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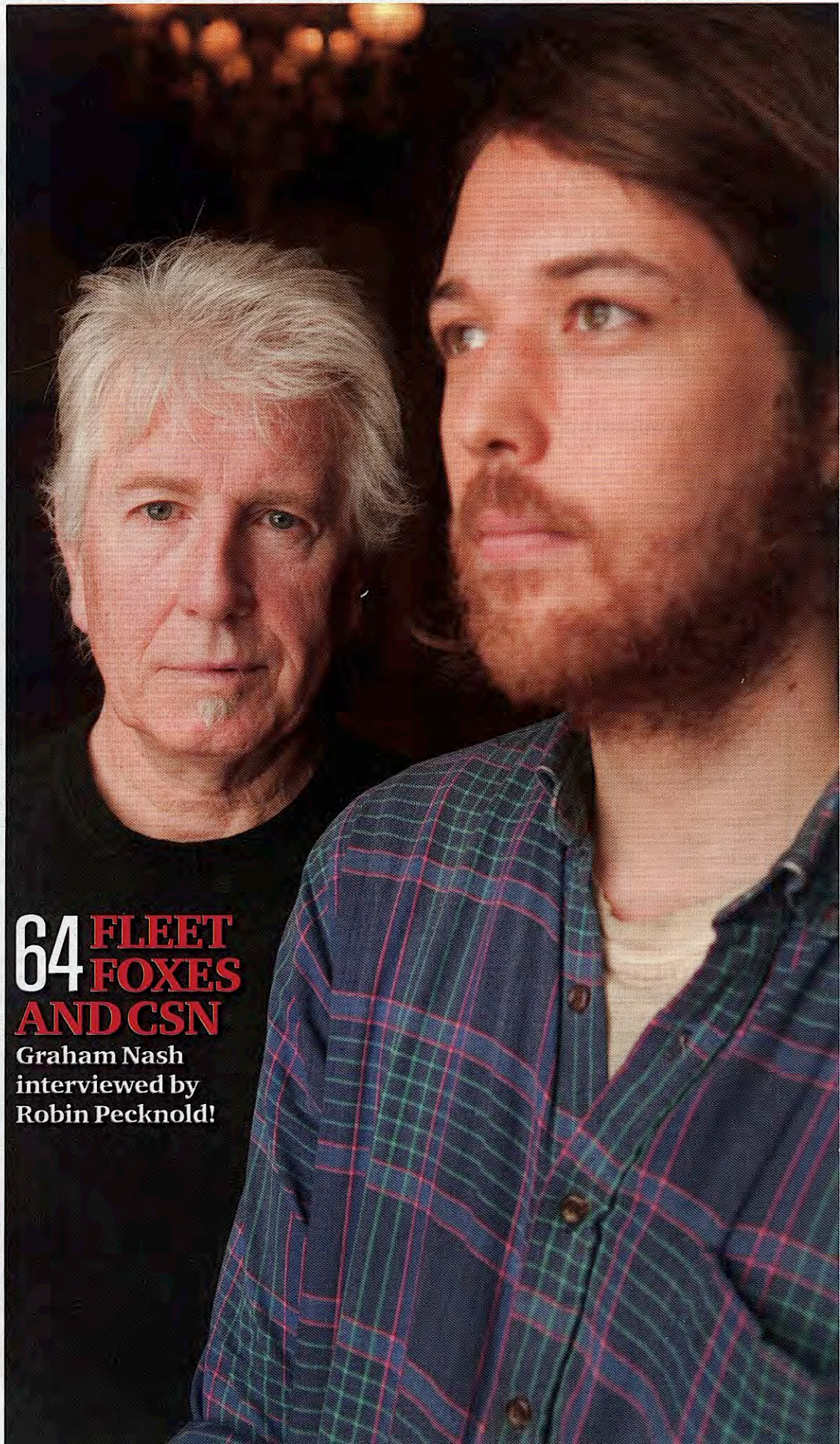
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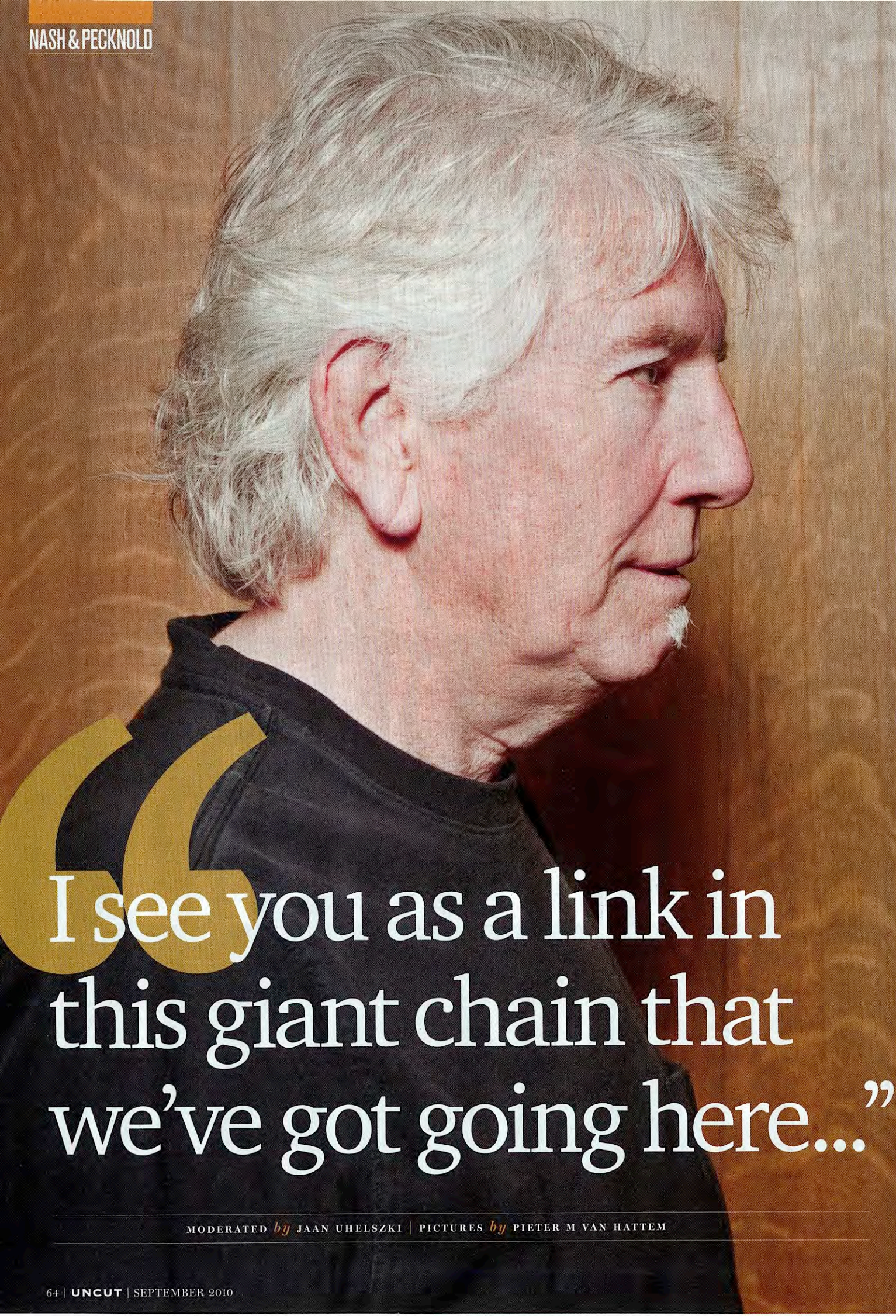
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## 64 FLEET FOXES AND CSN

Graham Nash interviewed by Robin Pecknold!





“I see you as a link in this giant chain that we’ve got going here...”

MODERATED *by* JAAN UHELSZKI | PICTURES *by* PIETER M VAN HATTEM



# Graham Nash *interviewed by* Robin Pecknold



# W

HEN FLEET FOXES' Robin Pecknold was 12, his father would try and sit him down and say, "Here, son, these are my artists. This is one that helped define my worldview." "I'd be like, 'Whatever,'" admits Pecknold. "I wouldn't let him show me what he thought was important, or force it on me." Among those artists were Crosby Stills Nash & Young and, even though he initially resisted his father's agenda, it's clear that their music made a powerful impression on the singer. By the time Pecknold and his band recorded "Mykonos" on the "Sun Giant" EP, Fleet Foxes' harmonies uncannily resembled those on CSNY's "Ohio"...

Which is why Pecknold was the perfect choice to record the title song for *Be Yourself*, a tribute album based on Graham Nash's 1971 album, *Songs For Beginners*, that was being masterminded by Nash's daughter, Nile. This is what brings him here to a suite in the Fairmont Olympic Hotel in his native Seattle, away from the studio where he has been working on the new Fleet Foxes LP for at least eight months. A one-time intern at *The Stranger*, a Seattle weekly paper, Pecknold is taking today's assignment seriously. He has a black moleskine notebook, filled with questions penned in a small, neat scrawl, and is an hour early for the job: to interview Graham Nash for *Uncut*.

It transpires that Nash is a fan of Fleet Foxes, too. "My sister told me about Fleet Foxes about a year and a half ago," he tells Pecknold. "She told me to watch out for these kids. They were singing great and I would enjoy 'em. And I do enjoy 'em. I'm a harmony freak."

This very morning, the news has come through that Nash has been awarded an OBE, something he finds both an honour and a little embarrassing. "Quite frankly," he claims, "I had no idea anyone in England was watching what I was doing. I've been gone for more than half my life—I haven't lived there for 45 years. I don't know what's going on but I'd like to go collect it, take my family and see where the Queen lives. To be given an OBE at this point in my life is very, very interesting. I think I get to park free in Harrods food court. I can drive my Mini right in and just eat..."

**ROBIN PECKNOLD:** Can I ask you about how you first came to be in Crosby, Stills & Nash? Were you at the end of the line with The Hollies because they weren't allowing you to do your own songs, and they happened to be there at the right time?

**GRAHAM NASH:** It was a little more complicated than that, but yes. Go ahead.

**RP:** What did you feel, being a part of this?

**GN:** Free. I felt free.



**RP:** And not an outsider?

**GN:** Well, in England in that point, if you didn't know John and Paul and George and Ringo, you weren't shit. In England it's always been, anything north of Birmingham, you're peasants. And anyone south of Birmingham works for the Queen. Then when The Beatles came down to London and set the world on fire, then everybody down south wanted to talk in a Liverpool accent. They burst through that line and opened up doors for everybody.

Once The Beatles were successful, then all the people that were making money down south at EMI thought, well, they can't be the only band up there. And that's how The Hollies were discovered. We were playing a lunchtime show at The Cavern in Liverpool. Then one day this guy called Ron Richards, who was a producer for EMI, came to see us. I'd broken my last guitar string and I didn't have any other strings, and so I played with no strings. And he thought that was kinda cute. He invited us to go

down to London, we cut our first hit record in April of 1963 and it became a hit, and we never looked back.

Then, quite frankly, I started to smoke dope and they were still drinking, and it's a different mindset. My way wasn't right and their way wasn't right, but we started to just deviate in our thought processes. Add to that the fact that they didn't want to record a couple of my songs. Add to that, they wanted to do an album of Bob Dylan songs.

Add to that, I'd heard me and David and Stephen sing together. Once I heard that sound, I was gone.

I've always had to follow my heart. And when I heard me and David and Stephen singing three-part harmony for the first time, we all stopped, we started laughing. It was ridiculous, but the sound of Crosby, Stills & Nash was born within about 40 seconds. I still get chills talking about it, to this day. When me and David and Stephen make the air vibrate with our voices at the same time, it's a different sound than I've ever heard before.

**RP:** Was it competitive between all of you guys, writing songs?

**GN:** In terms of songwriting, we have a reality rule. If I've got a new song and I play it for David, Stephen and Neil and nobody reacts, you'll never hear that song on a record or in our set. It's visceral. You can tell from body language. If you play somebody a song and you can see their foot tapping, they like it. If they're holding themselves stiffly, you're not reaching them.

**RP:** I wanted to ask you a few things that I've just been curious about myself; I've been thinking about my own creative process and life in general. How do you normally feel when you're done with a record? Is it something you ever want to hear again?

**GN:** We very rarely listen to our stuff. I don't listen to The Hollies stuff and I don't listen to CSNY. I'm much more interested in what I'm doing now, what I'm writing now.



**RP: Totally, yeah. I feel the same way.**

**GN:** And what I'm going to write tomorrow and the show I'm going to do in a few hours. We've never rested on our laurels—we're not like that. I've always tried to look forward. In fact, I haven't played "Be Yourself" in 30 years. Once it's out there, it doesn't belong to me any more.

**RP: Yeah. I think it's a matter of recognising that, in that moment, a record was the combination of all your opinions and all of your passions. I'll listen to my records for that, but I'm never going to put it on for pleasure.**

**GN:** Right.

**RP: With this record that we're making now, I'm trying to make a record that I'd want to have. If I heard it somewhere in the world, I'd want to say, "Oh, who's that band?"**

**GN:** Do you have a title for it?

**RP: The working title is *Sim Sala Bim*. It's an abracadabra-type incantation, you know. Like you were talking about earlier, I just want the record to be a window into another universe.**

**GN:** Yeah. You're putting 'em on a journey. Let's hope it's a good one. Would this be your third?

**RP: It would be the second album. But, yeah, it's coming along. What about you?**

**GN:** Right now I'm working on this CSNY Live 1974 stuff.

**RP: Do you have a title?**

**GN:** Yeah. *Witnesses Affecting Stuff*.

**RP: Did you ever feel like you had a plan for all of this?**

**GN:** We had no idea what we were doing. We just had an insane desire to make music and get it out, and we did. But there was no plan. There still is no plan for CSNY. We're four incredibly strong individuals that are opinionated to the nth degree. We worked together when we could, and didn't when we didn't like each other. We've just gone day-to-day, dealing with our lives.

**RP: Do you feel like you define yourself by what you do?**

**GN:** To me it's a very simple life. If I'm healthy and my wife and kids are healthy, everything else is a joke. This world is a fucking joke. It's so wonderful and so screwed at the same time, and if everyone in my family and friends are safe then I play the game the best

way I can. To get the best humour, enjoyment and positive stuff out of it I can.

**RP: How did you come to do *Songs For Beginners*?**

**GN:** We all write at a certain speed, and I've always tried to make it democratic. I always want three songs from Stephen, three from David, and three from me. But what happens when you write more than you record? You end up with a well of songs, then what do you do? I wasn't actually talking to David and Stephen at that point for some weird reason. I had all these songs, so what do you do? I had access to studios, to engineers, to tape, to musicians, so I went in the studio and I recorded however many songs were on *Songs For Beginners*. All of a sudden this music started to fall into place. It starts with me being born in an upstairs room in Blackpool. I thought,



Mitchell is one of the finest songwriters on the planet. And I sat there watching her do that, while at the same time trying to figure out if, 'OK, she's going to the grocery store, I can go to the piano.' I was in her house. It was her piano. I was not a stranger

there, obviously we were living together, but it was somebody else's environment and I'm watching her create *Ladies Of The Canyon* and later, *Blue*. It was very interesting for me, as a writer, to watch another great writer who happens to be in the same room, that you happen to sleep with. And share your life with.

**RP: Did it up your game?**

**GN:** Of course. When you immerse yourself in the best, it rubs off.

**RP: This is another thing that I'm curious about as a songwriter. What's your take on the social utility of music through the decades?**

**GN:** You have to talk about something important. Whether it's how much you love your cat or what's happening to the BP oil spill. During Watergate, I had three televisions in my living room, CBS, NBC, and ABC, watching constantly. I'm a news junkie.

**RP: Me, too.**

**GN:** I like to be in touch, to talk about things that are important to me. I'm really a same-as-everybody-else kind of guy, so if I think it's important enough to me to write about, I have a feeling you'll go, "Oh, I get it."

**RP: From 1968 on, there are a lot of songs that are just vessels for a message, one that's really idealistic, honest, direct and powerful. But the predominant message of music has changed. It moved into nihilism, CONTINUES OVER ►**

## "The sound of Crosby, Stills & Nash was born in about 40 seconds. I still get chills talking about it" **Graham Nash**

'What a great beginning for a journey of an album.' I ended up the album with "We Can Change The World"—something I believe to this day. *Songs For Beginners* may have ended up a wonderful journey, but it didn't start out that way. All I had was a pile of songs and the desire to get them out of my system.

**RP: Did you feel like it was an exorcism? Like you drained out the poison?**

**GN:** Yeah, I did. I was in love with a woman who was a brilliant influence in my life. I mean, Joni

Nash with then-lover Joni Mitchell, California, 1969: "A brilliant influence in my life..."







CSNY on the Freedom of Speech tour, Florida, August 8, 2006

and then in the late '80s and early '90s into a kind of apathy. I don't know, as a young songwriter, what the message is.

**GN:** Good. Why are you supposed to know? Just do it.

**RP:** I feel the world has gotten so complicated that it's hard to feel like there's a place to be proactive. I feel like kids my age have all this energy, but with no idea how to apply it.

**GN:** Put all that energy into music.

**RP:** But I'm afraid it would look like I was copying an old form. Treating it like pastiche.

**GN:** You can't think about that. You've got something to say and now you're saying it well. It's that simple.

**RP:** When you were my age, did you have that same impulse?

**GN:** Absolutely. But you want to communicate. That word 'message' is a little dangerous. It's just personal experience we're trying to share. I don't have messages for anybody. When I write a song, I'm talking to myself. I'm completely selfish and have been allowed to be.

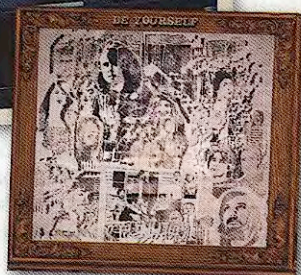
**RP:** I feel like there's got to be other people like me out there. There's not something that special about me. So if I'm writing honestly about myself, I'm sure that there's a number of people out there in the same situation.

**GN:** On the *Be Yourself* album, you really made my song your own—everybody did, and that's what I liked about it. What's funny is we're in the same process right now. We're doing a record with Rick Rubin where he just wants the vocal sound of CSN on songs that we wish we'd written, on songs that we wish we'd recorded. Last night we did "Ruby Tuesday", we did "Norwegian Wood", we did "Midnight Rider", we did "Girl From The North Country". We did all these great songs that we turned into our own, and the people on *Be Yourself* took my music and made it their own. That's a great compliment.

**RP:** When Rubin said, "I want you to do a covers LP," did you think he was out of his mind to ask three such strong songwriters?

**GN:** Yeah, we did. We told him as much. And then one day Stephen said to Rick, "Did you

ever hear us do 'Blackbird'? You know, the Paul McCartney tune?" And he said, "No. Haven't heard it." We hadn't done it in years, but we played it the way we used to. Stephen played his guitar. It was a little rusty, but Rick Rubin got the point. Then he says to Stephen, "Okay, put the guitar down." Stephen says, "What?" Rubin says it again. "Put the guitar down. Sing me the song." Well, for 40 years we've been doing it this way and Stephen says, "No fucking way." But still Rubin stands his ground, so Stephen finally says, "Oh, okay." We recorded it, and it was beautiful, and from that moment on we went, "This guy's not just some idiot."



## "Neil recently said he didn't think a song could change the world. That's the guy who wrote 'Ohio'" **Graham Nash**

**RP:** Would you say your politics have changed as you've gone through life?

**GN:** I don't think so. It's always been simple for me. It either feels right or it feels wrong. We're about human beings and what we do with our feelings, and how we deal with our lives.

**RP:** But wasn't the 2006 tour for Neil's *Living With War* album kind of political?

**GN:** Well, we did stay on point the entire time. We knew what we were doing. When Neil said, "Hey, come and listen to these songs, man. I



need help," we went down to the hotel where Neil was staying in Beverly Hills and I thought, 'We're going to sit in front of big speakers and get high and just listen to all the shit.' No. We're in Neil's car, we're driving along Beverly Hills, listening to this album and he's driving and he's putting in CDs and stuff. By the time we finished this hour-long drive, we knew what he wanted to do. The message he was trying to give was that we'd better watch this Bush administration—they've done some terrible things to America, to the American people and to the American ideals. We wanted to help him. Neil was smart enough to realise that he could've done that with Crazy Horse, but to me personally—and to Neil, obviously—it wouldn't have been half as effective.

Why do you think more younger bands aren't doing that?

**RP:** There's a reluctance. There's so many other ways to express your politics than by writing a song. Obviously, there's the lack of a draft. In terms of the war. That changes the immediacy of the message. When "Ohio" came out my parents were like, "Holy shit!" and, "Fuck, yeah! This song is telling us about ourselves." Now, music is so stratified. Not everyone's listening to the same thing at the same time.

**GN:** And the world is very different than it was.

**RP:** People express their politics in different ways and get politics from different sources. It's not like a seven-inch comes out and everyone goes out and buys it. The artist M.I.A. is fairly political, but in a different way.

**GN:** I find it interesting that Neil recently said that he didn't think a song could change the world. That's the guy who wrote "Ohio".

**RP:** He said that?

**GN:** He did. But I'm most curious as to why you think musicians today are reluctant to take a massive stand. It's kind of upsetting to me.

**RP:** Well, I think the world did change. A lot of stuff that came to the forefront in many different mediums and avenues, in that period of extreme change in America, are now part of daily life. In an awesome way.

**GN:** There's only one thing you can do. You can just be yourself.

**RP:** That's kind of the struggle for me. I feel like when I was first being exposed to music, I could have easily connected to the nihilism of punk, or the apathy of grunge. But what really resonated with me was the message and the feeling of a different mindset.

**GN:** We have a job to do. Let's get on with it. You weren't born at the wrong time, kid. You were born at exactly the right time. I see you as a link in this giant chain that we've got going here.

**RP:** Thank you. ☺