

**NEIL YOUNG: THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH**  
**NEIL YOUNG: EL HOMBRE QUE CAYÓ A LA TIERRA**

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**Abstract**

Canadian singer songwriter and composer Neil Young (b. 1945) has been puzzling the minds of his listeners for decades. His work is all about finding new shores and throwing old ways and patterns to the nearest ditch as soon as possible. He finds the idea of repeating himself simply abominable. His experimentation, sometimes brilliant, sometimes erratic and irritating for his lifelong fans exudes a great capacity for risk taking and cliché breaking. His instinctive artistic integrity and his premeditated scorn for the demands of the modern music industry are legendary. This article aims at explaining some of the constants which mark him out from the rest of the pack; not just as an artist, but also as a man.

**Keywords:** Neil Young; Shamanism; Ted Hughes; Nature; Jorge Oteiza; Cromlech; Creative Spirals; Fourth Dimension.

**Resumen**

El cantante y compositor canadiense Neil Young (nacido en 1945) ha estado confundiendo las mentes de sus oyentes durante décadas. Todo su trabajo gira en torno a encontrar nuevos horizontes y arrojar los viejos tópicos a la cuneta cuanto antes. Él encuentra la idea de repetirse a sí mismo simplemente abominable. Su experimentación, unas veces brillante, otras veces errática e irritante para sus seguidores de toda la vida, pone de manifiesto una gran capacidad para afrontar riesgos y romper estereotipos. Su instintiva integridad artística y su premeditado desprecio por las demandas de la industria musical moderna son legendarios. Este artículo pretende explicar algunas de las constantes que le distinguen del resto del mundo; no sólo como artista, sino como hombre.

**Palabras clave:** Neil Young; Chamanismo; Ted Hughes; Naturaleza; Jorge Oteiza; Cromlech; Espirales Creativas; Cuarta Dimensión.

Neil Young is, possibly, the most enigmatic figure in the history of pop music. I understand that it is very risky to label someone on a permanent basis, and that the temptation to include everybody and everything in a given pigeon hole may be misleading, especially when writing any sort of speech. For any form of speech is contradictory in itself but I have come to the conclusion that the instinctive, primary forces that motivate his artistic expression are deeper in their roots and origin than the average market-orientated ways of most musicians, painters or writers. His way of interacting with the environment and his artistic vision remind me enormously of the aesthetic ideal proposed by the Basque sculptor Jorge de Oteiza (1908-2003), an ardent defender of the refusal to treat the artistic opus as an empty repetitive act. Oteiza explored the relationship between ancient civilizations and the inextricable interaction between time and space. Thus, he produced a prodigious work which combined certain aspects in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), which Oteiza expands in his own concept of Time and Space,<sup>1</sup> as well his vision of the primitive Man in his most perfect expression: the small Basque Cromlech. This ancient form of collective Art still survives in the Pyrenees to this day, and Oteiza remarks the respect for nature that those ancient stones hold in themselves. They become a metaphor of the great vacuum and the endless space to which we are primarily exposed through loneliness. It is in this loneliness where the Man finds his true space and his truth. For Oteiza, the fundamental question posed by Heidegger in connection with the actual being of Man rather than his context, leads to an automatic assumption of metaphysics. And, as we will see later, the Art of Neil Young's is essentially a journey into the vortex of emptiness, with many of his works pointing precisely in that direction. In his review for *Rolling Stone* about *Harvest Moon* (1992), Greg Kot described the record as "a path from restlessness to reaffirmation, ... a hushed musical landscape at times populated only by a ghostly harmonica, a few spooky bass lines and Young's cracked, lonesome tenor" (*Harvest Moon*).

Oteiza also questioned the relationship between Man and God in a very sceptical way, as Young has also done all over his career. Moreover, Oteiza has demanded that human civilization manage to produce the right answers and the right sort of leaders to the intrinsic problems that modern-day society has brought with itself, in the same way as the Canadian musician has done in some of his later

<sup>1</sup> It would be extremely complex to point out the exact details of Oteiza's equation, and it would exceed the limits of this paper. This is the reason why I have chosen to comment on the matter on a very general level.

work. Oteiza's exposure to raw nature and his esoteric thinking has parallelisms with Neil Young's vision of both art and the world.

And as a final step, under the influence of Russian Constructivism, Oteiza demanded that the world of culture and modern industry work hand in hand to produce a form of utilitarian art which managed to mark the greatness of certain collective identities, and ultimately represented the interconnection of the different forces that permeate human existence. There is no doubt in my mind that this is what Neil Young tried to achieve in his album *Trans* (1982), which laid special emphasis on the possibilities offered by technology as a platform to take social interaction to new operational levels.

At one point of his life, Oteiza very clearly expressed his desire to abandon whatever artistic effort could become meaningless, and therefore dead, in his soul. He abruptly abandoned sculpture because he claimed that he had finally mastered the technique and that no more knowledge could be extracted from the process. He claimed that a man of imagination must focus his attention to a range of different activities and experiments, and drop whatever artistic process may become a dead weight in both his biography and his art. He then turned to writing poetry and drawing pictures, while simultaneously putting on paper his thinking patterns and reflecting on what was becoming of Nature and Mankind in his latter years. Relentless in everything which he attempted, only death stopped him; and yet I believe that even in the aftermath of his life, his heart and soul are still very much here, making his contribution to the hidden forces that define both Man and the world. Neil Young is very much that kind of person and that kind of artist. In his own words, when he feels he has reached a certain degree of artistic assertion and a sense of personal security, he always goes for the ditch. He applies his zest for artistic fulfilment in film making, writing, and building train replicas, as well as carrying on making music. Only on the condition that music and the musical industry will not get the better of him, which implies his total control over the artistic domain and the marketing field to which his art is constantly exposed. And he only carries on with music because he still feels there is something new to try and a new record in which he will, once more, risk his own reputation. In both Oteiza and Young, risk, failure, fall and pain are inextricably connected to their fate in Life and Art.

More specifically, in musical terms, he shares with the Cuban singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez (b. 1946) the paradoxical honour of owing his name to a huge popular acclaim when, in fact, his music is, with rare exceptions in his career, anything but popular. Both Rodríguez and Young use the essential tradition of their native lands as a starting point to end up going somewhere else in its development and execution. Such tremendous personalities and musical abilities had to leave their individual marks in the world of tradition itself. They have

enriched and enlarged the perception of popular music enormously, but they have not lost an atom of their own individuality in the process.

Born in Canada in 1945, Neil Young was soon exposed to the changing fortunes which life usually brings about, and from the happy, contented and healthy child that he once was, he went on to be almost fatally ill (he was struck with poliomyelitis when he was only a small child), became estranged when his parents decided to get divorced and, finally, as a result, ended up lonely, poor and friendless. Anybody else would have given up and accepted the inexorable destiny of a drop out and an outcast. But Young had other ideas: he had spirit. He had a vision. He had soul. He had found consolation in music, and music would be his main concern for the rest of his life.

His first attempts showed slow progress, but his ability to concentrate on absorbing musical ideas day after day would eventually pay off. His first bands dealt with instrumental music, in which he started to excel as a composer and arranger; but it became very clear that instrumental music was not enough. He turned to Bob Dylan and other folk singers, and worked hard at his lyrics, resulting in his first solo adventure as a musician in Toronto. In my opinion, Neil Young has a sort of very distinctive and unique condition in his mind which makes his choice of words and images a very odd one, with unconventional connections and mind-blowing associations which cannot be processed by the logical mind with its common-sense patterns. His ability to think in pictures is unquestionable, and it marks his work as extremely deviant in respect to the accepted norm. I believe this feature is not far away from those who have the so-called Asperger syndrome. The brain configuration of the people affected by this condition is different from the neurotypical person, and because of it, the neurological connections which configure its thinking patterns are different from other people's processes. By the time Neil Young went to Los Angeles and started Buffalo Springfield, the seeds of his shamanistic powers had already been laid.

Shamanistic, yes. This is no whimsical statement. Neil Young is a primal force of nature; it is as though the strength of tempests, hurricanes and water falls converged into his soul to be eventually freed in the form of musical art. We got some hints of it in some of his first songs, as in the case of *The Loner* (1968) and *Down by the River* (1969). But the first finished product of such condition evidently takes place in the album *After the Gold Rush* (1970). The listener is thrown at the eye of a musical tornado from the beginning and is only allowed to rest in peace with the initial notes of the last song. The shaman reveals himself in full for the first time in the song *Don't Let It Bring You Down*. Young suffered from an epileptic condition at that period of his life, and the visions which he had to endure during the seizures are summarized in its lyrics. In other songs exploring the same area, his ability to conjure apocalyptic images and the spirits of dead

people amidst a creative frenzy leading to a sort of cathartic end is clearly exposed. When the process is over, everything goes back to its original cosmic balance. The whole of the album *Tonight's the Night* (1975) also points to that direction; the music in it becomes a healing force to help the musician cope with the sudden loss of two of his best friends. But it is in his record *Rust Never Sleeps* (1979) where Young finally exposes the whole potential of his shamanistic self. *Ride My Llama* is a journey into the unknown inside, *Pocahontas* is an invocation to the spirit of the Native American princess, and *Powderfinger* illustrates the confrontation, face to face, with death itself. The whole set of songs in side one is a discourse which deals mostly with parapsychology.

For there are also shamanistic exercises of exorcism in Neil Young's music. Again, *Tonight's the Night* (1975) is a clear example. Chased by the demons of his past failures, his own success as a celebrity and his inability to prevent the death of two friends, he embarks in a dantesque journey to the doldrums of spirit to recapture his own soul from the world of the dead. The imperious need that the artist feels to let go of all emotions which had been routinely sacrificed up until that moment finally breaks in. Young releases all his personal demons, his negative self-view, his—again—personal unhappiness, his guilt, his anguish, his tortured mind, his ill health (both in body and mind), and he decides to fight them all at their own ground. He adopts the stance of Death's messenger in the cover of the record, determined to beat Destruction at her own headquarters, as he had previously anticipated in *The Old Laughing Lady* (1968). Young's voice is not his own in the recordings sessions of *Tonight's the Night*; it is the voice of spirits and ghosts from the past, speaking through the artist's throat, articulating the hidden truths behind visible reality which Young would otherwise choose to cover in a more conventional album. He is not a creator here; he is merely a medium. An invoker of other people and other times. During the performance of the *Prairie Wind* concert at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville (2005), Young declared that he and his fellow musicians were there to pay their respects to those who no longer are among us. He had already done something of the kind in *Tonight's the Night*; to an extent, in *Zuma* (1976) and, of course, in *Rust Never Sleeps* (1979). The sheer force of the interpretation in these albums, with their raw stance, is unshakeable, as it often happens when supernatural affairs are involved in the artistic equation.

There is a very interesting parallelism between the work of the English Poet Laureate Ted Hughes (1930-1998) and that of Neil Young. Both artists are radical Nature lovers. I believe that in the case of Hughes, the relationship between Man and Nature undergoes three steps. In the first one, Man cohabits with Nature on an equal basis, being essentially part of it. His first book of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), becomes a complete example of this. The struggle of mankind to survive is no more important than the necessity of other animals to assert

themselves by competing with one another (and this includes humans) in a natural, unadulterated way. The second stage is that of the shaman, when Man still remains an essential part of Nature, yet is now able to conjure magic and bring out the forces that hide behind the façade of the Natural World for the benefit of the community; in other words, man has learned to tamper with the Dark Arts for a specific purpose. This aspect becomes evident in Hughes' third book, *Wodwo* (1967). The third (and last) stage of Man's relationship with Nature is marked out by a sense of human domination, which is revealed through farming. Farming becomes the ultimate set in which mankind can ignore the ancient laws and rules of Nature and write entirely new ones. To begin with, Hughes detested this latter step, but later on, through his marriage with Carole Orchard, a farmer's daughter, he became more positive about it and contented himself by thinking that farming was, after all, another way to serve Nature. This last step was the driving force behind his book *Moortown* (1979).

Neil Young partakes of Hughes' first stage in such songs as *Expecting to Fly* (1968), the already mentioned *The Loner* (1968) and *Birds* (1970). The artist is Nature. Young even grows fictitious wings in the cover for *Harvest Moon* (1992). But then the shaman takes over very soon and becomes evident in his power to invoke the hidden forces which pervade everywhere and can only be detected by "the chosen ones", as mentioned in the song *After the Gold Rush* (1970). In the same album, the aforementioned song *Don't Let It Bring You Down* also describes the corrosive, disintegrating process in body and soul which this condition brings with itself. The artist undergoes a tremendous exposure to all sort of incredible forces leading to a general shock of all his senses, thus removing any hint of logic in his account. But the sensation experienced by the musician while being exposed to such tremendous, uncontrolled external power drives him closer to the truths of life than the witnessing of an ordinary sequence of events. The shaman is also evidently operating throughout the record *Prairie Wind* (2005), especially in the song that gives name to the album, as well as in *No Wonder*. The images and memories recalled by the artist in their immense scope are more an invocation than an evocation. The same applies to his most cryptic work yet, *Le Noise* (2011): *Peaceful Valley Boulevard* points at a bardic-like figure who tries to unveil the future through the dark, which is both real and metaphoric. The narrator in this song is, again, trying to see beyond conventional appearances to discover the true hidden equation which defines external reality. While performing *Love and War* at the Massey Hall in Toronto Canada (*Neil Young Journeys*, 2011), Neil Young accompanied himself with all sorts of masks and totems, in a deliberate attempt to achieve some sort of magic during his rendering of the song. It is no surprise that he should feel inclined to reproduce basic, ancestral rhythmical patterns in his songs, which draw him close to Native American and even South American motives. This aspect had also become evident in his cover for *Zuma* (1975) as well

as in two songs already mentioned here which belong to his album *Rust Never Sleeps* (1979): *Pocahontas* and *Ride my Llama*. Again, the parallelism with Jorge de Oteiza becomes evident, for one the Basque artist first proper stances about the world of Art was his essay about the interpretation of megalithic statues in America, written in 1952; he had clearly been moved by the same ancient aesthetic corpus which would later inspire the Canadian musician.

In 1969, Young bought a ranch in California, and his love affair with the practicalities of land production was renewed; after all, many of the members of his family in Canada were farmers of Irish stock. *Harvest* (1972) explained how the whole process had been finally closed down. There he was at last: Young had become the farmer he had always wanted to be at heart, and which he quite never managed as a child, when he attempted to breed chickens for some time. He had fulfilled his dream, which pretty much epitomizes the American dream. He had finally found himself, and the definitive maturity as an artist which his former works were lacking. For it is in *Harvest* where he finds his true voice; it is here that his music finally gets connected to the musical roots which sweep America from North to South and East to West. By rooting down in his domain he rediscovers his origins. But he does not follow tradition; he simply organizes his own very particular version of it. None of his songs in the album can be labelled as proper country music, and his folk material is very personal, to say the least. But Neil Young becomes truly himself, and nothing will ever take that away from *Harvest*. I insist on the idea that the record is his first real artistic achievement. Newly rediscovered identity usually brings brilliance around. Everything about it seems very simplistic, customary, almost part of a routine (as it often is with the practicalities of daily farming). To an extent, it is almost minimalistic. But there is a deeper, more subtle aspect that eludes the standard listener. The grounding of the work is not overdone, but the different nuances and new fields covered in it reveal an artist of high talent and purpose operating at a new level and breaking further grounds. In this case, expansion is the term. *Harvest* is also an intensely personal, self-spoken masterpiece. The person and the artist are slowly reaching maturity. *Old Man* is a song which presents the listener with the superposition of two moments in a man's life: youth and old age, just as many traditional century depicted both young and old people in their works. In any case, the song *Are You Ready for the Country?* is a declaration of principles. Roots is the key term in the album. A man without roots is not complete. And his ranch provides him exactly with that. After all, this is what country music is all about. And the fact that the Canadian folkie had decided to record in Nashville, the very heart of South USA Country territory, speaks volumes for the determination of the artist to succeed and push the old boundaries. Young's days as a Paleolithic hunter-gatherer and drifter were over; he had become a Neolithic farmer. But his relationship with Nature would still be about cooperation rather than of domination.

Hence his later series of concerts for the International Harvester. He would revisit *Harvest* every now and again: *Comes a Time* (1978) is a more mature record than *Harvest* was, although it presents us with a more mellow, settled and contented character, in full command of his powers and happy enough to provide commercially successful tunes combined with the accustomed zest for quality. Young's own perverse sense of dissonance probably pushed him to produce a traditional, patrician, melodic album at the height of the raging and raving punk revolution: *Harvest Moon* (1992), a classic album in its own right, completely out of touch with the mainstream rock of its time. And, more recently, *The Monsanto Years* (2014) still deals with the eternal topics and practicalities of the farming way of life, where traditional seeds and crops become dangerously threatened by the massive use of aggressive pesticides and transgenic seeds everywhere, thus putting the very issue of sustainability in jeopardy. Young believes that the future of mankind relies on adequate farming concepts worldwide.

But it is not all about practicalities in the farm. There is also mysticism. *Prairie Wind* (2005) is proof of it, too. The wind brings about the voices and the presences of the past in another yet shamanistic approach to the reconstruction of both the world and the self. Young declared at the time that the songs were an organic whole, written in a period in which he felt like a leaf floating in the river amidst a feeling of total emotional connection with his loved ones. It is, in my opinion, his best work ever. He finally manages to complete the process started in *Harvest* and gets his final picture of the universe and the position which he occupies within its womb. The harmonies of the songs correspond with the harmony of the cosmos. Young is finally happy. At last. It is the defining moment of Young's career as a band leader. He is up there on stage, surrounded by a parnassian assembly of musical gods who assist him as the Father of All, and is blessed by the presence of the Three Graces: Peggy Young, who could be identified as Hera; Diana Dewitt, who poses as Athena, and finally Emmylou Harris, who adopts the role of Aphrodite. And yet, Neil Young underlines his human condition by singing a song called *When God Made Me*, just to remind us all (and himself) of his mortality, in one of the most moving moments in the history of popular music.

I believe classical music was made so that Man could speak to God; folk and pop music were made for Man to be able to communicate with his fellow men. And finally, rock and blues were made so that Man could speak to the Devil. Young approaches all three styles, each one of them with its own intentionality, at different moments of his career.

As for speaking to God through a classical pattern, *When God Made Me* (2005) has already been mentioned as an example. Classical music includes church choirs, and Young became obsessed with those and the sounds he could



hear in them at some point in his career. He is clearly addressing this song to God; a deity who seems to be absent from the whole process portrayed by the lyrics of the song, but whom Young, nevertheless, is still attempting to engage in some sort of communication.

Folk music is so evident in most of Young's production. In this case, I will highlight the song *A Man Needs a Maid*, included in *Harvest* (1972), which becomes an absolutely honest confession made by a man to other fellow men; even if the song is not exactly Newport Festival material, the intentionality is quintessentially folkie. In that very same album, *The Needle and the Damage Done* provides us with a more classical folk tune and a more conventional approach about a man struggle with life and with his own insecurities. It is so important that Neil Young chose early on to question the patterns that Counter-Culture was choosing to antagonize the American Establishment, at the cost of the integrity of those involved in such a combat. The song is clearly aiming at dismantling any aura theoretically provided by the use and abuse of drugs. Neil is speaking about alienation, about isolation, about personal insecurity and about false perceptions. And this discourse would also be repeated in many other songs

In what respects hard rock and its affairs with the Devil, *Tonight's the Night* (1975), is the album to listen to, as well as its predecessor, *On the beach* (1974). I have already explained most of the circumstances surrounding the album, and its significance. The former was actually recorded before the latter, but it was edited a year later. In *On the Beach*, I feel Neil is completely on his knees after the cathartic experience of *Tonight's the Night*, which was recorded earlier on. He is also trying to find time and space to recuperate his battered soul and regain his flight; personal, rather than artistic, for these two albums are absolute masterpieces, each one of them in their own way.

Neil Young is essentially a folk singer trying to sound as a rock frontman; quite the opposite of Bob Dylan, who is essentially a bluesman trying to sound like a folkie. Dylan is the ultimate, accomplished master of the biblical *logos*, man centred and masculine at the same time; Neil Young is the incarnation of myth, of the collective subconscious; the female soul of the mother goddess which pervades all over his work (*Unknown Legend*, 1992). Humour and sarcasm alongside deep poetic *nous* impregnate Dylan's legacy; harmony, melody, cryptic language and an almost female bittersweet stance mark Young's most prominent records. His lyrics are a homage to the cult of the ancient Mother Goddess, whereas the Minnesota bard owes his voice to the fathers of the Bible, anticipating a male, warlike god with a beard, and a prophet very capable of breaking the stones containing the essential commandments by throwing them from a mountain top in a fit of wrath. Dylan, to a certain extent, represents the power he is allegedly trying to undo through his discourse; but Young *is* the real subversion, for he chooses to

ignore such a power and concentrate on an alternative search for the very essence of reality. A reality that rarely scratches the surface where we live, and more often than not lies deep in the ground (*Flying in the Ground is Wrong*, 1967).

Finally, we should not forget prophetic Neil. The DVD *Neil Young Journeys* (2011), directed by Jonathan Demme, is the most prominent performance of this sort. The shaman allies himself with the prophet and the Wise Old Man to create a memorable performance in which Neil Young achieves one of his best artistic role models ever: intense, cryptic, sharp, honest and unfathomable.

I do believe that Neil Young fell to Earth at the right time. I do believe that, if there is anything similar to a cosmic order—as well as a cosmic chaos—in the universe, he has most successfully managed to express so in his work. His ability to operate in four dimensions rather than three is evident. The succession of his different dramatic personae acting as spokesmen for the different themes in his works is endless. The depth of his vision is unfathomable. The lonely wolf can help humans to get in touch with the beat of the far beyond. The hawk in the rain, with its hungry eyes, is still gazing through the horizon line, half-blinded by the sun, but nevertheless possessing everything. And still aching to find more. More sounds. More colours. More images. More sensations. More magic. The crow in the mist, following the thunder and the echoes of the fleeing animals, hops along, tracking down the stampede of the buffaloes in Springfield. The yeti in the snows of Siberia awaits, hearing a distant voice which does not belong to the throat which is conveying it, and is watching closely, as the deep polyphonic scream shakes the edges of the rocks and forever changes the direction of the wind. The serpent will finally awake from her immortal sleep and begin to look at the sky, watching a legion of birds whose feathers, colours and movements will be aped by wise primitive men; and they all will start recreating the essential migratory spiral, at one point envisaged by certain works by Stanley Kubrick<sup>2</sup> and Andy Goldsworthy<sup>3</sup>, which defines the origin and the end of the world. Amen.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999) is one of the most revered names in the history of film making. In *2001, A Space Odyssey* (1968) the spiral movement of the hominid's bone thrown into space represents the cosmic force which drives the universe.

<sup>3</sup> Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956) is an outstanding, truly unique artist whose ephemeral work is also linked to the primal forces of Nature, especially those representing the creative spiral of the cosmos. This idea is illustrated in the documentary *Rivers and Tides* (2001).

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**Received** July 20, 2020

**Revised version accepted** November 17, 2020