oh, Hello, Mr. Soul
IN A RARE INTERVIEW, NEIL YOUNG TAKES US FOR A RIDE SOMEWHERE ON A DESERT HIGHWAY

By ADAM PITLUK  || Photography by STEPHEN BUSKEN
MALIBU CANYON ROAD IS AN ICONIC, MEANDERING SCENIC BYWAY THAT connects the Ventura Freeway with the similarly iconic Pacific Coast Highway. Much of the surrounding area has a state-park designation, so the few residential pockets in the canyon will remain rugged and pretty indefinitely, regardless of how neighboring Los Angeles, with all her corporate tentacles, decides to expand.

Deep in the heart of the canyon, where there’s nothing but inland sage scrub and California bay laurel to obscure your sight lines — and where all creatures great and small can be heard howling and chirping and braying and barking — lies a smattering of ranches. The neighborhood, if it can be called that, is only a couple of miles from the beach, yet there’s neither sight nor sound nor smell of the Pacific Ocean’s foamy surf. The freeway that links you with downtown’s sprawl is only a couple of miles in the other direction, yet there’s no sign of traffic; there’s no hint of smog. It’s the sort of place where you would expect to find Angelenos who were ready to put down their cellphones, build a country home, and retire.

One of those Angelenos is Neil Young, who at the moment is relaxing on his longtime manager/neighbor’s leather sofa, chin to his chest. Resting, yes, but he’s not even close to retiring. Young has been a canyon dweller for decades, and this particular canyon has served him well. After all, it was just 10 miles away in Topanga Canyon, circa 1970, where he recorded *After the Gold Rush* in a basement studio not far from an
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Neil Young relaxing at a hotel in Tokyo in March 1976; Young backstage at Oakland Stadium on July 14, 1974, during the Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young U.S. tour; Young and his band Crazy Horse in 1975
“THE LONGER I LIVE, THE MORE I SEE AND THE MORE I THINK INJUSTICE NEEDS TO BE ELIMINATED FOR PEOPLE.”
old Indian burial mound. But that was then, and that journey through the past has snaked around these canyon roads and delivered us to last week, which kicked off a series of appearances and shows for Young that will last clear through the fall.

One week earlier, Young had a press conference and listening party for his new album, *Earth* — his 52nd overall — at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Since then, he’s tried to steal a few more chin-to-chest moments in this canyon before embarking on a 27-day marathon tour of Europe and Scandinavia.

Back at his manager’s ranch, it’s okay that the 70-year-old rock legend — a man who has toured extensively for more than five decades and who played Woodstock 47 years ago this month with Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young — catches a few quiet moments when and where he can. Because rust never sleeps, and neither does Neil Young.

**HE’S A PERFECT STRANGER**

The public persona of Neil Young is that of the proverbial loner. His songs pay tribute to an amalgamation of freedom and earth, where the human spirit is able to move about and interact — or remain solitary — at will. If you see him on the subway, he’ll be down at the end of the car.

And although there’s a commotion around him at Elliot Roberts’ ranch off of Malibu Canyon Road, and notwithstanding the fact that Young is surrounded by seven people at the moment (a German journalist, a photographer, a photographer’s assistant, two publicists, manager Elliot Roberts and me), Young still conveys an air of isolation. Some of the chatter is about him, and yet the speakers act as if he’s not sitting right there on the couch. When the photographer starts discussing the forthcoming shoot with the publicist, Young rises from his rest, removes his green wire-rimmed sunglasses, and speaks. “Here, I’ll go and get my special hat for you.”

He slips through a sliding glass door and ambles around the house to his car, one of the most distinguishable rides in North America. It’s a one-of-a-kind, Young-dubbed “LincVolt,” which is essentially a retrofitted 1959 Lincoln Continental.
Rock luminaries have always clamored to perform with the iconic Neil Young, including Bruce Springsteen, Joni Mitchell, Eddie Vedder and Bob Dylan.
THE VOICE IS NOW
THE CHOIR

Far from being a lone wolf, Neil Young has collaborated with many legendary musicians over his decades-long career. From his long-time partnership with Stephen Stills in Buffalo Springfield and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, to his numerous albums with the Southern California garage band Crazy Horse, to his most recent collaboration with Promise of The Real (fronted by Willie Nelson’s son Lukas), Young has churned out enough albums to have his own Top 50. Here are some other Young-spearheaded mashups.

THE MOTOWN CONNECTION

In the mid-1960s, Young played guitar in the Toronto R&B group The Mynah Birds, fronted by an AWOL American sailor who would later go on to be funk legend Rick James. James and Young’s band would become the first mostly white band signed to Motown Records.

THE NEW GENERATION

When 1989’s Freedom came out, Young was starting to hit big with the up-and-coming indie-rock crowd. He was a major influence with Dinosaur Jr., Nirvana and Sonic Youth, whom he would call upon to be the opening act for his 1990 tour supporting Ragged Glory.

THE GODFATHER OF GRUNGE

His strong influence on the new generation of musicians earned him the moniker The Godfather of Grunge. In 1995, Young teamed up with grunge behemoths Pearl Jam for Mirror Ball, his highest charting album since 1972.

REUNITING WITH OLD FRIENDS

Young partnered with the instrumental R&B group Booker T. & the M.G.’s for 2002’s Are You Passionate?, whom he first toured with in the early 1990s. The group’s groovy instruments created an interesting juxtaposition to Young’s raw guitar style on the love-and-war-themed album. —DAVID HALLORAN

Neil Young — the one who is all business when the recorders are on and a jokester when the recorders are off — presented himself.

“Hey, Elliot, put on the sombrero,” he requested of his manager as we photographed him.

“Come on, Neil. I don’t want to put on the sombrero,” replied Roberts, who’s also been Young’s friend for more than 50 years.

“Just for a second. Here, I’ll go get it.” Young disappeared for a moment and returned with a kitschy straw hat. He walked right up to Roberts and plopped it down on his head. Then the rock star put his arm around his manager/friend and mugger for the camera. “Here, shoot this,” he requested of our photographer. The rest of the entourage doubled over laughing at the sight of Elliot Roberts — a man who once managed Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell, and who is widely regarded as the man who broke up Buffalo Springfield — wearing a goofy straw sombrero. And so did Neil Young.

IT’S THESE EXPRESSIONS I NEVER GIVE

Sitting on a wicker chair, Young looks unkempt, although that appearance is standard-issue. He sits there in his faded black jeans, beat-up black-leather work boots laced up tight, a black T-shirt with the word Soil written across it in faded yellow silk-screen and a red baseball cap. He leans back in his chair and lets his arms dangle. Young looks good and his body looks lean, and not just for a 70-year-old.

“I have a truck that travels with me when I’m on the road, and it has a Pilates Reformer in it,” Young says of his training regimen. “I’m a trained Pilates instructor. I keep doing stuff like that. It keeps me fit.” If you’ve seen Neil Young in concert before, you know that his performance is quite the aerobic workout in itself, what with the stomping around and rocking back and forth and playing his guitar solos as if doing so was a form of strength training. “I can actually do it better now than I’ve been able to for years because Pilates has opened my body up, I feel much better about my ability to react physically to what I’m doing.”

For two years now, Young has been a vegetarian, and he says he’ll never go back to the old way of doing things. His body is cleaner; his voice is clearer. After a lifetime of being a carnivore, he decided one day that he was done eating meat. Like everything he does, when Young is in, he’s all in.

He speaks with tremendous intensity. After each question, he’ll look out the window at the sloping hillside abutting his manager’s house, then he’ll lean forward and make direct eye contact. His cobalt eyes inherently challenge you to a staring contest. Time after time, he wins.

The conversation is sweeping and Young has strong, well-thought-out opinions on myriad topics. That’s what you’d expect from a man who not only helped to shape folk music in America but who has also been the subject of pop-culture controversy. Lynyrd Skynyrd’s 1974 hit “Sweet Home Alabama” is a response to two Young songs, “Southern Man” and “Alabama.” In fact, listen closely to the Skynyrd lyrics, and you’ll hear ol’ Neil called out by name.

And because his music is about everyday goings-on, it’s no surprise that his new album, Earth, features a few surprising guest stars: Animals from around his California ranch have been mixed in to some of his favorite live performances. “It’s amazing that the bees occupy the same space in the sonic frequency spectrum as
cymbals,” he says, growing animated as he elaborates. “So usually where you’d have a cymbal crash, you just bring in the bees and all you have is kick drum and bass and bees. And it’s insane. There’s one bird in ‘Seed Justice’ that sounds like a vinyl scratch. That’s just a real bird.”

STILL THE SEARCHER
MUST RIDE THE DARK HORSE
The creative process varies from musician to musician. When Young composes songs, it’s not necessarily a concerted effort. The process is less 9-to-5 work and more divine inspiration, as it were. Some of his most beloved singles were conceived in unconventional places and at inopportune times. He wrote three of his best — “Down By the River,” “Cowgirl in the Sand” and “Cinnamon Girl” — in one day when he was sick with a fever. But he doesn’t have any musical inspirations when he’s writing.

“When I’m creating things, I don’t much listen to anything,” he says. “I’m writing a book right now and I just finished this record, which was a draining experience: four months of postproduction to turn out 98 minutes. Every transition: every fade from one thing to another; every piece of sound; the placement of it; the volume of it; it wore me out.”

Young gazes pensively out of Roberts’ bay windows at the canyon rolling out before him. He pulls his left foot over his knee and grabs his ankle while searching for the words. Then he straightens, anchors his feet into the floor and turns toward me. He’s not angry, but his eyes are wide open and laser-focused on mine. “For some reason, I had to do this record. I wanted people to go with me and feel the animals in the audience, and for them to feel like they were part of something bigger than they are.”

It’s a peculiar concept, to be sure, but then again, so was the concept of a concert in upstate New York where a bunch of bands would congregate on a farm and play for three days.

“Remember Bram Stoker’s Dracula?” Young asks.

“That’s where this record is coming from. That’s what I was thinking of for the whole record was the bat. The bat couldn’t see. It heard where it was going. That’s what this record is.”

That’s a fitting metaphor from a man who’s made several laps around this world over the years. Part of Young’s creative process is to be the endless searcher-cum-unifier; the venerable Indian on the banks that were crowded and narrow, holding a broken arrow. That’s why it’s interesting yet altogether not surprising to hear that even in the year 2016, Young doesn’t fall back on his fortune when he’s on the road. He’s still out there, searching.

“I go to truck stops, and then I’ll sleep on my bus,” he says. “I don’t go to any cities. I don’t stay in hotels. I don’t have any trappings of going in and out of hotels. As much as I can, I try to not do that anymore.”

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It’s a sentiment that Elliot Roberts explains when I mention the comment to him later in the day. There’s a presumption that Young is avoiding hotels because he’s becoming reclusive in his later years. And it’s surprising to hear that the septuagenarian exemplar of musicians for more than 50 years still travels like he’s on his way to Yasgur’s Farm.

“When you’re at a truck stop, you’re not reclusive,” Roberts explains. “Neil likes that life of being solitary and still meeting people that you ordinarily wouldn’t meet. I don’t think he’s trying to be reclusive. It’s the other way around.”
COME A LITTLE BIT CLOSER, 
HEAR WHAT I HAVE TO SAY

Press the right button, and Young will give you his opinion about anything. His ideas are often provocative, and whether you agree or disagree with his premise about, say, not eating any food that once had eyeballs, he speaks with such knowledge and conviction that you can’t help but nod in agreement. In fact, he says his passion for social, ecological and economic justice is even stronger now than it was when he wrote songs like “Ohio,” his response to the Kent State University shootings that occurred in May 1970.

“The longer I live, the more I see and the more I think injustice needs to be eliminated for people. And people are actually becoming aware. They don’t like it, but they are becoming aware of it.”

What’s more, Young is having déjà vu as it pertains to American youth. He catches echoes of 1968 — when even Richard Nixon had soul — in how the younger generation is embracing a concept of outrage and manifesting it in their support of Bernie Sanders.

“The young kids are just like they were back in the ’60s,” Young says. “The young groups, they really get it. They know that the corporations are taking over our democracy. They know that food supplies are being [screwed] up by big food. They know that drugs are bad and that big pharma is perpetrating these things on us and that doctors are being paid extra by the pharmaceutical companies to prescribe certain drugs. And it’s out of control. Look at what happened to Prince. He was taking a prescribed drug, a drug that was made. It wasn’t an illegal drug. There should be a responsibility for that, but there’s no politician who will fight big pharma. Except Bernie.”

And that is the quintessential Neil Young. He still has the spirit of Crazy Horse, even if he no longer plays with the band of the same name. He still embodies the essence of the ’60s and ’70s, even though the hair has silvered and the face has changed. Yet still a light is shining, from that lamp on down the hall.

“I tell you what, it sure has felt like 50 years,” Elliot Roberts says through a chuckle. “Now that he’s getting older, he’s conscious of leaving a legacy. That’s how he started out with the hippy generation, yet the hippy generation lost its way somewhere along the way. Neil is still very, very much about activism. But he has so much heart, and he has so much soul.”

It’s good to know humanity doesn’t have to worry about Neil Young retiring anytime soon. All he needs are those few chin-to-chest moments in his beloved canyon, and all is well.

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Editor-in-chief ADAM PITLUK is the author of Standing Eight and Damned to Eternity. The last musicians he profiled for American Way were Dave Grohl and Michael Stipe. Follow Adam on Twitter @adampitluk.
Time moves pretty fast at Zion National Park. That’s somewhat of a paradox because being surrounded by towering rock formations and vast expanses that haven’t been manipulated by man in more than 250 million years conveys the assumption that Zion is in a time warp: the sort of sanctuary where a person could slow their life down to a walk. But maybe it’s because there is so much to see and do in this rugged section of southwestern Utah that the sun rises and sets at a quickened pace, or at least at a pace quicker than you’d like it to.

I visited twice in five months. I can still see the soaring bluffs and the red and orange rock arrangements standing sentry over the Virgin River. If I try hard enough, I can also smell the cottonwood trees and herbaceous plants. The rushes grew so green. The water trickling from Mystery Falls, in that otherworldly setting, provided the perfect natural soundtrack.

Those visits were 18 years ago. The first visit was with my girlfriend, Kimberly. It was spring break 1998, and while many of our friends went to Jamaica that year, we decided to drive from Columbia, Missouri, to Tucson, Arizona. On the way, we made a stop.

Neither of us had ever been to Utah, so we pointed her Chevy Cavalier due west on Interstate 70, drove until its conclusion in Cove Fort, Utah, and then took I-15 toward Springdale and Zion National Park. We spent all day hiking around that natural playground. At night, I splurged on a $35/night room at a AAA motel. We ate chili verde for dinner at the Bit & Spur Restaurant & Saloon. It was a honeymoon before we were even engaged to be engaged.

Jared and I rolled in to Springdale, Utah, with $33 between us. Not enough for a hotel room, which was OK because we were 21 and would happily sleep in the car. Not enough for food, but that was OK because in those days, we lived on beef jerky and corn nuts. The problem was there wasn’t enough for gas back to Missouri.

Ragged and road weary, we drove on fumes to the Bit & Spur, where Kimberly and I had eaten the best chili of our lives five months earlier. I got my acoustic guitar out of the back seat, and we plopped down on the pavement in front of the restaurant.

I overdy dismayed that my body — which turns 40 this month — can’t handle hikes like the ones my sister, Jessica; Kimberly (now my wife) and I did 10 years ago at Saguaro National Park. I love the parks because they put on full display just how spectacularly beautiful this country is, and because the people attracted to them year after year — for a century as of this month — embody the best of the American can-do spirit. Jared will second that emotion. And so will Darius Nabors (page 56), who’s doing the trip at 31 that Jared and I wished we would have done at 21 — and that I’m seriously considering doing now at 40.

Neil Young (page 46) also gets it. Don’t be surprised to see him at a truck stop along I-15 one day en route to Springdale, Utah, guitar in hand.

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