

Neil Young's *Homegrown*: Time capsule from the 1970s

By Kevin Reed
4 July 2020

On June 19, Neil Young, the 74-year-old Canadian-born singer-songwriter, released a new album entitled *Homegrown* on his long-time label, Reprise Records.

It is Young's forty-fifth recording of original music since he began his solo career in 1968 after departing Buffalo Springfield, the popular band he helped found in southern California two years earlier.

Homegrown is unusual in that Young recorded it in 1974 and 1975, but never released it until now. As a "lost album," it has interest for both long-time listeners of his music as well as those less familiar, because it captures something of the sound and feel of a time when he was at his most artistically productive and successful.

Young's 1972 *Harvest*, which included the well-known singles "Heart of Gold" and "Old Man," was the best-selling album of that year. "Heart of Gold" became Young's only number one hit single, featuring Linda Ronstadt and James Taylor on backing vocals.

Young has said of *Homegrown*, "This album is the unheard bridge between *Harvest* and *Comes a Time*," the latter of which was released in 1978. During those years, Young stayed pretty much within the acoustic, folk and "country-rock" genre, which he broke out of decisively in 1979 with *Rust Never Sleeps*, adopting a more abrasive electric guitar sound, influenced to some degree by punk rock, with his band Crazy Horse.

In an earlier interview, Young explained that *Homegrown* was held back because it was recorded during the protracted breakup of his relationship with the late actress Carrie Snodgrass (1945–2004), the mother of his first child, Zeke Young. He said, "It was a little too personal—it scared me." Upon the release, he added, "It's the sad side of a love affair. The damage done. The heartache. I just couldn't listen to it. I wanted to move on." He was twenty-nine years old at the time.

His sorrow comes through on the slow-moving opening track "Separate Ways." On another, "Kansas," that also deals with the emotional impact of his broken family, Young sings alone in his signature tenor voice, along with acoustic

guitar and harmonica.

*I feel like I just woke up from a bad dream
And it's so good to have you by my side*

While it is not his best work, *Homegrown* does remind one of the simplicities and memorable qualities of Young's songwriting talent. He has had, throughout his career, an apparently limitless supply of attractive lyrical and musical ideas, even if they have sometimes emerged from the darker side of his psyche.

Young uses uncomplicated pop musical forms and riffs. His lyrics are straightforward, only occasionally drifting into dreamlike—or possibly drug-induced—imagery, never penetrating too deeply or straying into a metaphorical treatment of the subject matter.

Young's appeal has always been his sincerity and his eschewing of the excesses and affectations common to the rock music genre. While he has written his share of introspective lyrics and songs, Young's popularity is in some measure due to his concern with broader social and political issues—the condition of farmers, blue collar workers, the poor and native Americans, the environment and US wars.

Listening again to just a few of these popular songs—"Southern Man" (1970), "Cortez the Killer" (1975), "Like a Hurricane" (1977), "Pocahontas" (1979), "Rockin' in the Free World," (1989)—reveals that Young has often been successful writing and performing music with a definite social content. Of course, there's no reason to idealize Young's politics. Something of an impressionist and susceptible to a variety of populist-nationalism, in 1984, to the horror of many, the singer-musician announced support for Ronald Reagan, on the grounds that he was "tired of people constantly apologizing for being Americans." But four years later, Young hinted at support for Jesse Jackson.

His 2006 *Living with War* album included "Let's Impeach the President," about George W. Bush, which begins, "Let's impeach the President for lying/And misleading our country into war," and went on, in a reference to Hurricane Katrina,

“What if Al Qaeda blew up the levees/Would New Orleans have been safer that way?”

In 2015, when Donald Trump used Young’s “Rockin’ in the Free World”—written as a criticism of the administration of George H. W. Bush—to announce himself as a Republican candidate for US president, an official statement from the musician said it was unauthorized and that, “Neil Young, a Canadian citizen, is a supporter of Bernie Sanders for president of the United States of America.”

Young became individually prominent through his collaboration with David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash beginning in 1969. The quartet of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young released the critically acclaimed *Déjà Vu* in March 1970. The album displaced Simon & Garfunkel’s *Bridge Over Trouble Water* at number one in May of that year and stayed on the Billboard top ten for 23 weeks.

Although the three hit singles from *Déjà Vu*—“Woodstock,” “Teach Your Children” and “Our House”—did not include Young as songwriter or featured musician, it was the events at Kent State University in Ohio on May 4, 1970 that permanently changed things for him.

In his 2011 memoir, *Waging Heavy Peace: A Hippie Dream*, Young described his response to the news that National Guardsmen had killed four students at Kent State: “I picked up my guitar and started to play some chords and immediately wrote ‘Ohio’: *four dead in Ohio* .’ The next day we went into the studio in LA and cut the song. Before a week had passed it was all over the radio. It was really fast for those times; really fast. All the stations played ‘Ohio.’ There was no censoring by programmers... DJs played whatever they wanted on FM stations... There was no push-back for criticizing the government.”

“Ohio” is considered one of the most important protest songs of the Vietnam War era.

Over the decades, Young’s music has remained accessible, even as he shape-shifted and experimented, beginning in the 1980s, with various electronic techniques and genres, including rockabilly.

With record sales dwindling and his career looking to industry executives like it was failing, Young emerged reincarnated as a blues man in a band called the Bluenotes in 1987. A year later he had a hit single “This Note’s for You,” where he derided corporate rock music and denounced sponsorships from Budweiser and such:

Ain’t singing for Pepsi
Ain’t singing for Coke
I don’t sing for nobody
Makes me look like a joke
This note’s for you

Young made an accompanying video and, although it was initially banned by MTV at the height of the music video

channel’s popularity, because it mentioned some of their sponsors, the network ended up having to name it the best video of 1989. Young asked at the time, “What does the M in MTV stand for: music or money?”

In the 1990s, Young earned the nickname “Godfather of Grunge” for his edgy and distorted electric guitar style, especially when he toured and recorded with Crazy Horse. He collaborated with the very popular Seattle grunge band Pearl Jam on his 1995 release *Mirror Ball*.

Young’s enduring popularity is due in part to the expansive list of artists with whom he has performed and recorded. Although he has a reputation as something of a cantankerous individualist and even a “libertarian,” that aspect of his personality seems to have been reserved primarily for people involved in what he considers the negative business aspects of the popular music industry, who are constantly obstructing and suspending his creativity.

In fact, one of the pleasing features of *Homegrown* is that it includes the participation of musicians such as Levon Helm (died April 19, 2012 at age 71) on drums, Ben Keith on lap slide guitar (died July 26, 2010 at age 73), Stan Szelest on piano (died January 20, 1991 at age 48) and Tim Drummond on bass (died January 10, 2015 at age 74), while they were all in their prime. The album also includes Robbie Robertson (The Band) on guitar, Emmylou Harris on vocals and Karl T. Himmel on drums, who are all active musicians and performers today.

The title of *Homegrown* is a reminder of one aspect of Young’s life as well as many of his contemporaries, some of whom did not make it out of the 1960s and 70s alive, that is, drug use and drug addiction.

Young wrote the song, “The Needle and the Damage Done” (on *Harvest*) and the entire album *Tonight’s the Night* in grief over the 1972 death by heroin overdose of Crazy Horse guitarist Danny Whitten and band roadie Bruce Berry. Although Young never seems to have partaken too heavily of some of the more damaging drugs, he wrote in his memoir that he finally stopped smoking pot and drinking after his 65th birthday.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>