

THE INDEPENDENT – TUESDAY – JANUARY 14, 2014



Stephen Stills interview: 'We're still here, haha haha ha!'



Next month, Crosby Stills & Nash will perform their classic 1969 debut album in its entirety at the Royal Albert Hall.

printed on the front. “That looks like my son,” he says, before smiling and adding, “or like me without the lumpy bits.”

Fearful of those pre-interview instructions, I kick off with a reassuring, “So we’re here to talk about The Rides...” “About the what,” he replies. “The Rides,” I say a little louder. “Oh, The Rides,” he says as the penny drops. “I thought you said the riots.” Right, I figure. If he’s thinking I’m going to kick off with a question about worldwide socio-political turmoil, I’m probably going to be safe to venture cautiously away from the agenda. Here is an edited transcript of the conversation that followed.

So The Rides is essentially a blues band, though in your time you’ve been involved in folk, country, rock and all manner of musical genres. Why have you gone back to the blues now?

When I was a kid, all my peers were studying the old blues songs – Jimmy Reed, Howlin’ Wolf and Lightnin’ Hopkins – so I’m just going back to where I started. Over the years I’ve had other people to please but now I’ve finally got to play in the way I always wanted to do in the first place. One of the reasons I stayed the second time CSN came to Britain [in 1970] was because of what British musicians were doing with blues music. The Surrey boys [Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck] were a big influence on me. I actually played with Lightnin’ Hopkins once in about 1960 at a party in Houston. We were in the bedroom sitting back to back and I was playing a sort of bass line to what he was playing. I put my guitar down and he said, “Why’d you stop?”

Why did you?

I was shy and overcome and feeling bashful.

The Rides consists of you, the keyboardist Barry Goldberg and the 36-year-old guitarist Kenny Wayne Shepherd. How did it come about?

Me and Barry missed each other by a day recording for *Super Session* [the 1968 album orchestrated by the Dylan and Blood Sweat & Tears guitarist Al Kooper]. And I'd met Kenny Wayne as we have a mutual friend who owns the Indianapolis Colts football team. When my manager first suggested him, I was like, "Who?" He said, "You know him, he's really great." And I said, "Sorry, I don't know who you're talking about." I was at a casino, yelling into my phone and I turned around and there was literally a marquee with an eight-storey poster outside the window with his picture on it that said "Friday and Saturday: Kenny Wayne Shepherd." I went, "Oh, the kid from the football." It was one of those great human moments where grandad finally connected the fucking dots. The name comes from the fact that me and Kenny Wayne are both automobile nuts, of the Jeremy Clarkson persuasion. We're not Prius people, let's put it that way. I've got a 1990s Bentley, which I adore (it's just a very fast living room) and an X5. They're both pristine and get terrible gas mileage.

Do you think Kenny Wayne feels a little bit playing with you like you did playing with Lightnin' Hopkins?

Might be. Sometimes, when we're playing, I have to say to him, "Come on, you've got to bring it now," and he'll be like, "I was just being polite." Which is what Clapton taught me when I first came to Britain: You have to take turns in being polite and not out-flash the other musicians and have good manners. I don't think competition has that much of a place in music. If the audience want sport, they can go watch rugby. Ours is a collaborative art form. Kenny Wayne is younger than my kid who's a musician. In many ways it's like working with my kid only better cos when you work with your kids they tend to be more familiar.

Less respectful?

I guess.

So is everything else on hold while The Rides is

happening?

Graham [Nash] has a book and wants to go out and play by himself and David [Crosby] wants to do the same with his son, so they're very much rooting for me with this. All we're doing together is the Albert Hall [on 8, 9, 11 October], where we'll be playing the first album. We were astonished how easy that was. It just went, duuurrrr [when we started to rehearse]. A couple of things have changed but not much. And I can still make all my parts, which startles me as much as anyone. But the thing for me right now is The Rides, the three of us together is this magical force and the music just falls out. We wrote these songs with jaw-dropping ease and it's not always like that. Particularly with [computer programs such as] Pro Tools around. Like Joe Walsh said, if The Eagles had had Pro Tools during [the making of] *Hotel California*, they'd still be working on it. [Laughs]

Would I be right in thinking that you were the least hippie in the CSN collaboration?

[Laughs] I abhorred hippies. That's fair and accurate. I went to a military school and my mother tried to make my manners refined, except for when I was a drunken lout, so all that carrying on about something you'll never have an answer for never quite worked for me. I went to San Francisco looking for musicians and I saw all these drummers, and I was like, man, back down South none of these people would get jobs ever. And so all that was pretty much lost on me. But yeah, I was there [at Woodstock, Monterey and Altamont]. David Crosby and I virtually thought of Monterey. We were just yakking about why not do a festival where they have the jazz festival in Monterey and someone overheard that and all of a sudden it was on and I had to talk myself on to the bill because Neil [Young] had quit the band. It was quite an interesting time, everything moved very very fast and that's one of the stumbling blocks of my book... I realised that all this shit happened in 18 months and I couldn't get a hold of it or the order or who was who or what was what. So I have to go back and check with people. I'm not a diarist really.

But the stories are great and fun to write.

You've met some incredible people along the way...

My favourite was Cass Elliot [of the Mamas and the Papas]. We would sit on the street together in New York after earning the money for a slice of pizza and crack wise about the passers-by. We were hang-buddies. She was very well read, had great education and was one of the funniest people in the world. I was on the road when I heard she had died, and she was over here and I was furious cos my friend was gone and she was the one I always looked forward to coming home and going out for dinner with and just yakking endlessly. She also did this one clever thing of getting me up to her house when Graham was going to be there and not telling me.

So it was her house! [For decades there have been various opinions as to whether Crosby Stills & Nash sang together for the first time at Elliot's house, Joni Mitchell's or somewhere else entirely]

OK, so now everyone's written their version I'm going to have the last word. Graham was head over heels in love with Joni Mitchell and they were smoking some stultifying weed so they've misremembered it. The fact is I would never have sung together for the first time in front of Joni Mitchell. I know myself well enough to know I would have been petrified. I would never have been able to function. We did it at Cass's house and two days later we sang at Joni's to show off. But the first time was at Cass's house as I am sitting here. Graham's book is coming out next so... Actually his book is quite charming and I don't hold anything against anyone else's memory but I have a smellophonic, stereophonic image of this thing and I can describe the house in vivid detail.

What can you tell me about all the other musicians you've played with?

It was sheer luck, though some of it was hustling. Hendrix was a

wonderfully kind and generous man and he tried to show me lots of things on the guitar. But his hands were the size of an NBA basketball player's. He'd be like, "See, you can do that." And I'd be like, "Jimi, put your hand up next to mine." We had some great times in Ireland just rambling about. I went this one time and we went in to this studio and I said just record everything. So I had a line of tapes the size of that couch but the tragedy is I went back to listen to them and it was just a bunch of people loitering - la la la la la la, clink clink clink. Then Jimi played one song, which was his song, and I gave it to the estate and then there's another song he played with me. I couldn't believe we didn't get more than that, though, but the hangers-on kept showing up and it just never went anywhere. He was quite shy and I think for him being with me was as much about having an American voice to talk to, being a bit of a stranger in a strange land. I always felt very comfortable here and so did he to a point. But at that age in the music business, because this is a small and compact island. it was very competitive and there was a lot of gamesmanship. Sometimes I think he felt a bit like the ball in a ping-pong game. So he'd come and find me and my friend from Louisiana to sit and talk philosophy with and life and so on.

Where were you when you heard he'd died?

I'd just come back from the road and was on my way back here [to the UK] to find him because he called while I'd just broken my hand and the David Geffen office [at CSN's record company] didn't pass the message through to me. But he called and I didn't find out until Mitch Mitchell put it in his book. He called asking me to come and play bass cos there was a war going on with Noel Redding and he wanted me to fill in and finish out the tour. I wouldn't have been able to because my hand was broken at that time but if that hadn't happened I would have dropped what I was doing. I think David Geffen was terrified I was going to run away, and I would have done, but I'd just got to my mother's house in San Francisco and was coming back to England and I don't know what I did for the next week... Me and Jimi had a

little scheme going and it was very hush hush and shall remain so. I was heartbroken.

Many of your early songs were about your former partner, the folk singer Judy Collins, right...

She was a big influence in making me behave like a gentleman - for a short while. And we've gotten rather close again. She's good friends with me and my wife. We are texting all the time and we're threatening to do a little folky album together. You know, we were together at an age when romance was really romance. Back then when you fell you fell hard and you'd wear your heart on your sleeve and you write all these songs. It's like Taylor Swift today: you know who she's singing about and it doesn't matter. Judy even gave her book the title *Sweet Judy Blue Eyes* [after Stills' song "Suite Judy Blue Eyes"] and writes lovingly about the experience and I'm flattered beyond measure. She was very much nicer to me in prose than I was to her in song.

How did the Ringo Starr collaboration come about?

I asked [if he wanted to play on my album], and he said, "Sure, I'll coom [Does passable Liverpool accent]." I bought his house [Brookfields, in Elstead, Surrey, which Starr had bought from Peter Sellers], actually. Maureen [Starr's first wife] took me down there and I said, "I can't believe you're selling this," and she was like, "Well, it's too far and ner ner ner ner." I said, "No. It's perfect."

Do you still own it?

I wish. I made the mistake of bringing my mother and sister and they spent so much money while I was on the road the accountant sold it. I cried a lot when I got back. It was my little spot of England.

Is it true that you play percussion on the Bee Gees' 'You Should Be Dancing'?

We were in the studio next door making a CSN album and David

was all full of himself and saying this is going to be the album of the year. I went, “No it’s not, that’s being recorded across the hall,” cos I’d heard some of that *Saturday Night Fever* stuff and I knew it was totally unique and going to be a monster. So I played timbales and for a long time that was my only platinum single. If I’d got royalties from that I’d still be in that house in Surrey now.

Maybe The Rides will give you the means to buy it back...

Well, I’m an old fart now. I don’t give a fuck. If younger musicians want to elbow me out the way I’m happy to step aside. But they can’t seem to get rid of me. During the punk era, it was anything but 1960s people. They just spat on us. But we outlasted them. We’re still here. Hahahahaha.

And what does Stephen Stills like to do when he’s not playing music?

I’m a pretty private guy. I like having people over and having a meal at home. We’ve got a new big mummy crew cos I’ve got small children again. My children are aged from 42 to eight. Father’s Day was quite a day. I had the regiment check in, all seven of them.

You have a reputation for sometimes being short with journalists...

I had a torturous day in New York one time where someone had fed a writer this thing that I had tried out for the Monkees and failed. The truth was that I wanted to sell my songs to a hit TV show to make money. The thought of being a pretend Beatle on TV was so appalling that I couldn’t imagine it, but I went down and said I know a kid, and I sent them Peter Tork. This journalist kept saying, “But they turned you down right?” I was like, “You’re not getting the point.” So I ended up going fuck you! Often the journalist has already written the piece and all they’re looking for you to do is to confirm their obnoxious

preconceptions. There's a point where you just go, fuck fame, fuck being famous, fuck being a celebrity, fuck this. I'm a fucking musician. Take my picture and make it up.

Thanks for not being like that with me.

That was an absolute pleasure

It was. I love that I talked about all the things you were warned not to talk to me about. High fives on that!

The Rides release their debut album 'Can't Get Enough' on Monday 26 August on Provogue Records (theridesband.com)

THE CRITICS
ON  SUNDAY