



# STOP KEEP IT SIMPLE, I

**BRANDISHING HIS FIRST ALBUM IN A DECADE, WE BRING YOU NICK LOWE: PRODUCER, SIDEMAN, AND SONGWRITER SUPREME, ON A MISSION TO STRIP ROCK'N'ROLL TO ITS ESSENCE. JUST DON'T ASK HIM TO BLOW HIS OWN TRUMPET. "MY LEGACY — SUCH AS IT IS — ISN'T SOMETHING I LOSE SLEEP OVER," HE TELLS BOB MEHR. PORTRAIT BY KEITH MORRIS.**

**A** PART FROM A BRIEF TENURE AS A JUNIOR reporter for the Middlesex Advertiser & Country Gazette, Nick Lowe has spent most of the last 60 years in the same job: pop musician. In that time, he's operated under numerous guises (Basher, Jesus Of Cool, Nick The Knife), fashioned radio hits, produced some of the most important records of the latter part of the 20th century, and written at least one standard, (What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love And Understanding, that will still probably be played 100 years from now. "Yes, that one may hang around for a while, though I've got mixed feelings about it," says Lowe chuckling. "But my legacy — such as it is — isn't something I lose any sleep over."

Self-effacement has long been Lowe's default setting. "I used to be frustrated that Nick did not lay more claim to his talents," says his friend Elvis Costello, "but now I realise it was a smart thing to do. You don't write songs like Endless Sleep, The Beast In Me or

I'm A Mess without sensing the depths that extend beneath us all, but whether it's wise to point them out, is beyond me. I think that's how you drown."

The son of a Royal Air Force officer father and a songstress mother, Lowe grew up abroad — living in Jordan and Cyprus — but remains, as he puts it, "a true product of the British middle class." It may have influenced his standing in the pantheon ("if Nick had been American," says Costello, "he would have been spoken about in hushed and mythic tones. He's right up there with Dan Penn, Jim Ford and Charlie Rich") but hasn't compromised the affection of music fans and fellow musicians. "I heard Cruel To Be Kind on the radio when I was maybe 11 or 12 years old and bought the single," says Wilco mainman and Lowe collaborator Jeff Tweedy. "It feels he's just been this constant, distinct musical presence in my life."

In September, Lowe will continue his journey with new album, *Indoor Safari*, his first long-player in over a decade. At 75, it may also prove to be Lowe's swan song, or perhaps just another marker in a long, chimerical career.

"There's an energy to Nick that comes across in all of his music that's full of whimsy and irony, but also sincerity," says Tweedy. "He is one of those rare guys that's figured out how to be himself on purpose. That's a hard thing to do."

Keith Morris/Getty

Party of one:  
Nick Lowe in his  
element, 1979.

**“THERE ARE A FEW THINGS THAT STAY THE SAME. A GOOD POP SONG STILL HAS A BEGINNING, A MIDDLE AND AN END.” NICK LOWE**



**Bash it out:** Rockpile in Germany, 1979 (from left), Billy Bremner, Nick Lowe, Terry Williams, Dave Edmunds; (left, top) Lowe and Edmunds with Debbie Harry during Blondie and Rockpile's 1979 US tour; (below) Lowe behind the desk at Eden Studios, London, 1977.

**Lowe end theory:** (clockwise from above) Nick in 2022; Brinsley Schwarz, 1969 (from left) Bob Andrews, Billy Rankin, Lowe, Schwarz; Lowe with The Damned's Rat Scabies and Dave Vanian, 1977; Live Stiffs, 1977 (from left) Lowe, Elvis Costello, Wreckless Eric, Larry Wallis, Ian Dury.

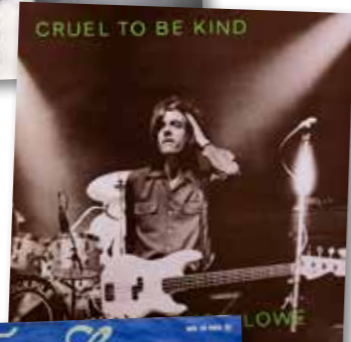


IT'S LATE JUNE, AND LOWE IS in the midst of a summer tour of North America. He's holed up in a hotel in Boston, near Logan Airport, where he's about to link up with the Luchador mask-wearing American surf-rock combo Los Straitjackets, who have served as his band – in the studio and on the stage – since 2017.

As he settles in to chat with MOJO – cutting a dash in a crisp striped shirt, with his oversize specs, and perfect silver coif – Lowe exchanges messages with Roy, his son with wife Peta Waddington. At 19, Roy's followed his father's footsteps into the music business, playing drums for up-and-coming English singer-songwriter Willie J Healey. Coincidentally, he's the exact same age Lowe was when he began his professional career in the late '60s.

"It's such a different world from when I started though," says Lowe. "There are a few things that stay the same. A good pop song still has a beginning, a middle and an end. But I'm not sure if people care about music the same way any more. They are interested in Taylor Swift and Beyoncé. But at the more grass roots level, I don't know..."

Lowe's pop odyssey began in 1968 when the ex-Mod joined school pal Brinsley Schwarz in Kippington Lodge. "As soon as I got in the group, I wanted to change them," he chuckles. "The first thing was to get rid of all these session guys who were playing on their records. Of course, as soon as we were playing on the records, they sounded terrible! (laughs). That's when I realised how much I had to learn. And the main thing I had to learn was how to write songs."



Kippington Lodge became Brinsley Schwarz, notorious for their 1970 flop New York showcase gig where their manager flew in a phalanx of UK rock critics on a beery beano. ("I just thought, Oh my God, how could I have been so stupid to swallow this guff and follow these awful spivs?") Retreating back to London and under the radar, the Brinsleys caught a wave with the rise of pub rock while Lowe soon embraced its snottier younger sibling, punk.

"The Fillmore experience really cemented in me an attitude of, I won't get fooled again," reflects Lowe. "From that moment, I wanted to be an outsider in the pop music business. And there's sort of a deal that you make if you choose that path – you accept that you're never going to get really big, but you're going to have a lot of fun. I started meeting other people who felt the same way as I did – glorious misfits that couldn't be pinned down."

STIFF RECORDS, CO-LAUNCHED BY LOWE'S longtime manager Jake Riviera in 1976, was a misfit honey pot, and Lowe became the label's flagship artist and house producer. His low-tech, high-concept production style ("Just bash it down now, we'll tart it up later") would define the era, helping launch the careers of The Damned, Pretenders, Wreckless Eric, Graham Parker and Elvis Costello, as well as delivering hits for Dr Feelgood, and putting him in the studio with American country singer Carlene Carter, whom he would later marry.

Lowe would also enter into an unofficial partnership with the Welsh guitarist Dave Edmunds. The two would lead Rockpile – along with guitarist Billy Bremner and drummer Terry Williams – across a series of memorable recordings. Watching Edmunds build his "Welsh Wall Of Sound", he learned some of the niceties of studio technique – but when did he discover his own production style?

"There was a mastering engineer in London who was all the

rage at the time, a guy named Arun Chakraverty," relates Lowe. "He was cutting a record for Edmunds, who wanted it really loud, and Arun said, 'I can't do it, there's too many overdubs on it, it's just white noise.' Because Edmunds had made his usual Phil Spector thing – 10 acoustic guitars, 20 vocals and all that. So Edmunds got cross and stormed out. And for some reason, I stayed behind with this guy."

What happened?

"Arun said, 'Look, I'll show you what I mean. This has just come in from the States.' And, as he put on this record, he said, 'Now listen, there's five instruments on here, but they're all talking to each other. The arrangement is just right. The key is perfect for the singer. Listen to how great it sounds! It's going to be a piece of cake to get this to sound really pumping on the radio.'"

What was the song?

"Frankie Valli's December, 1963 (Oh, What A Night) (laughs). It sounds strange, but that made a big impression on me. Just keep it really simple. The first thing I was really able to try that on was Elvis Costello's first album."

In 1976, Costello's *My Aim Is True* would begin a monumental five-year run and one of the great producer/artist collaborations in music history.

"I met Nick when I was 17 in a pub opposite The Cavern in Liverpool, so he's always been my hero and I am his student," says Costello today. "He's one of the handful of people outside of my family who can call me Declan without seeming presumptuous."

When Costello formed The Attractions, Lowe stayed on the team for 1978's *This Year's Model* plus the band's next three studio albums. "Between Nick's cheerleading and Roger Béchirian's engineering we couldn't have done it without either of them," says

Costello, "even when things got a little wilder and unpredictable on *Get Happy!!* and *Trust* – in fact, especially when things came a little undone."

"I don't know why he kept asking me back other than I was like some sort of mascot," shrugs Lowe. "Because Elvis had such a sense of direction with his own music. It started out where I was in charge – he was the kid, and I was the experienced guy that he looked up to. Then suddenly I found myself going into the studio one morning and saying, Good morning, Mr Costello – what would you like me to do today?"

A CHARMING RACONTEUR KNOCKING back bottles of Blue Nun, Lowe blitzed through the back half of the '70s – writing, playing, producing. Meanwhile – backed by Rockpile – he released two solo albums, 1978's *Jesus Of Cool* and 1979's *Labour Of Lust*, the latter yielding *Cruel To Be Kind* – an international smash. Rockpile itself remained in limbo as a recording entity, due to Edmunds' contractual obligations to Led Zeppelin's Swan Song label. As a live act, however, they toured the world, stealing the show opening for Bad Company and Blondie. Yet the band's only official album, 1980's *Seconds Of Pleasure*, didn't gel and Rockpile broke up soon after.

"In retrospect we had one lick – but it was a really, really fantastic lick," says Lowe. "We made a bunch of Rockpile records in effect, we just couldn't call them that. And by the time we actually made the real Rockpile album, the spirit had kind of gone out of the thing."

Although not before the >



group's profile, and Lowe's, had swollen significantly in the States.

"It was so much fun in America being almost famous, or almost making it," he says. "If it ever looked like we were actually going to be famous, we took steps to sabotage it. The truth is we were too lazy; it would have taken a lot of work for us to really make it. We saw it opening for four or five different big acts – it seemed like we had way more fun than they did. We'd play our 40 minutes and generally go down a storm, and then we'd be off with the second and third division groupies – which we were quite grateful for."

A prolific force in UK music during the late '70s, Lowe saw a downturn in his fortunes at the dawn of the 1980s, as digital technology brought a new way of working in the studio.

"There was no need to have a charmer or a tyrant or anyone at all behind the board," he says. "It had become a science. The mystery of conjuring something out of people that I found so intriguing was largely gone. Also, the sound of the era was so horrible to me. It really did sound like nails scraping down a blackboard. I loathed it."

At the same time, Lowe's solo records started sounding less sure of themselves.

"It's all in the ear of the beholder, but I didn't think my records were as good," he confesses. "Plus, by that time, I could feel my star was waning. In my role as a producer, I'd sort of hung around with the Svengalis, the people who pulled the strings. So I was in a good position to perceive when my own career was starting to wane. I'd been a pop star, but I was going out of date. Then came all the other clichés: my marriage to Carlene was breaking up, I was hitting the bottle too hard, taking too many drugs, all in a bid to excite myself again. The fact is, I didn't like *not* being cool. And I definitely wasn't very cool at that point."

IT WOULD TAKE LOWE NEARLY half a decade and several more albums to fully reinvent himself, to find a way of aging gracefully. "I knew it wasn't going to be for everybody," he says, "but I thought if I got it right, I'd escape what I saw was the dreaded fate of having to play to the same people who discovered me when they were young and have to pretend that I was still young in order to cheer them up."

Lowe's task was aided by Elvis Costello, who brought him on tour in 1986, and encouraged him to play his first ever solo concerts. The following year, he was asked by his former production charge, singer-songwriter John Hiatt, to play bass on a session with guitarist Ry Cooder and drummer Jim Keltner. Cut in four days, the result would be Hiatt's acclaimed 1987 LP, *Bring The Family*, and the experience would define Lowe's musical path moving forward.

"Nick had a beautiful tone and his time was great," recalls Keltner. "You didn't get the impression he was trying to do any-

## BASHER AT THE BOARD

Nick Lowe: Producer, in five albums, as told to BOB MEHR.

### GRAHAM PARKER

#### Howlin' Wind

(Vertigo, 1976)



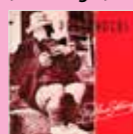
"I was making my first tentative steps post-Brinsley Schwarz when I suddenly found myself in charge of my former bandmates – Brinsley, Bob Andrews – who'd become

Graham Parker's backing group. Needless to say, they weren't exactly thrilled with the idea of being bossed around by me (laughs). It was a strange experience, but we were all very glad to coalesce around Graham, who was clearly a talent and had written some great songs."

### PRETENDERS

#### Stop Your Sobbing

(Real single, 1979)



"Chrissie and I had dated, and I used to hear her playing songs in our flat. I couldn't make head nor tail of what she was doing, but I thought she looked fantastic and sang great. At

the time, she had a mate named Phyllis, and they were absolutely dynamite together. I told Chrissie, Why don't you and Phyllis do a cover of Dion's *The Wanderer* – I can see it now on Top Of The Pops. I remember she gave me an extremely withering look."

### THE FABULOUS THUNDERBIRDS

#### T-Bird Rhythm

(Chrysalis, 1982)



"I loved The Fabulous Thunderbirds, especially [guitarist] Jimmie Vaughan, who's a wonderful musician. We met in Austin, their hometown, and got into a cool old studio

there. I encouraged them to cover themselves in Thunderbird-ness, I suppose. They were already starting to get people trying to organise them to get on pop radio. They were wild sessions, but I think I got the atmosphere right. Though I do believe the band got dropped right after this."

### ELVIS COSTELLO & THE ATTRACTIONS

#### Blood & Chocolate

(Imp, 1986)



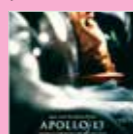
"Well, we'd all gotten a bit older, and the times were certainly changing. By that point, I'd developed more of my theories about recording live, which I encouraged them to do – though

they were a bit jaded about everything. [Bassist] Bruce Thomas was still with them, who was such an integral part of their sound, but it seemed like everyone was getting fed up with one another. You can almost hear that tension in the record."

### THE MAVERICKS

#### Blue Moon

(from *Various* – *Apollo 13* OST, MCA, 1995)



"I turned up smartly dressed to a fantastic studio in Nashville, where there were about three tape ops, a couple of assistants, and several assistants to the assistants. The Mavericks would

do a take and then eight or nine heads would turn to look at me. All I had to do was give it a thumbs up or thumbs down like a Roman emperor (laughs). In the end, they only used about three seconds of the song in the movie, but it was a great experience."



Peace, love and understanding: (clockwise from below left) Elvis Costello and Lowe with manager Jake Riviera, 1986; Lowe and Graham Parker hail The Damned's debut LP, February 18, 1977; Little Village, 1992 (from left) Lowe, Jim Keltner, John Hiatt, Ry Cooder; Lowe and Los Straitjackets, 2024; rehearsing The Band's *The Weight* with Wilco and Mavis Staples backstage at Chicago's Civic Opera House, December 12, 2011.



thing, it was all really natural. I can tell you that playing bass with somebody like Ry is not easy, because he's really particular."

Today, Cooder praises Lowe's bass technique, his use of a thumb-pick, and his deliberate choice of notes.

"He was looking for the space in the music," says the guitarist, who'd later launch short-lived supergroup Little Village with Lowe, Keltner and Hiatt. "Nick knew a lot of old tunes, ones I hadn't even heard before. Seemed like he was working out how to take all that and turn it into his own thing. What he does is not rhythm and blues really, it's not straight country, it's not exactly pop – it's just a nice mix, it's Nick."

Lowe fondly recalls *Bring The Family* as a pivotal moment in his career.

"When I first got in the room with those guys, I thought, Oh God, I'm gonna be found out, well and truly. But I tried my first little thing and they responded, and I thought, Wait a minute, this is going great. It affirmed everything I'd been thinking about, all my theories about music. My feeling was rock'n'roll, on the surface, is very simple music but it's incredibly easy to play it badly. People who can play rock'n'roll effectively, they're not always virtuosic musicians but they've got a wit and intelligence about them – it's more like a frame of mind."

With the release of 1994's *The Impossible Bird*, Lowe began to inhabit a kind of character – a romantically bruised, solitary figure. Except the character was also Lowe – scarred by the end of his relationship with broadcaster Tracey MacLeod.

"I had a bit of good fortune in retrospect, in that I had my heart absolutely shattered," he says. "It was a brand-new experience. I'd written these songs when I was a kid about, 'Oh don't break my heart,' and then it actually happened, and, oh my God, it was awful (laughs). Great fodder for a writer."

Those heartbroken songs and refined recording style would crystallise in the so-called Brentford Trilogy – completed by 1998's *Dig My Mood* and 2001's *The Convincer* – with critics hailing the birth of a new Nick Lowe. But as Elvis Costello notes, the latter-day Lowe was part of a continuum: "You need the young dreamer who wrote *Egypt* or a beautiful ballad like *Nightingale* to get to the rogue in *All Men Are Liars*, the *roué* in *I Trained Her To Love Me*, the longing in *You Inspire Me* or the resignation of *Lately I've Let Things Slide*."

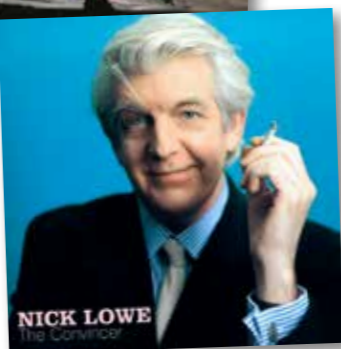
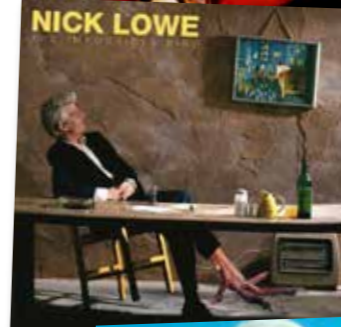
"Nick is a good example that if you stick with it, if you have the tenacity, you'll get better at what you do," says Cooder. "Although lots of people have the tenacity, they don't have the talent. They chew the legs off the furniture for breakfast but then they don't go anywhere with it. So, it helps that Nick is so good. He's always been good."

LOWE'S NEW ALBUM, *INDOOR SAFARI*, compiles material from a spate of recent singles and EPs, with some songs reworked, as well as a few new numbers and a couple of covers (Garnet Mimms; Sammy Turner) thrown in. While the younger Lowe used to knock out songs at a furious clip, he's become far more discerning with the decades.

"Even stuff that a few years ago I would have been very pleased with, I chuck away now," says Lowe. "I'm much more interested in the craft of songwriting, in putting work into the songs, but not so much that it sounds like you've done that. It takes an enormous amount of effort to make it seem like you've made no effort at all."

The easy feel of the songs is matched musically by Los

"ROCK'N'ROLL, ON THE SURFACE, IS VERY SIMPLE MUSIC BUT IT'S INCREDIBLY EASY TO PLAY IT BADLY" NICK LOWE



Straitjackets – arguably the most sympathetic outfit he's worked with since Rockpile's heyday: "I don't feel they're backing me up at all," says Lowe. "When we get together, we make a thing of our own."

Another recent collaboration has found Lowe working with Wilco. Lowe's recorded with the group, toured with them, and become a fixture at the band's annual Solid Sound festival. "People say Nick has aged gracefully," says Wilco's Jeff Tweedy. "But I think his music has always been outside of a full embrace of youth culture or passing fads. His style or approach may have shifted, but that smile is exactly the same, the love of what he's doing is the same."

Still, at 75, Lowe knows he can't go on forever. "I can definitely see the old chequered flag waving down the road now," he says. "I mean, I've got to be realistic about it." A couple of years ago, Lowe had a "semi-serious operation... and I thought I was going to have to quit touring," but he managed to recover and has since returned to the road with a renewed vigour.

"Nick's still out there," says Cooder. "Jesus, he's got stamina. Nick will take a bus to take a plane to take a boat to take a car to get to the show. But Nick could always travel, man – he'd just sit there and do his crosswords. More importantly, he still plays great."

Even so, Lowe is wary of outstaying his welcome. "When the time comes, I've left strict instructions with people that I trust," he says, "to tap me on the shoulder and say, 'Excuse me, Nick, you are past it and you're making a fool of yourself.' But, fortunately, that hasn't happened yet."