



## VOICES IN THE HALL: NICK LOWE

### EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

**PETER COOPER** Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. My guest today in our audio lair is Nick Lowe.

**NICK LOWE** I got to the front of the line, you know the front of the queue as we call it in the U.K.. And that's the way it was back then. You joined the end of the queue and you spent time learning how to play and going up and down the country in a van and doing gigs, one night stands, until finally you got to the front of the queue and then a voice sort of said, "It's your turn." Suddenly you were standing at the front and the spotlight fell on you, whether you blew it or you didn't know what to do with it, that's a different story.

**PETER COOPER** It's Voices in the Hall with the great and wise Nick Lowe.

#### ***"Stoplight Roses" - Nick Lowe (The Old Magic/Yep Roc)***

**PETER COOPER** That was "Stoplight Roses," by Nick Lowe, from the aptly titled album, *The Old Magic*. Nick Lowe's a masterful singer-songwriter who started out as this rebellious new wave rocker in England and has mellowed like great whiskey. The author of classics including "Cruel To Be Kind" and "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding," he's a genius of understated cool. Throughout his decades-long career he's been moved by country music, and his songs have been recorded by country heroes including his one-time father-in-law Johnny Cash.

Nick Lowe, thank you for being here on Voices in the Hall from the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. It's just such a pleasure to have you here. So great to see you come through the gates.

**NICK LOWE** Well thanks very much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here too.

**PETER COOPER** Country music was a formative influence on you. Even though you were you were associated with Stiff Records and with punk, there was always a country underpinning to what you were up to.

**NICK LOWE** Yes, there has been. When I was learning how to play the guitar, my mother could play a bit. She was a pretty good musician. Self-taught. But she taught me a few chords on the guitar. And there was a guy in the U.K., well I was still living abroad at that time but we listened to radio of course, and there was a guy in the U.K. who was really big called Lonnie Donegan. And he actually played banjo and guitar in in Chris Barber's jazz band. And traditional jazz was going through a successful period in the U.K. at the time. But Barber's jazz band which is probably the best of them all, when they'd take a break in their set Lonnie would do a few songs by himself. And they were sort of Leadbelly songs and Big Bill Broonzy songs. And he'd be backed up by Chris who was a trombone player but he would play the bass, stand-up bass, and the drummer.



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And I suppose because they were traditional jazz players, they played with a lot of swing. So they put something into these Leadbelly songs with Lonnie singing them. And he had a very kind of nasally, kind of abrasive voice, which was, you didn't hear in the U.K. at all. It was all crooners then, you know really. But he put something into these Big Bill Broonzy songs and folk blues songs with this rhythm which was akin to sort of a rockabilly groove. But it was very potent.

And he spawned a lot of copiers. And they mixed it up. They used washboards for the rhythm. It became a real homemade kind of music. Anyone could do this stuff. They were very easy songs to learn up. And we didn't know because a lot of people of my vintage, British musicians of my vintage, they all cite Lonnie Donegan as being the nearest thing to a homegrown proper rock and roll guy really. But we didn't know that at the same time we were getting a lesson in American roots music from this guy. And we were learning up these great songs from his catalog that we wouldn't have heard otherwise.

**PETER COOPER** Which was thought of as skiffle music.

**NICK LOWE** It was called skiffle. Yeah it was called skiffle. And I, like hundreds of other kids, got on this thing. I was only eight, nine years old. But in a way it's what I still do. I think, you know that skiffle groove, that, well rockabilly groove really. I can make a pretty good job of that.

**PETER COOPER** John, Paul, George, and Ringo were into Lonnie Donegan.

**NICK LOWE** Absolutely, yes they were skiffers too.

**PETER COOPER** It seems that that was kind of a window for them into Buck Owens and that West Coast country music.

**NICK LOWE** Yes. Without a doubt, without a doubt. Yes and we. We just couldn't put it together from over there. You know we couldn't understand the regional aspects of the music from the United States, which now of course I've visited here many times and been lucky enough to get to know a lot of the people who were actually playing this music. But it's impossible to imagine the size of the United States from a tiny country like the U.K.. So it's very difficult to hear the regional differences from there. Now I understand it much more.

**PETER COOPER** Were there other country musicians that hit you when you were a kid?



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**NICK LOWE** Well Conway Twitty was one of the first people that I heard that I really really liked, and still do. Don Gibson. I love his stuff. Hank Williams of course. I'm thinking back to the Forces Radio. You know because also we could hear American Forces Radio and that was a great education. It was the names of these people as well that I thought was so great. Conway Twitty obviously you know, but Ferlin Husky. You know I never met anyone with a name like Ferlin. That's such a great name.

**PETER COOPER** Conway was Harold Jenkins and changed it.

**NICK LOWE** Yeah. Well I think Harold Jenkins is a pretty cool name too.

**PETER COOPER** Sure.

**NICK LOWE** But. So I fell in love with that as well. It seemed so mysterious. And also hearing on the American radio you know Howlin' Wolf, you know that was a pretty exciting name for an eight-year-old kid to hear. I'm trying to think of the really early voices I first heard, would be them.

**PETER COOPER** I understand that one of those voices was Country Music Hall of Fame member Tennessee Ernie Ford, the old pea-picker. Now what was it about Ernie Ford that intrigued a British kid?

**NICK LOWE** Well Tennessee Ernie was I suppose the first country music I heard. I was a kid, 7 years old I think, living in Jordan in the Middle East because my dad was in the Royal Air Force. And he was stationed there. And my mother had a pretty good record collection of the sort of records that you heard in most homes at that time. Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Peggy Lee, soundtrack records you know from movies, *South Pacific* and that sort of thing. But she had rather curiously these two Tennessee Ernie Ford records. And I just thought they were the greatest.

I didn't realize at that time that Tennessee Ernie was playing in a different kind of music because it's from California you know. It wasn't from Nashville. It wasn't Nashville music. So it had a lot of jazz in it. I just loved the sound of it. And once I heard that, I was totally hooked.

### ***"Fatback Louisiana, U.S.A." – Tennessee Ernie Ford (Capitol 78RPM)***

**PETER COOPER** Folks, that was "Fatback, Louisiana, U.S.A." recorded in 1952 by Tennessee Ernie Ford, a country music legend and early inspiration for our guest today on Voices in the Hall, Nick Lowe.

So much of your early reputation was as a producer. What is a producer and do you think you were a good one?



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**NICK LOWE** Well back then you just had to sort of claim that you were one, and you were. And the producer then was really someone who told a lot of jokes and was a sort of father confessor and some sort of psychoanalyst or something. I mean I never really went near the actual sound board. You know I was good at telling somebody else what I wanted to hear, but I wasn't any kind of a knob-twiddler or anything like that.

What I enjoyed was the sort of man-management aspect of it. If it was, say I was working with a band, I'd enjoy finding out where the power lay in there in the band. It might not be where you think it would be with say the singer you know whose face is on the cover of all the magazines and things. It might be that sulky bass player sitting over there in a corner. He's the guy they all look to. So if you make friends with him, you can get the band's attention without appearing to lay down the law too much. And get things done that way.

And little tricks like getting people to think that your idea was their idea. That sort of stuff. I loved all that. But all that was in a pre-digital age. Nowadays making records is done by almost one person. You can just sit in a room and do it all yourself and make a pretty good record in your bedroom. So it means that we're living in an age now where there's a tsunami of pretty good. Pretty good is the new kind of really ordinary and sort of dull. It's a breath of fresh air to me if I hear something really funky and kind of scratchy. But my shtick, you know my sort of life and soul of the party shtick as a producer, really died out with the with the coming of the digital age. And the way people made records changed overnight in the sort of early to mid-80s, and rendered my sort of act obsolete.

And I didn't really, I wasn't sufficiently in love with it to learn the new techniques. You know and being fundamentally a fairly lazy person, I couldn't apply myself to it. And also it was early days, but the new sound of digital recording, I hated the sound of it. I mean I really couldn't stand to be around the sound of drum machines and things. It used to really make me feel physically ill.

Well I don't want to sound like a like a luddite, you know as they call someone that just says, "Oh yeah the old wax cylinder was where, never been better." You know. That's ridiculous. And now times have changed. They've got it all going. But initially you know I thought, "Oh no, I'm off. I've had enough of this." So that's why I don't really produce. The last record I produced actually was in Nashville. And when I say "produced," I really did just turn up at the studio, wore a good suit and sort of said "Play it again," or "That'll do nicely."

**PETER COOPER** Was that the Mavericks?



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**NICK LOWE** Yes it was. I don't think I've ever got paid more for doing less work in my life.

**PETER COOPER** When did you first hit a lick as a songwriter. When did you first write something that that you think stands?

**NICK LOWE** The first decent song I wrote? Wow. You know my first efforts as a songwriter was probably like most people's. I'd just rewrite my hero's catalog. And then after I'd done that I'd move on to another hero's catalog and rewrite theirs. You know and so on until I got to about the fifth hero's catalog. And I'd put a little bit of the first guy's lick, you know the first hero's catalog and I'd rewritten, and the next time I'd write I'd take two bits of the eighth person and a couple of bits from the fourth, and three bits-. And hey, presto. I started to find that I was getting my own recipe. You know because it's all been written. Everything's being done. There isn't anything original. It's all in the recipe that you choose.

In fact when I personally, you know people say "Oh this is an original or this new music," you know, I don't find it very interesting. The stuff I find interesting is always something I kind of, in my core, I recognize that I've sort of heard before, that twangs with me. But you definitely hear original and new recipes where people have got interesting influences. But my first song I wrote where I can remember being totally surprised that I'd come up with a new idea that I hadn't stolen from anyone or reworked from anyone was "(What's So Funny) 'Bout Peace, Love, and Understanding."

It's a bit of a mouthful as a title, but I had the idea for this song. I thought, "Wow, that's a really great idea." And the idea of it was supposed to be a bit of a joke. But I had a very mature thought, considering I was such an immature person at the time, and that was not to mess it up by making it too jokey because it was actually a pretty good title. And so write the verses very very, so they're not too specific. Just let the title do the work for you. And that's what I did. And it's a song that really has being covered by, it's never actually been a hit, but it's been covered by so many people that I almost feel, when I hear people doing it I almost feel like I didn't actually have anything to do with it.

**PETER COOPER** It's an interesting song to me in that it, when I see archival footage of you doing it long ago, there's bluster and there's anger and aggression. And when I see you perform this song now and hear it, it's not ironic. It's as if you've grown into the song.

**NICK LOWE** Yes it's very. It is a curious song. And I think that's probably what I meant by I had this quite sophisticated notion you know when I was such an idiot in nearly every other respect at that time, not to mess it up. And it is a song that I've heard done so many different ways from as you say the early versions which were blustery and shouty. You know. And Elvis Costello who really dug that song out of the trash can



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when our group, the group I was in at the time Brinsley Schwarz, when they broke up it should have gone into the dustbin you know along with the rest of our material. But he dug it out and it's his version that everyone noticed. But I've even got a version of it sung by a little group of Tahitian fishermen singing this song and it sounds really, really great. So when I do it now I do it much more sort of plaintively and poignantly. And that's the it works for me. But even then sometimes I'll do it with a slight up-tempo or even downplay it a little bit more you know. Even I don't know quite how I'm going to play it every night.

***“(What’s So Funny ‘Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding” – Nick Lowe  
(Untouched Takeaway / Yep Roc)***

**PETER COOPER** “(What’s So Funny ‘Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding,” written and performed by Nick Lowe. That song was performed by Elvis Costello famously, by the Flaming Lips, by Keb Mo’, by Wilco, and many more titans of music.

Nick you managed something that I greatly admire. At some point you decided to become elegant. And you did it.

**NICK LOWE** What a nice thing to say.

**PETER COOPER** Musically you went from this basher guy to somebody who was a sophisticate and who traded in beauty. I've often wondered if that was a difficult transition. Did you wake up one day and just say I'm not going to be that guy anymore, I'm going to be this guy.

**NICK LOWE** I did rather. Yes I did. I had a sort of an epiphany. I woke up one day with a terrible hangover. And the difference was, you know I'd woken up with a terrible hangover many many times and said "Oh, it's the last time" you know. But I really did think "Oh my God. Today is the day. You've got to do something about this. You know. You're an unhappy man. And you have to do something about it." And I did. Everything really was going wrong for me in my personal life as well and my professional life too.

I could tell that my shtick as it had been up till then, the public was getting tired of it. And I certainly was tired of it. I think that's why I was drinking such a lot to try and make myself more interested in it. You know and it doesn't work. You know otherwise everyone would do that and you know the world would be full of stars. But it wasn't working. I was fed up with it. Also I'd been, because I'd been a producer I'd in some sense had my foot in the other camp, you know in the other, on the other side of the glass. So I knew, you know I'd produced records and taken them to the record company and played them to the executives there, and I knew how they talked about their acts. And it wasn't always that kindly. You know they're quite disparaging. And I very often joined in you know with the laughter and general sort of sniggering.



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And so I could see my own career you know as if I was not me, in a funny way. I could judge my own self you know from the point of view of being like a producer. And I knew that my thing was on the slide. And I was tired of it as well. So I realized that a line had to be drawn. And I had to take stock of my situation. And when I took stock, started to feel a bit better. I quit drinking and all that, all the rest of the nonsense you know. And after a few months I started to feel better and I thought, "Well let's see, what have you got going here? You know you've had a bit of success, haven't done too badly, produced a few good records. Reputation is, you just about saved it. Written a couple of good, even had a couple of hits myself. You know so it's not bad, but why do I think inside that I haven't really done anything really good, really good yet? And yet here I am in my early well the late 30s really, mid to late 30s, and I'm sort of washed up. And why is it that in pop music I'm washed up at 35?"

Certainly in jazz you can't be too old. Blues, no problem. And at that time even in country you couldn't be too old. You know if you were good, no problem. But in pop music. No. You've had it. Now you can't move for oldsters in pop music. They're wall to wall you know. But it was unheard of back then for someone to be in their 40s and still be of any interest in pop unless you were someone like Frank Sinatra or something like that. So I thought, "I'm going to buck the trend here and I'm going to actually actively try and create a new act for myself, present myself in a new way, and write songs for myself and record myself in a way, in a new way, that I can actually use the fact that I'm aging in a business that at that point didn't value someone that was older, that I can use the fact that I'm aging as an actual advantage so that people might even envy my advancing years."

And I started to give this some thought and make a few steps in that area. And blow me down if it didn't start working! And I found, started to find a new audience. Because I also thought that if I get this right, younger people will dig this just like I dig older artists. And I thought that if I get it right, I don't want to get down with the kids or try and talk down to anybody or, and I don't want to shrug off my fans, you know the people who stuck with me all the time. I don't want them to go away. A lot of them did go away by the way. You know they thought "Oh well, he rocketh not anymore," you know. And they just didn't get it. But it would be my idea of hell to just be playing to the same people that I played with when I was a kid, and they'd expect me to behave like a kid you know on into my 60s and 70s. That's. I can think of few things worse. But I thought if I can create this new thing, it could be really good. And it has worked to a certain extent.

**PETER COOPER** There's a decision to be made it at some point. You can be your own antique. You can be the guy that takes the stage and says "Hey remember me? I used to be this." And then there are people like you and Mark Knopfler, Paul Simon, who insist on growth and change. And I suspect there are some people in your audience who just want you to do "Heart of the City" and rock it out. I also suspect that that's not



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terribly interesting for you and that there are other people who come along and are overjoyed to hear you getting better doing different things.

**NICK LOWE** I think that's the way it's worked out. Yeah. The people who want to hear the older stuff, because I still do a lot of old songs, but I play them slightly different now you know. And I don't feel like I'm metaphorically squeezing myself into a pair of tight leather trousers you know and going to do some ridiculous act from yesteryear. I like doing a lot of those old songs, but the people who want to hear it in that old style and are disappointed, and I used to hear people shouting out for things like that. And you don't hear that too much now. Most of the old older fans that I've got, they like the newer stuff. They sort of get it. They get the evolution that there's been. And for my younger fans who've come along, they don't really know anything about the old stuff. They actually have come on at the time we were talking about earlier when I said I was going to reinvent myself. They don't know very much about the, well I suppose they know about "Cruel to be Kind" which is my one big U.S. hit that I had, bona-fide A Top-20. You know. I suppose they know that, but they're not terribly interested in the very early stuff. They prefer the newer sort of style. And so it all works out pretty well. You know I don't have one half of the audience rather upset you know or either of them upset some parts of the show. You know they say they seemed to sort of get it.

**PETER COOPER** One thing a lot of musicians find problematic is meeting their heroes and getting to know these folks and having to step up to them as an equal, musically. You had a circumstance where you were in Johnny Cash's family. How do you approach somebody like that and assert yourself as a musician and stay on somewhat equal footing?

**NICK LOWE** Well that's a very good question because the only way I did it was because Johnny Cash was such a nice man and was aware of the effect that he had on people. And he was extremely kind to me. But even so. I mean I didn't see him that often because I lived in London and he, obviously he lived here. And so I would see him four or five times a year I suppose. And every time I saw him for the first 5 or 10 minutes I was with him, I couldn't really speak properly because he was so charismatic.

**PETER COOPER** Most charismatic person I have ever been around.

**NICK LOWE** Yes. Me too. But you would get over that. You would get over that. And he was such an enthusiast about music as well. I remember he came to stay with Carlene and I in London at this little, just a little house that we had, him and June turned up to stay for a few days. And it was a little ordinary little terraced house you know, like a row of houses. Typical of London house. They were in one taxi and they had another taxi following behind with their luggage.





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**PETER COOPER** June had a lot of luggage.

**NICK LOWE** Yes she sure did. And you know we got it all in. And I soon got used to them there. They were so they were so great. But to come downstairs in the morning to our little kitchen we had and see June sort of standing there you know making scrambled eggs in a robe with some sort of turban on. You know and John sitting at the table in his robe playing the guitar. You know I thought "How the heck has this happened?" And listen I remember we used to listen to records together. You know. He played me a lot of stuff I'd never heard before. Johnny Horton. He was the first person to play me Johnny Horton stuff, which I understand they were very good friends. And he played me Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Yeah.

But he played, just like I and my friends used to play records. And he'd say, "Oh listen to this one, listen to this one!" You know and he'd try, you know miss the groove you know trying to get the needle in the groove. "Oh you've got to hear this!" You know and the records would be strewn all over the floor kind of thing. You know just like just like if I was sitting around playing records with my friends. It was fantastic. And I would actually forget that I was sitting with Johnny Cash playing records. Until I'd pinch myself you know. But he was a wonderful guy. And June as well. I adored them both. And I think about them all the time.

#### ***"The Beast in Me" – Nick Lowe (Impossible Bird / Yep Roc)***

**PETER COOPER** "The Beast in Me," recorded by Nick Lowe and inspired by music legend, and Country Music Hall of Fame member, and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame member, and Rockabilly Hall of Fame member, and probably a lot of other stuff too, Johnny Cash. The man in black.

Nick, you have enriched country music and woven yourself into its tapestry. You began across the ocean as a receiver of this music, and you've become a prime contributor. Thank you for visiting with us on Voices in the Hall.

**NICK LOWE** Oh thank you very much Peter. It's been a pleasure.

**PETER COOPER** Learn more about Nick Lowe at our website, [VoicesInTheHall.org](http://VoicesInTheHall.org). And use the handle [@VoicesInTheHall](https://www.facebook.com/VoicesInTheHall) to find us and to follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Our next episode features a visit from Jimmie Allen, who's a guy with a story that you're going to want to hear. This guy is creating quite a stir. If you aren't familiar with his stuff, there's a playlist on the Voices website.



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Voices in the Hall is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, in collaboration with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo of BMP Audio. The show is recorded by Alan Stoker. I'm Peter Cooper. Thanks for listening. We invite you to visit the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee.