

Chris Nelson

Speaking of Neil Young

AS A JUNIOR IN HIGH SCHOOL I FOUND MYSELF HUMMING ALONG TO Neil Young's "Old Man" and "Heart of Gold" whenever the local classic rock station decided to take a break from Aerosmith or Boston or AC/DC. Senior year I'd take the scenic route home from football practice while blaring *Harvest Moon* in the used Mustang I shared with my older brother, driving past the cornfields just as the setting sun made them glow and feeling nostalgic for the innocence I had yet to lose. First semester of college I was getting high to his 1969 self-titled solo debut, and by spring I waited for rainy days to wallow in my loneliness with the haunting *On the Beach*, playing it over and over on an old turntable of my father's that I had restored.

In accordance with the natural progression of other Neil faithfuls, it wasn't until I had exhausted this mostly acoustic, more accessible singer/songwriter side of Neil Young that I was able to graduate to an appreciation of his electric work—the highest and most challenging level a Neil faithful can reach. And it took me even longer to fall in love with it. Only recently have I begun to figure out why: his style of playing, with its wailings and repetitions and clutter and incoherence, is my style of speaking. Like his guitar, I stutter.

The phonetic makeup of the word itself seems cruel, *stutter*, in that its intonation peaks at the difficult and forceful "t" sound—a voiceless alveolar stop produced by blocking airflow in the vocal tract—and therefore prevents sufferers from cleanly vocalizing what's afflicting them, rather like the blatantly onomatopoeic *lisp*. Not that sufferers necessarily want to vocalize what's afflicting them, for speech problems run long and deep. I can't recall a time when I didn't stutter, but I do remember when it was first defined as such. I was eating breakfast with my older brother Jeff, who coincidentally spoke like me. We were very young, maybe eight and ten. I must have tried to tell him something—I'm sure my mind has blocked that part out—but he just looked at me and said:

"You stutter."

"So do you," I said.

"I know," he said, bringing another spoonful of cereal to his mouth. Fortunately, we both had another avenue for fluent communication: the piano. Our parents had forced my oldest brother, Joe, to learn the instrument, and they imposed the same requirement on Jeff and me. Despite our resistance, we got really good really quickly. How freeing it was to feel my fingers dance across the keys with Clementi's sonatinas, Chopin's nocturnes, and Beethoven's sonatas. But after a while I started doing the same thing with my fingers as I had been

doing with my mouth. My tempo was first to change, and it became apparent at one of our early annual recitals, which my family and I watched on video. There Jeff and I appeared in matching tuxedos to play a duet of “Yankee Doodle Medley,” he on bass, I on treble.

“You see, you’re playing too fast,” my mother told me, pointing at the TV. “Your brother’s got to keep up.” I kept my eyes fixed on the carpet.

As Jeff and I grew older, our parents deemed us cultured and mature enough to choose our own hobbies. Our devotions turned from piano to sports, and somehow he eventually overcame stuttering. I did not. And so I would live at the mercy of my own mouth, harboring lifelong grudges against those who wouldn’t let me forget it: my childhood friend’s brother who answered the phone when I called and yelled to his brother that “it’s C-C-C-Chris”; the professor who, the one time I went to his office, said I should change my writing topic on *Billy Budd* from masculinity to speech, because I “stuttered like Billy”; my ex-girlfriend’s roommate who, in front of my brothers during their one visit to my college, silenced what I thought was our amusing drunken banter by snickering, “At least I can talk.”

It didn’t take me long to develop and refine superficial coping mechanisms such as using words like “ah” or “um” or “uh” to ease myself into more difficult combinations, attributing the hesitation to mere deliberation. In certain situations, the filler sounds won’t suffice so I pretend I simply can’t find the right word and set up listeners to finish the sentence for me, a frustrating crutch. More desperate is the strategy of figuring out ways to avoid problem sounds and words and phrases and even speaking at all: changing the play formations from “Pro” to “Slot” in high school football so that in the huddle I wouldn’t have to try to force out the “p” sound, another voiceless stop; calling family and friends to wish them a happy birthday when I know they’re at work and won’t pick up; being the only one of ten grandchildren to not read a Bible verse at our grandfather’s funeral mass.

I suspect stutterers make terrific chess players, always experiencing life several moves ahead, guiding conversations away from topics and rhythms containing trouble sounds and words that may otherwise result in a kind of spoken checkmate. The effort and absurdity of the conversational manipulation are preferable to the alternative: attempting to say what readily comes to mind and thereby opening myself up to ridicule from people whom I then mistrust. Paradoxically, however, I also mistrust those whom I’m always able to defeat at the oral chess game, because by accepting a deliberately false or incomplete version of myself they’ve fallen for the charade. This mistrust leads to alienation from others, but I also feel alienated from myself for cowardly and cunningly projecting an artificial identity. Thus, for me speaking becomes an existential double bind: either they reject who I am or I reject who I am trying to be, a dilemma that undoubtedly accounts for much of the clinical depression I’ve battled since adolescence. Maybe that’s why I’ve always struggled articulating the word “you” and its variants: after years of limited experience genuinely

knowing and being known by somebody else—resulting partially from my fear of it—I don’t know how to acknowledge the other.

When the checkmate does inevitably happen, most people are decent enough to not outwardly react to it. Others can’t help themselves. I vividly recall one instance during the first few days of college, which I, like many other freshmen, saw as an opportunity to reinvent myself. For me, this opportunity meant getting people to understand me in ways unrelated to my vocal self-imprisonment. But I could only maintain the façade for so long, and at the lunch table one day it dropped. When a new friend witnessed my hesitation to speak, he widened his eyes and physically recoiled from my rocking body and jerking head. This made me convulse even more, as though I were having a fatal seizure. A different guy stood up from the table, maybe thinking he’d rush over and help me. Before he could, I forced out whatever I was trying to say and everyone looked at me, then at each other. I knew I wouldn’t want to hang out with them again. It was only a matter of time—the checkmate is bound to happen. I always end up surrendering and everything in my field of vision recedes. That’s when the *other* person usually assumes the façade by acting like we’re just having a normal, fluent conversation.

My father has always carried this burden of pretense. He let it slip only once, and that was the day I wondered if I would ever really know him. I was thirteen. I said: “Hey Dad, *Malcolm in the Middle* is on soon,” referring to our Sunday night TV tradition. He smiled and nodded and I continued down the hallway. For some reason, I turned back around and he was mouthing “I can’t understand him” to my mother. In what would be the start of her role as parental representative, she looked at me apologetically and said:

“You’re not speaking clearly enough.”

I was just excited. I couldn’t help it. I never really can, which is why it’s difficult for me to conceal emotions, especially anger, confusion, anxiety, enthusiasm, shame.

Shortly after that day, my mother suggested speech therapy.

“Now don’t get mad at me,” she said, referencing my defensiveness the previous times she had hinted at therapy. “I’m going to say something.”

I remembered my father’s expression when he saw me turn around.

“Okay,” I said.



Whereas I would go to therapy to try to abolish my disfluency, Neil Young embraced his. Unlike many other guitar-possessed rockers who rose to prominence in the late ’60s—Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Duane Allman, Jimmy Page, Mick Taylor, David Gilmour, Peter Green—Neil Young did not grow up listening to much Delta and Chicago blues. While his contemporaries cut their teeth on Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, the three Kings (B.B., Albert, and Freddie), Muddy Waters, and Elmore James, playing along to their records and imitating their Dionysian styles by ear, Young dwelled in the heavenly, Apollonian

sounds of singer/songwriters like Hank Williams, the Everly Brothers, and Roy Orbison. Yet somehow, halfway into his career, Young became the “Godfather of Grunge,” due largely to his idiosyncratic and explosive guitar playing—a powerful argument for avoiding tradition in order to achieve true artistic originality. As rocker J. J. Cale has said, “There’s nobody that sounds like Neil Young. A very, very original sound. If he has influences, they don’t show.”¹

Young does have influences—Link Wray is an obvious one—but Cale is smart to imply that Young’s sound does not fit into any single category. And the unusual tones and rhythm of his playing evoke many different situations and states of mind: his pinprick acoustic precision in “The Needle and the Damage Done” suggests the self-inflicted puncturing of a heroin addict; his playful and upbeat soloing in “Powderfinger,” a powerful and eerie contrast to the dreamlike lyrics about a young rural man fated to lose his innocence, sounds like a curious dog’s yelp; and his ferocious and frantic lead guitar in “Cowgirl in the Sand” always reminds me of repeated knife stabbings, perhaps because of the song’s love-turned-lethal theme. These examples hint at Young’s unsurpassed fluidity—he’s a genius at shaping form to follow content—even though Bob Dylan is usually the one considered rock and roll’s biggest musical chameleon.

What these examples don’t necessarily reveal, however, is the human tone of Young’s electric guitar and his inarticulateness in playing it. Young’s trademark electric guitar is called “Old Black,” an early model Gibson Les Paul that got its name from its previous owner’s crude paint job. According to Young’s guitar tech Larry Cragg, “Old Black doesn’t sound like any other guitar,” probably because it easily slides out of tune and consists of analog and rare parts that have long been out of production.² Young’s biographer Jimmy McDonough explains, “Old Black’s features include a Bigsby wang bar, which pulls strings and bends notes, and a Firebird pickup so sensitive you can talk through it. It’s a demonic instrument.”³ The term “talking guitar” is redundant. All guitars talk, and not just in the literal way that’s made hacks like Peter Dinklage famous. The very grammar of musical phrasing—how one *plays* the instrument, not just its sound—is modeled after the most human and primordial method of communication: speech. Watch any performance of B. B. King; he can’t suppress the urge to effortlessly mouth his smooth solos. But if Neil Young did the same thing, I imagine he’d look a lot like me in my stuttering inarticulateness.

And it is this inarticulate quality that has defined some of his greatest guitar-driven songs, mainly because Young characteristically channels his lack of clarity for larger aesthetic purposes. For instance, the muddled call-and-response solos fit perfectly in “Change Your Mind” (even the title signifies hesitancy). Similarly, Young’s panicked and unrestrained guitar reflects his mental white noise in “Barstool Blues”: “If I could hold on / To just one thought / For long enough to know / Why my mind is moving so fast / And the conversation is slow,” he

1. Jimmy McDonough, *Shakey: Neil Young’s Biography* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 17.

2. McDonough, 7–8.

3. McDonough, 8.

whines in the opening stanza. Because he's thinking too quickly, he can't figure out why he's thinking too quickly. The problem precludes a solution, not unlike dealing with the voiceless alveolar stop of *stutter* and the onomatopoeia of *lisp* by those who really need to.

But what best captures his unintelligibility is “Down by the River”—a musically expansive though lyrically sparse nine-plus minute song mourning failed opportunities and love lost: “Down by the river / I shot my baby,” he repeats again and again and with increasing desperation, shifting the rhetorical purpose of the lyric from explanatory to expressive, his emotions evolving from detachment to disbelief to self-loathing and guilt over the respective three choruses. Along the way, Young's extended solos contemplate and meander. I remember first discovering the song, driving around one foggy summer night. I didn't know where I was going or what I was listening to. Was it music or just noise? At the time I didn't care—it was the sound of both my mood and my circumstance.

But it's a question worth pursuing. Young's aimless solos contain very few actual musical phrases—the most basic requirement for distinguishing music from noise. They're what please the ear and give a work melody, form, and meaning. Yet meaning is precisely what Young is looking for in “Down by the River.” And lyrics aside, it's clear from the very beginning of the song's first solo that he won't be speaking in complete, comprehensible sentences. After moaning the end of the chorus, he plays the same note—a low E—nineteen times. Then he tries again. But he still can't get the word out and all he does is repeat the same stuttering “phrase.” It's both ugly and beautiful. Trey Anastasio, lead guitarist and frontman of Phish, writes, “If I was ever going to teach a master class to young guitarists, the first thing I would play them is the first minute of Neil Young's original ‘Down by the River’ solo. It's one note, but it's so melodic, and it just snarls with attitude and anger. It's like he desperately wants to connect.”⁴

With whom? Some other person? Himself? The guitar playing suggests it's both. Danny Whitten, the now-deceased rhythm guitar player for Young's principal and best backing band, Crazy Horse, cuts into Young's leads in little agitations as if they're speaking at—instead of with—each other. Young explains, “We'd only been together for six or seven days when ‘Down by the River’ was cut . . . I just wanted to catch it . . . it was when we were really feeling each other out, you know, and we didn't know each other, but we were turned on to what was happening. So I wanted to record that, because that never gets recorded.”⁵ But Young desperately wants to connect to himself as well—“the person that I talk to in my songs is mostly me,” he says—and this internal conversation is

4. Trey Anastasio, “100 Greatest Guitarists. 17: Neil Young,” *Rolling Stone*, November 23, 2011, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-guitarists-20111123-neil-young-20111122>.

5. Neil Young, interview by Elliot Binder, *Rolling Stone*, April 30, 1970.

equally discordant.⁶ His solos occur at two distinct groups of frets: one low and one high, as if he's doing anything he can to express himself, but he just comes across as even more tongue-tied, stuck between and overwhelmed by those two outlets for communication.

Young tries other strategies to circumvent his lack of fluency. Before and amid each chorus line of “Down by the river / I shot my baby,” he grunts a low A eight consecutive times before expelling a powerful G chord that eases him into singing “Down” and “I”—as though he's relying on avoidance and filler sounds in order to confront what he must. Thematically, there's no more suitable occasion in the song to tense up and potentially avoid articulating certain words, because in this moment he's coming to terms with what he metaphorically or literally did down by the river. When Young arrived at these parts of the song during a recent solo electric concert I caught, he stomped his effects pedal for overdrive, pounded out the A-A-A-A-A-A-A, and the repetition boomed through the small concert hall and rumbled down our spines.

The lack of fluency continues all the way to and through the climactic guitar solo, to the extent that a song this aurally jumbled can have a climactic guitar solo. With two minutes and fourteen seconds left, Young makes one final push, but all that comes out is clutter. Paralyzed, he grunts and chokes and gags his way to the song's conclusion. There's not a single musical phrase; it's all expression. On Ultimate-Guitar, a website of tab notation posted for and by shred geeks who have easily decoded Hendrix and Clapton and Page, the transcriber of “Down by the River” gives up and says, “For this part, it's best to just kinda ‘wing it’”—the only time I've ever seen an incomplete tab.⁷ You can't transcribe expression. Young also gives up in his own way, reverting to the first verse and then repeating the chorus until the song fades out, dragging him away still whimpering.

When asked if his songs—specifically “Down by the River”—make sense to him, Young replied, “No, that's not a requirement. It doesn't have to make sense, just give you a feeling. You get a feeling from something that doesn't make any sense . . . it's not about information. The song is not meant for them to think about me. The song is meant for people to think about themselves.”⁸ Singer Rickie Lee Jones agrees: “His songs were never finished pictures. He'd look at this, he'd say this, he'd feel this. But things usually didn't have a clear moral meaning at the end, there was no punch line, no reason for the lyrical journey.”⁹ Authorial intent is hardly the sole determiner of meaning, but assuming that Young is right and that his songs literally mean nothing—that they don't communicate anything in particular—then that's exactly why they mean everything to me.

6. McDonough, *Shakey: Neil Young's Biography*, 129.

7. “Down By The River Tab,” *ultimate-guitar.com*, last modified February 27, 1998, http://tabs.ultimate-guitar.com/n/neil_young/down_by_the_river_tab.htm.

8. McDonough, 127–128.

9. McDonough, 15.

I started speech therapy when I was thirteen. The date of the preliminary appointment hung above all else in my first few weeks of eighth grade, and when it came my mother and I embarked on the twenty-minute trip downtown in the family minivan, the smell of burning leaves drifting through the open windows. Neither of us spoke until we left our neighborhood.

“We just want you to feel good about yourself,” she said. “*I stutter. Everybody stutters.*”

“Where are we going to tell Jeff we went?” I asked. Joe had just moved away for his freshman year of college, but Jeff was a sophomore in high school and in the position of wondering why my mother and I left the house together every Tuesday at three thirty and returned at five thirty.

“We’ll tell him we’re at the orthodontist,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “He won’t even notice.” Her words of comfort would prove prescient; either out of compassion or convenient obliviousness, Jeff never inquired about our weekly trips. But at the time he wasn’t the only person I had to worry about. A few minutes from our destination, one of my friends pulled up next to us at a spotlight with his own mother, a guidance counselor at our middle school.

“The Nelsons go downtown!” his mother said, half-mocking our suburban roots. I instantly felt unjustifiably angry at my mother—why couldn’t she have gotten home from work a minute earlier, why couldn’t she have taken a different route, why couldn’t she have scheduled a different day altogether?—but then I realized I had to scramble for an excuse. Fortunately, the light turned green, buying me plenty of time to remember that my grandparents lived a couple blocks over. I said we were visiting them when my friend asked at school the next day.

Therapy was located at a nearby college known for its Speech-Language Pathology department. Students strolled in and out of buildings and on the sidewalks, some of them locking arms or holding hands. Nobody was waiting in the therapist’s office when we found it, the air stale and the lights fluorescent. The receptionist gave us forms to fill out and a parking sticker, which I would keep in my wallet instead of attaching to the van’s window and risking disclosure. Eventually, the door to the treatment area opened and out came a woman my mother’s age.

“Christopher?” she asked.

“Hi, how are you?” I replied without delay. I was going to be the most fluent patient she had ever met. She introduced herself as Heather and led us down a hallway and into something of an interrogation room with a table and four chairs and a one-way mirror spanning an entire wall. Sitting there was a beautiful young woman with red hair and fair skin. She smiled, revealing perfect teeth.

“I’m Fran,” she said. We joined her at the table and she described the process. I’d spend each session mostly with her, a graduate student fulfilling her clinical

Although I hated going to therapy, it did help, and my habits gradually changed—in my final session the following spring, Fran’s index card tallied nineteen. That was also the day my anonymity was threatened: on our way out of the office for the last time, my mother and I passed a sixth-grade girl from my middle school and her mother. They belonged to a community-oriented large family—the girl had sisters close in age to my brothers—and they lived right in the village of our small town. Our mothers said hello and the girl and I made eye contact. After a more distressed ride home than usual, I ran upstairs to my bedroom and looked her up in the yearbook.

“Alyssa,” I said.



There wasn’t anything quite like “Down by the River” when it first came out on *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* in 1969, and there still isn’t. Young’s eccentric, unintelligible guitar playing is no doubt responsible, because when he breaks his own guiding philosophy and attempts to impose coherence, the songs stay emotionally stagnant. For example, two popular bluesy performances of “Down by the River”—one with Crazy Horse at the Fillmore East in 1970, the other with Phish at Farm Aid in ’98—are blazing and groovy and a whole lot of fun, but too fast and sure of themselves for what the song demands. As innovative guitarist John Frusciante puts it, “When the intellectual part of guitar playing overrides the spiritual, you don’t get to extreme heights.”¹⁰ The original studio version remains the best I’ve heard—it’s Neil speaking with honesty and vulnerability. Even Eric Clapton, the epitome of guitar virtuosity and style and fluency, has both stressed and endorsed the connection between playing and speaking. Championing negative space as vital for evoking emotion, he cites the natural pauses of jazz greats like Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Horn and woodwind musicians have to take a breath, he points out, so why shouldn’t guitarists?

If only he practiced what he preaches. Far too often Clapton plays guitar without taking a breath, opting instead for clean technical perfection that always strikes me as unnatural. He’s a little too melodic, a little too smooth. Every time I listen to him play, I get the sense that he knows precisely what he’s doing and how he’s doing it—a man in total lingual control. Perhaps that’s why his style has never fully resonated with me: he embodies a way of speaking that I’ve never had access to.

There’s a time and a place for Clapton—I still love listening to him—but his blues mastery is simply not suited for certain songs. Young’s incoherence, meanwhile, *is*. And there’s no better example of their different approaches than seeing them trade licks during “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” at Bob Dylan’s *Thirtieth Anniversary Concert Celebration* (dubbed *Bobfest* by Young)—a forgettable affair whose overblown and lackluster performances bring to mind

10. David Fricke, “The New Guitar Gods,” *Rolling Stone*, February 2007, 44.

The Band's *Last Waltz*. The camera swoops in on all the relics from the '60s—Ronnie Wood, George Harrison, Roger McGuinn, and others—looking more like CEOs than rockers, as though the glamour and materialism of the recently passed '80s trumped their hippie idealism.¹¹ Standing tall and straight behind Dylan is Clapton, sleek and sexy and sterile in all black. And there's Neil, stage left, apart from everyone, with the hair and face of a caveman and grizzled as ever in his token flannel shirt and ragged jeans. Dylan croons through the first verse and chorus and Clapton can't go more than three seconds without indulging himself in gratuitous fill, overpowering the other twenty or so artists. Then, out of nowhere, Young's timid and messy solo fades in to say hello. He gets in maybe five notes before Clapton starts to talk over him. In an appropriate visual metaphor for the lack of attention Young's guitar playing gets, the camera takes several seconds to cut to him and when it does, he's already ceded control of his lead to Clapton, who is now finishing Young's sentence. This leaves Young convulsing in the middle of the frame, with no voice whatsoever.

The overcrowded band trudges through another verse and chorus interrupted by more Clapton flawlessness, until Young's shrieking tone again injects the song with much-needed longing. The camera snubs him a second time, though we don't need his accompanying image to know who's speaking, and Clapton tries to speak for him yet again, but this time Young heroically keeps talking. He's only able to utter repetitions of the same six-note riff, but boy does he make them count, screaming and throbbing with bends and vibrato, rocking his body to the beat, forcing the noise out of his muscles. What would have taken Clapton less than a second to glide past, Young expressively stumbles over for almost half a minute. And as he should, considering that the song's mood is somber, desperate, tentative, and that Dylan himself stutters the chorus: "Knock-Knock-*Knockin'* on heaven's door." Just like I was before listening to the tape at therapy, Young was unaware of his disconnect from everyone: "Patti Smith told me how she saw Bobfest and we were doin' 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door' and I kept playing . . . I didn't realize I was making the song *longer*. She could tell some of the people onstage thought it was just crazy . . . But hey, it's all in the spirit of the thing. It's funny—I never looked at it like that, 'cause I had my eyes closed. I was just thinkin', 'Wow, we're really fuckin' grooving. Everybody's gettin' off.'"¹²

Neil Young steals the otherwise unremarkable show when given near-complete rule of the stage for other Dylan covers like "All Along the Watchtower" and "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," but it's his contribution to "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" that best demonstrates his originality as a guitarist—especially because he's sharing space with "real" players like Eric Clapton. In addition to their differences in musical compatibility, there are other ways to explain the disparity between the two. Clapton makes technically hard solos look easy;

11. "Knockin on Heavens Door Bob Dylan's 30th Anniversary," YouTube video, 6:49, from a performance recorded on October 16 1992, posted by "vayz," June 12 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bk_V41erLHY.

12. McDonough, *Shakey: Neil Young's Biography*, 172.

Young makes technically easy solos look hard. Clapton has learned to speak fluently; Young has not.



I would never become completely fluent, and I knew as much entering high school. The prospect of permanent disfluency bothered me, but I didn't want to go to therapy forever, and between my old coping strategies and the productive ones that Fran taught me, it was clear that at least my stuttering wouldn't be a serious handicap. Plus, at the time, I was far more concerned about being identified and known as the kid who needed speech therapy. In my small town, the high school contained the seventh and eighth graders, which meant Alyssa and I were in the same building my freshman year. I had visions of everybody pointing and laughing at me as soon as I walked in that first day, but it passed with my confidentiality still intact, as did the next few years. Alyssa and I would spot each other every now and then, in the hallways or at assemblies. I liked to think that therapy—and to some extent, our speech problems—had become our tacitly agreed upon little secret.

Indeed, we never even spoke to each other until my senior year. My good friend and next-door neighbor Chris had the house to himself one night, and he invited me and some others over to smoke pot. Alyssa was there, and when Chris introduced us we immediately glanced at each other's mouths, trying to discover what had prompted therapy. Although I did detect some clutter and a fast tempo, she spoke quite fluently and certainly better than I did. She seemed to have absorbed the lessons from therapy, and she probably thought the same thing about me after seeing me smoke; it was my first time, and because therapy had conditioned me to breathe from my diaphragm rather than my lungs, I wasted much of Chris's dime bag on empty hits. I feigned ignorance and he cited an abnormally high tolerance. But I had some explaining to do a few hours later when, having figured out how to properly inhale, I took one hit of somebody else's pot and could barely function.

"Must be really good weed," I said, laughing in the throes of a coughing fit. Alyssa smiled coyly and said nothing.

Even though we'd see each other around the next few years, we didn't become close until our two groups of friends started spending time together, the summer after my freshman year of college. There she was, standing next to her girlfriends on the driveway at a house party. We locked eyes and then burst out laughing. I don't remember what we said—I don't think it really mattered—but we spent the night following each other around, rolling our eyes at the drunken boasts and flirtations of the other partiers. Alyssa and I exchanged numbers before leaving, but we rarely used them. Instead, whenever there was a social event, we simply counted on the other being there. And we'd usually end up together making wisecracks about whatever affectation or idiocy we came across, whether in a bombastic speaker at a Memorial Day parade or the ridiculous dialogue in a new blockbuster film.

Our relationship only grew when we were apart during the school year. I'd come back from college—as would she, eventually—and we'd regale each other with similar stories from that past year. Although I was attracted to her and the feeling seemed mutual, we'd never go out alone. I think we were just afraid that whatever it was we had wouldn't survive the next step, at least not then. So we continued to seek each other's company in the secure presence of our friends. When we started going to clubs, Alyssa and I would sit quietly at a table, watching them dry hump each other to the latest jam. One night, we witnessed one of my friends—a real smooth talker we knew to be a womanizer—working his game on one of hers. Alyssa went right up to him and said, “You think you're hot shit, but you're not.” He stood there dumbfounded as she walked away—it was the first time anyone had ever put him in his place. He mentioned the incident only once, later, on the car ride home.

“That Alyssa girl's a bitch,” he said. Enthralled by her spontaneity and frankness, I smiled to myself and began to consider silly, romantic questions about her. Would we clearly articulate our wedding vows? Would our children be more likely to have speech problems? Despite our shared disfluency being on my mind and probably hers, I didn't want either of us to acknowledge it—I was scared of how she and especially I would react. But that changed one night the summer before my senior year. We were at a party, laughing together, and when we stopped she looked me in the eye.

“I know you hated going to that place as much as I did,” she said. She didn't expect a response—it was just a statement—but I still waited for my face to flush and for her and everything else in my field of vision to recede. None of that happened, and I realized I was finally free of the worry I'd been carrying around for years.



As a whole, mainstream rock culture—fans, the media, the industry itself—has ignored Neil Young's guitar playing. He's known as a singer/songwriter first and, occasionally, a guitarist second. I find this disregard both surprising and unfair, especially given that Young's unique style and tone have influenced ensuing generations' best rock artists: Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Ryan Adams, Wilco, Radiohead. I'm not saying that Young's playing is not without its flaws. It's almost always infuriating and demanding to listen to, even for diehard fans. My neighbor Chris once told me his dad loved Neil Young. The next day, I brought him a bootleg of Young and Crazy Horse on their '96 European tour and we bonded over Heinekens and distortion.

“Oh, his guitar playing fucking *sucks!*” he shouted over the speakers, drumming his beer bottle in rhythm to Young's virtually one-chord solo at the end of “Cinnamon Girl.”

“I know!” I said.

“But I *love* it!”

“I know!”

Others—like my cousin—find no value at all in Young’s playing. I recently told him I thought it was underrated and underappreciated and he shrugged and went on about heavy metal finger-pickers. It felt like a rejection of *me*, and it’s not hard to explain why: to defend his style of playing is to defend my style of speaking. And I’m resigned to having to use this style indefinitely, even if the texture of our world has seemingly made communication easier.

For stutterers—and for everyone, to some degree—the recent boom of non-oral means of communication—texting, e-mail, various social media—is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they provide an easy and safe outlet for self-expression. On the other hand, they provide an easy and safe outlet for self-expression; that is to say, their accessibility and utility and prevalence encourage digital over-reliance at the expense of the intimacy of sensual human contact. The effect of such reliance is to paradoxically lock us even deeper into ourselves. We can head straight for the self-checkout lines at the grocery store, order Chinese take-out online, walk down a crowded street with our iPods plugged into our ears, tap our GPS navigation devices for directions.

And yet, despite the fewer opportunities and incentives to use one’s voice and hear somebody else’s, this is still a culture that rewards *talking*, especially in the empty *Glengarry Glen Ross* connotation of the word: the significance of a news story, for example, is based more on a latitudinal sweep of all the media personalities, pontificators, and talking heads surrounding that story than on the core of the story itself. Everyone must have an opinion—no matter how shallow or insipid—and we must express that opinion—preferably quickly and loudly—in order to affirm our existence and to connect with the outside world. We also belong to a culture that increasingly seeks instant gratification, specifically when it comes to giving and receiving information.

While repetition, especially the stuttering kind that Young elicits with his guitar, communicates no new information, it does express emotion. And confronting unadulterated emotion is never pleasant, especially if it’s your own. Maybe that’s why so many music fans have resisted Young’s guitar playing: “it’s as if the instrument is patched directly into his heart,”¹³ says McDonough, and, according to Anastasio, “Neil’s playing is like an open tube from his heart right to the audience.”¹⁴ Like stuttering, Young’s playing is sensual, expressionistic in its manifestation of emotion rather than just representation or, worse, concealment of it. His emotion is our emotion. As Young says of “Down by the River,” “The song is not meant for them to think about me. The song is meant for people to think about themselves.” One can trace this loss or subjugation of self to his background: Young used to have epileptic seizures, frequently in the middle of performing. He explains, “Did I get songs from the seizures? Probably. To go somewhere else and you’re there and you’re talkin’ to people and you’re part of the thing and you are somebody else. Then you realize, ‘Hey, wait a minute, I’m not—’ You don’t know who you are because you know you’re not the person

13. McDonough, 487.

14. Anastasio, “100 Greatest Guitarists. 17: Neil Young.”

you seem to be. And you start waking up. Then you find out who you are by looking around.”¹⁵

The last few lines epitomize the symbiotic, mutually reflective relationship between internal subject and external object in expressionistic art. What we see is what we feel, and yet what we feel is what we see. McDonough believes this “unprompted, unedited nature of Young’s art only adds to the reality, and what’s left off the canvas is just as important as the paint sloshed on.”¹⁶ The comparison to visual art is essential, and it’s no coincidence that filmmakers have taken a liking to Young’s music, especially his guitar playing—Jim Jarmusch and Jonathan Demme are both big fans, and each has directed at least one concert DVD of Young.

“Cortez the Killer” is perhaps Young’s most abstract canvas. Only Neil Young has the bravado to compare his love life to a gruesome sixteenth-century massacre, and only he has the genius to pull it off. He does so with earnestness, particularly in his guitar playing. Young roams up and down the fretboard, contemplating, and it takes him almost half of the seven-plus minute song to find the words, so to speak, and sing the first verse: “He came dancing across the water / With his galleons and guns / Looking for the new world / In that palace in the sun.” As in “Down by the River,” the listener has to fill in many of the blanks, with Young lobbing bombs of distortion here and there. Near the end, he randomly shifts into the first-person present—“And I know she’s living there / And she loves me to this day / I still can’t remember when / Or how I lost my way”—and wanders about some more. It’s an intellectually adolescent song—we certainly don’t gain any insight or perspective into the conquest; after all, Young wrote the lyrics in a tenth-grade history class. In many ways, however, it is this very innocence that defines “Cortez the Killer.” He doesn’t know what to think or how to communicate it even if he did, but that childlike purity is crucial for preserving the emotional and spiritual essence of the song. It’s not about explaining *why* “They carried them to the flatlands / And they died along the way.” He simply brings us there, emotionally.

I recently came across the following analysis of Jackson Pollock’s *The She-Wolf*, on the MoMA website. It could just as well refer both to Young’s playing and to stuttering: “All of the color, all of the lines, all of these rather frantic notations, as if there were some message being transcribed. Almost like the cave paintings on the walls going back further than antiquity, where you have this urgency of human communication and yet you don’t know exactly what that communication is.”¹⁷



But isn’t art supposed to rise above merely telling us what the world is and

15. McDonough, 176.

16. McDonough, 15.

17. “*The She-Wolf*,” *moma.org*, last accessed November 2014, http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=78719.

go on to show us what the world could be? Is it enough to explode worlds and categories and feelings without offering blueprints for rebuilding them? So much of Young's electric oeuvre destroys or at least criticizes what he sees in the world, due in no small part to the candor and chaos of his guitar playing: he tears down the racism, ignorance, and hypocrisy of the righteous red-state ethos in "Southern Man"; the narrative of homogeneity and universal liberty promised by post-Reagan America in "Rockin' in the Free World"; and conventional notions of gender identity and power in "Cowgirl in the Sand." No doubt he presents a mirror of our world, but it wouldn't be hard to retreat into the confines of disenchantment and cynicism if he didn't provide a window into a better one. Fortunately, for me at least, Neil Young does provide that window.

"Like a Hurricane," one of his few guitar-heavy songs that's ever played on the radio, explores familiar Young territory: idealizing a romance from the past, yearning to reclaim an innocence long lost, navigating love's deadly edge. "You are like a hurricane / There's calm in your eye / And I'm gettin' blown away / To somewhere safer / Where the feeling stays / I want to love you / But I'm gettin' blown away," he wails in the chorus. "My love for you is *killing* me," he may as well be saying, in this song and others.

But it's what comes from Old Black, not Young's mouth, that makes "Like a Hurricane" sublime. Over the course of this sprawling eight and a half minute epic, Young's solos choke and ring and stumble and screech, bursting through and past the main riff of E-D-C-B-A-B-C-E-D-C-B-C-D with thrashing distortion and jaw-tightening bends. Anastasio recalls witnessing a live rendition of the song: "Neil went into this feedback solo that was more like a sonic impressionist painting. He was about six feet back from the microphone, singing so you could just hear him over the colorful waves of hurricane-like sound."¹⁸ It is this lack of order and meaning and coherence afforded by the "colorful waves of hurricane-like sound" that conveys the speaker's inner torment.

Coincidentally, that's precisely the feeling that prompted Young to write the song. McDonough says, "Young had undergone an operation for nodes on his vocal cords and had to refrain from talking for a time—although it didn't slow down his lifestyle one iota." At bars, Young and a friend "would do this sign-language thing" when picking up women. One of these nights led to "Like a Hurricane." His friend explains, "Neil had this amazing intense attraction to this particular woman named Gail—it didn't happen, he didn't go home with her." When they got back to Young's ranch, "Young was completely possessed, pacing around the room, hunched over a Stringman keyboard pounding out the song." "I wrote a lotta songs when I couldn't talk," Young admits.¹⁹ "Like a Hurricane" is about the torture of being locked in—of being unable to engage with the world. It's about desperately wanting to connect.

And nowhere is that sense of yearning more evident than in the climactic guitar solo. After grieving through the last chorus at the five-minute mark,

18. Anastasio, "100 Greatest Guitarists. 17: Neil Young."

19. McDonough, 492, 492–493, 494.

Young spends the next minute and a half squeezing even faster and tenser and more frenzied and desperate noise out of Old Black, culminating in one final cry for help: he squeals two Bs, an octave apart, nine consecutive times—the highest up the fretboard he goes in the entire song, and one of the few parts of his solo featuring two simultaneous notes—before punctuating the sentence with two Gs, outlining a G major triad. Then, he *repeats* that same stuttering sentence, only changing the punctuation from the G major outline to an F major outline. Everything about this sequence creates tension. But it's his tonal exchange with bassist Billy Talbot that's particularly jarring. For one, the G major chord outlined in the guitar is dissonant with the implied harmony of A minor in the bass, as is Young's F major outline with the implied G major in the bass. In other words, Young's harmonic motion is not synchronous with the harmony implied by the bass line A-G-F—basically, he's one step ahead of the rhythm, one step ahead of his band, one step ahead of himself. He's talking too fast.

But that's just the mirror. And Neil Young doesn't stop there, even though "Like a Hurricane" would still be brilliant and moving if he had. What makes the song an enduring work of art—what provides the window—is a moment that comes directly after this one last plea. With a little over a minute left in the song, each member of Crazy Horse makes it clear that we're arriving at a peak: Ralph Molina crashes his cymbals at the end of the measure; Frank Sampedro presses on his organ and holds an ethereal, high-octave chord; Billy Talbot plucks steadily at his bass, a heartbeat urging Young to charge forward. We've reached the eye of the storm. And it is only here that Neil Young finds solace, as he insisted he would in the chorus. He proceeds to fire off a closing distortion-free solo that melts the tension in my neck every time I hear it. His playing unexpectedly radiates assertion, confidence, and, most importantly, fluency. Every member of Crazy Horse enunciates the first two notes of the next two bars, as though sustaining and celebrating his newfound eloquence. There are no lyrics to explain the sudden epiphany but it's apparent that, unlike in "Down by the River," in some small way he's found peace. He's found connection.

It's one of the many transcendent moments in Young's playing and possibly the most redemptive, for him and for me. Perhaps that's why I love his guitar playing so much: every now and then Neil Young emerges from the desolation of oral incomprehensibility and stumbles upon fluency a stronger, wiser, and better man.



Alyssa and I never dated. We never even kissed—not that we didn't want to or didn't have plenty of chances. Once, at a party, she pulled me aside and told me about a picture of the two of us posted on our friend's online photo album.

"Our smiles are so big and real," she said. I had of course already seen and cherished the same picture.

"I know," I said, and we looked away bashfully.

Another time we were at our friend's house, and she seemed sad so I went over and sat next to her at the bottom of the stairs. I rubbed her back and she

put her head on my shoulder. I could feel on the side of my neck how smooth her hair was. Neither of us moved or spoke. It was enough to just sit there and listen to the sound of our breathing.

And then one night a large group of us had attended one of our city's weekly concerts on the river. It started to storm so we all took refuge in a pizza parlor downtown. Alyssa and I had some red wine, and when the storm passed our friends decided to walk to a bar. We followed them for a while. The air had cooled and the setting sun was beginning to stream through the clouds and onto the wet streets. Eventually, Alyssa and I fell behind and lost sight of our friends, but we didn't catch up to them. Instead, we took each other's hand and spent the evening wandering the glistening city.

That was the last time I saw her. I left for my last year of college the next day and we drifted out of contact. But she's never disappeared from my life. Now that I'm out in the world, I think about our last night together, her hand in mine and mine in hers, the sunlight reflecting off the puddles, the water dripping down sides of buildings, the steam rising off the streets. We didn't say much, but when we did speak we were fluent.