

Canada's rock legend returns

# The "ragged glory" of Neil Young

by Alex Mason

*Ragged Glory*, Canadian rock star Neil Young's latest release, is at the same time a brilliant resurgence of Young's straight forward rock sound, and a gloomy vision of a dark world and troubled times to come. It does not provide as accurate a picture of the songwriter as last year's release *Freedom*, but it does fit neatly into the context of the 24-album career of one of rock's most dedicated and tormented artists.

The album itself marks Young's first real reunion with back-up band Crazy Horse in nine years, although his 1987 entry *Life*, partially recorded with Crazy Horse, showed hints of their earlier patented "garage band" sound. In a word, the new material is raw. But don't get me wrong - raw is good. "Ragged Glory" is a real-life, down in the dirt, rock album relating the kind of sound that can only be captured by a four piece band. Two guitars, a bass, and a set of drums - that's all you'll ever hear on this album. There are no overdubs, and no keyboards.

Young has expressed on many occasions his dislike of studios, and since *After the Goldrush* (1970) all of his subsequent 21 solo albums have been recorded live with only two exceptions: his 1982 synthesizer excursion *Trans*, and the vocals to 1986's *Landing on Water*.

The 80s were a rocky ten years for Young, and *Ragged Glory* reflects this. The album's opener "Country Home" and "The Days That Used To Be" are the two most obvious references to what seems to be a necessity to retreat, the first on a physical, the second on a more spiritual plain. Who can forget the cries for help we heard on the sometimes intensely personal *Landing on Water*? Like these few lines from the song "Hippy Dream":

*Just because it's over for you  
Don't mean it's over for me.  
It's a victory for the heart  
Every time the music starts  
So please don't kill the machine  
Don't kill the machine...*

*Another flower child goes to seed  
In an ether-filled room of meat-hooks.*

*It's so ugly  
So ugly...*

Neil Young seems to be a man who's died for his cause a million times, and yet, a million times more, the hero returns. His primary emphasis this time around seems to be on a basic contrast between love and hate. He states numerous times during the 63 minutes of music on *Ragged Glory* that "...love and only love can

break [hate] down." It's as though Young is trying to convince others, as well as himself, that the darkness that seems to undercut our lives can be overcome.

Young's no stranger to this type of confusion, though. His music's always indicated this seemingly schizophrenic quality. His 1979 album *Rust Never Sleeps* with

Crazy Horse featured a folksy, acoustic side one, and a blistering hard rock second side. His next two albums following *Live Rust* exhibited the same diverseness. *Hawks and Doves* (1980) was a mostly acoustic approach bordering on a country music sound. *Reactor* (1981; also with Crazy Horse) found him back to a hard

rock sound with qualities greatly similar to the music on *Ragged Glory*.

The rest of the 80s saw Young experimenting with just about every musical direction in sight: an almost entirely synthesized approach on *Trans*; 50s-type rockabilly music on *Everybody's Rockin'* (1983); country music with the talents of Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and others on *Old Ways* (1985); and finally a strange brew of experimental synthesizer rock on *Landing On Water* before returning (somewhat) to his rock roots on *Life*. All five counts were met with success in that the music on these albums supply the real insight into the diversity of Young's talents. *Trans* and *Landing On Water* stand out as possibly the most brilliant works in Young's career as a solo artist. Commercially, however, they met with disaster as many of his loyal supporters got fed up with his inconsistency.

One last foray into blues with a ten piece brass band he named the Bluenotes on *This Notes For You* (1988) and Young seemed ready to settle down with a Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young reunion. After *American Dream* (1988) came out plans were for another album by the group and possibly a follow-up tour. Young never has been one to plan too far ahead, however, and before we knew it he had released an EP called *Eldorado* (1989) in Japan and was back with another great solo album *Freedom* (1989). Add to that Young's

claims that his best material during the past ten years has yet to be released and his plans for a follow-up to his 1977 greatest hits compilation *Decade* and you have the reason that Neil Young can easily be viewed as the most talented songwriter of the rock era. (At last word *Decade II* was estimated to be in the realm of seven to ten disks long.)

*Freedom* and *Ragged Glory* have little in common with each other, it seems. *Freedom*, said to have been chosen by Young from about eight previous years of unreleased material, in itself reflected Young's diversity. *Ragged Glory*, recorded in a matter of days on Neil's Broken Arrow Ranch, is a far more consistent approach and reflects his diversity best when viewed in the context of his other albums.

Unquestionably, *Ragged Glory*'s most moving song is "Mother Earth". Its lyrics are brilliantly crafted and the airy three part harmony chorus is accompanied only by an over-driven electric guitar. The finest moment of all, however, is the moment when Young's voice alone passes away from the chorus. "Obey Mother Earth and her healing ways." His voice is shaky, unsure (and, of course, a little off-key). But that's Neil Young - a delicate shell that is an all-too-vulnerable human. It is within that we find his strength: a strong, forgiving, and enduring soul that still searches for a heart of gold...



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