playing and in the afternoon, Neil Young and the Squires were playing. We played on Saturdays and Sunday afternoons because I was still in high school. I'd go down and there was all this hay on the floor, and peanuts. We'd go to settle up and they'd give me my seven dollars, or whatever it was. I heard country music on the radio all the time. We'd listen to the Grand Ole Opry, and a healthy dose of rock 'n roll out of Chicago, too. Those are my roots and have always been my roots. I've been around fiddlers and mandolin players. And crazy, crazy electric-guitar-playing country musicians.

What do you remember about your first trips to Nashville?

My first experience in Nashville was 1968, I came here with Steve Stills when we were on the road with Buffalo Springfield. We went to Tootsie's Orchid Lounge. It was like 11 o'clock in the morning. We were so green that we were almost still coming out of the ground. Tootsie was there, so we got out our guitars and played a song because we wanted them to know that even though we were a rock 'n roll band, we had country roots. We felt that we had to explain that for some reason. So, we sat down and played 'Go and Say Goodbye', and a couple of other songs. That was my first trip here. And the second time I came here, I was on a solo tour and I did the 'Johnny Cash Show.' That's when I met Tim Drummond, Ben Keith, Kenny Buttrey and John Harris, and we cut 'Harvest.'

'Amber Jean' is a terrific live performance and really sets the tone for the entire album. What do you remember about doing that on 'Nashville Now'?

[It was] the best I ever sang it and, for some reason, I did it on TV! We could never figure that out. I'm usually so nervous, but that was pretty loose. I was singing really loosely and with a lot of soul, and the band, they were always excellent. My daughter, Amber Jean, she sent me a letter. She heard 'A Treasure.' She always signs her name 'Amber' but this time, she said, "Dad, that's a great record. I love it! I'm playing it for all my friends. Your daughter, Amber Jean." That made me feel good.