



Long Time Coming



Neil Young has a new record ready to release. It's called, *Comes A Time*, and if it was anybody else's you would have heard it months ago. But Neil isn't anybody else, and *Comes A Time* has been a long time coming.

Initially, the album was going to be called *Gone With The Wind*, (probably a reference to the giant hair dryer effect on "Like A Hurricane") then it was *Give With The Wind* — and those are just the ones he told people about. Of course, there was quite a bit of bother over the cover art work — often a source of difficulty for Young. There were four complete sets of covers not only designed, but actually printed, before he settled on the final format.

And that's not to say that what comes inside the package hasn't caused its share of soul-searching too. It seems that Young rejected no fewer than thirty-seven test pressings of the album in America for technical reasons, and when they finally got the masters right, he demanded to be given two samples from each of the twenty or so countries where it would be pressed under licence. As you might be able to work out for yourself, all this takes a certain amount of time.

Probably as much as anybody, though, Young commands the kind of loyalty in his audience that puts up with delays like that, in return, I guess, for a loyalty towards them which tries to ensure that what they lay out their money for is at least going to be technically worth it. However you like to psychoanalyse the relationship between Neil Young and his public, you just can't get away from the feeling that he's, well, different.

Far too many people think of Young as some kind of Southern Californian Leonard Cohen — hunched over an acoustic guitar, keening away about how lonesome he is — an image unfortunately further promoted by the decision to use only "Helpless" in the movie, *The Last Waltz*. For those of you with a bit of nerve, and a dozen or more dollars to spare, the recent compilation album, *Decade*, should serve as convincing proof just how inaccurate that picture is.

Decade was intended to be a retrospective over the first ten years of Young's career, but unfortunately, it was held up for twelve months for various reasons (!). Even Young's ingenuity for titles couldn't figure a way to say 'eleven years' snappily, so *Decade* stuck. It is completely different from the standard "Greatest Hits" set, as it has been carefully collected and annotated by Young himself, and includes five songs not available previously. It is a triple album, and it is the sheer scale of the undertaking which really drives home the scope of Young's talent.

It encompasses work with Buffalo Springfield, with Jack Nitzche, solo, with Crosby, Stills and Nash, Crazy Horse, the L.S.O., Nils Lofgren, with Emmylou Harris, with just Stills, and with the Stray Gators. The last thing it sounds like is a folk song record.

There isn't really space here to go into a full history of Young's recording career, but a few of the liner notes from *Decade* give a good picture of his idiosyncracies. He began with Buffalo Springfield, along with the Byrds, an essential West Coast band. Of singing with them he says, "The boys gave me some uppers to get my nerve up." After the final demise of the band — essentially a break between Young and Stephen Stills — he recorded with Jack Nitzche, and then with a pick-up band called Crazy Horse. As a footnote to "Down By The River", he says, "I remember Crazy Horse like Roy Orbison remembers "Leah" and "Blue Bayou"".

From the full-out rock and roll of Crazy Horse, he turned to the style with which he is still most commonly associated on *After The Goldrush* and *Harvest*. His summary of fame and fortune? "This song ('Heart of Gold') put me in the middle of the road. Travelling there soon became a bore, so I headed for the ditch. A rougher ride but I saw more interesting people there." And at the same time, he was entering Rock Dreamland as a member of CSN&Y. His stay was pretty shortlived. He sums up playing with rock and roll's answer

to the Andrews Sisters by saying that he had to wait until 4 am to record "Helpless", "when everybody got tired enough to play at my speed."

It was at this point — as he reached the ditch — that the behaviour which had simply been temperamental, became downright wierd, at least by the standards of the LA aristocracy. His next album (and the only one not represented on *Decade*) was the live *Time Fades Away* which went out and rocked like nothing since "Cinnamon Girl". This obviously came as something of a disappointment to the millions who were waiting for another *Harvest*, and gained him his first foothold on the bargain bins.

After the interim *On The Beach*, which mainly proved that playing acoustic guitar didn't make Neil sweet if he didn't feel like it, he produced an album called *Homegrown* which was apparently stone country music. On the eve of its release, he is reputed to have got drunk, gone into the tape library and dug out some material he had recorded months before — during and after the death of two of his closest friends through heroin. He decided that this stuff — "Out of pitch but still in tune" — was what he really wanted to release, and over the objections of the record company he put out *Tonight's The Night* instead of *Homegrown*.

In my humble opinion (and also in Young's) this record is probably his best.

"Coincidentally" he says, "it was my least commercially successful record ever made." The horrifying yet rivetting despair over the deaths of his friends and the drug that killed them drives his singing to painful flatness, and astonishing effectiveness.

There is only one direction from *Tonight's the Night*, and that's up, and that's pretty much where Young has been heading these last two or three years. His ties to country music have strengthened, and at the same time he has reformed Crazy Horse for *Zuma* and *American Stars & Bars*. Don't be mistaken though, he's still the same old Neil. Last year he turned up in various little North California bars with a band of locals and played dance music. This year, he conducted a 'World Tour', which consisted of one week at a 300-seat night club in San Francisco, playing by himself and trading one-liners with the audience. When someone shouted out for Stephen Stills he fixed him with a psychotic stare and said, "I am Stephen Stills".

Neil Young's new album isn't here yet — and heaven only knows when it will be — but I can't imagine it won't be worth waiting for. Meanwhile, the way I see it, you've got a choice: *Decade*, and a conducted tour; or *Tonight's The Night* and the heart of the matter.

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