

WAGING HEAVY PEACE by Neil Young

Excerpt

Blue Rider Press

I pulled back the plastic sticky tape from the cardboard box. Wrapping paper was on the ground around my feet. My son Ben watched from his chair, and Amber, my daughter, and my wife Pegi sat around me. I carefully lifted the heavy weight out of the box. It was further wrapped in packing paper and then a final layer of some foamy quarter-inch-thick protective material. Then it was revealed: a locomotive switcher with handmade Lionel markings. Curiously, it was not a real Lionel. It must have been some kind of prototype. There was a white typewritten sheet in the box from Lenny Carparelli, one of the endless stream of Italians connected in one way or another to the history of Lionel, a company I still have a small share of. I read the sheet. The model was from General Models Corporation. It was a beautiful model of a switcher. It was indeed the prototype that Lionel had used to create its own model from. As the letter pointed out, this was back in the days before corporate lawsuits and trade secrets invaded every little area of creativity and design.

Pegi always gives me Lionel collectibles for holidays, and I now have a very extensive collection of rarities, all proudly displayed behind glass in a room with a giant train layout on my Northern California ranch. It is not a normal train layout: The scenery is made up of redwood stumps for mountains and moss for grassy fields. The railroad has fallen on hard times. A drought has ensued. Track work, once accomplished by hardworking teams of Chinese laborers, has been left dormant. Now expensive, highly detailed Lionel steam engines from China traverse the tracks. The railroad is historic in its own way as the site of many electronic development programs where the Lionel command control and sound systems were conceived and built from scratch, then the prototypes were tested and the software was written, tested, rewritten, and retested. Heady stuff, this electronics development.

It all started with Ben Young. Ben was born a quadriplegic, and I was just getting back into trains at the time, reintroducing myself to a pastime I had enjoyed as a child. Sharing the building of the layout with Ben is one of the happiest times. He was still in his little bassinet when the Chinese laborers originally laid the track, thousands of them toiling endless hours through the nights and days. He watched as we worked. Then, after months, it eventually came time to run the trains, and later I devised

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a switch system run by a big red button that he could work with his hand. It took a lot of effort, but it was very rewarding to see the cause and effect in action. Ben was empowered by this. My friend and studio maintenance engineer Harry Sitam was responsible for actually building the devices, electronic switching mechanisms that turned the power on and off at the touch of a button. A selector enabled momentary or toggle action. Harry was a huge help.

That was thirty-three years ago, though, and now I have the Windex out and I am cleaning the glass doors on the display shelves where my prized Lionel possessions are kept safe and sound for all to see. Not that anybody ever comes here. You could count the visitors on your hand. Relatively speaking, that is, to the amount of care that has gone into the display. The display and layout are a Zen experience. They allow me to sift through the chaos, the songs, the people, and the feelings from my upbringing that still haunt me today. Not in a bad way, but not in an entirely good way, either. Months go by with boxes piled everywhere and trains derailed with dust gathering on them. Then miraculously I reappear and clean and organize, working with every little detail for hours on end, making it all run perfectly again. This seems to coincide with other creative processes.

I remember one day David Crosby and Graham Nash were visiting me at the train barn during the recording of *American Dream*, which we did a lot of on my ranch at Plywood Digital, a barn that was converted to a recording studio. We had a truck parked outside full of recording equipment and were working on several new songs. We were all pretty excited about playing together again. David had recently gotten straight, was recovering from his addiction to freebase, had recently completed jail time having to do with a loaded weapon in Texas, and was still prone to taking naps between takes. His system was pretty much in shock, and he was doing the best he could because he loves the band and the music so much. There is no one I know who loves making music more than David Crosby. Graham Nash has been his best friend for years, through thick and thin, and they sing together in a way that shows the depth of their long relationship.

They met in the Hollies and the Byrds, two seminal bands in the history of rock and roll, and then

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came together with Stephen Stills to form Crosby, Stills & Nash around 1970. Their first record is a work of art, defining a sound that has been imitated for years by other groups, some of which have enjoyed even greater commercial success, but there can be no mistaking the groundbreaking nature of that first CSN record. Stephen played most of the music, overdubbing all the parts into the night with Dallas Taylor and Graham. There was so much he had wanted to do with Buffalo Springfield, like producing, writing, and arranging harmonies, as well as playing more guitar, and that was his first opportunity to be really creative after Springfield ended, and he went for it big-time.

Anyway, I saw David looking at one of my train rooms full of rolling stock and stealing a glance at Graham that said *This guy is cuckoo. He's gone nuts. Look at this obsession.* I shrugged it off. I need it. For me it is a road back.

So now I'm polishing the glass on one of the display shelves that house my collection. With the glass all cleaned and sparkling, I stand in the room alone and admire the beautiful Lionel models, all perfectly lined up in an order that only I understand.

I leave that building and walk about 150 feet over to Feelgood's Garage. Feelgood's is full of my amps, old Fenders mostly, but also some Magnatones, Marshalls, and the odd Gibson. I remember my first Fender amp: I got it as a gift from my mom. She always supported my music. It was a piggyback model. The amp was on top of the speaker cabinet. Two ten-inch speakers delivered the whopping sound of the smallest piggyback amp Fender ever made. But to me it was HUGE. Before that I had an Ampeg Echo Twin. I used to dream about amps and stage setups in school, drawing diagrams and planning stage layouts. I didn't do real well in those classes.

Feelgood's has cars, too. I have a transportation thing. Cars, boats, trains. Traveling. I like moving. Once when I was walking along a street in LA at age twenty-two or twenty-three, I saw a place called Al Axelrod's. It was a car repair place. There was a red convertible's rear end poking out of the garage. I recognized it as a '53 or '54 Buick. One of my dad's friends, the author Robertson Davies, lived near us in Peterborough, Ontario, and we used to go to his house every Christmas and play charades at a party.

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He had a bunch of daughters. Very exciting. Anyway, he also had a '54 Buick. It was brand-new and made a large impression on me with its beautifully designed grille, taillights, and an overall shape that featured a kind of bump or ripple in the lines at about the midpoint, accentuated by a chrome strip that mirrored it. This ripple emanated from the rear wheel's circular well and was unique to Buicks. So I went inside Al Axelrod's and saw my first Buick Skylark. That really blew my mind. Only about five hundred were ever made! It was custom chopped at the factory about the same time as GM introduced the Eldorado and the Corvette. I looked for a Skylark for years, and finally John McKieg found one in a body shop in Pleasanton, California.

John was a Vietnam vet who was taking care of my cars. He was an excellent body and paint man. I had him do a job for me and then I hired him to come and work for me, taking care of the thirty-five cars I had acquired by then. All of them were wild designs. Mostly '50s; a lot of Cadillacs. I was not overly interested in their mechanical condition when I bought them, just wanted those unique shapes. Later that turned out to have been a big mistake, because most of them didn't run well and took a lot of time and money to restore. It would have been better and less expensive to just get original cars in excellent condition. Anyway, after years and years of collecting, I sold a lot of them and just kept the good ones. Most of them were right there in Feelgood's. The best in my collection is a 1953 Buick Skylark, the one that John found, body number one. The first one ever made. That is the big Kahuna.

So here I am at Feelgood's, looking at my cars and a conference table with a whiteboard. Tomorrow is a big meeting with Alex, the venture capitalist who works for Len Blavatnik, the new owner of WMG, my record company. The reason for the meeting is my new start-up company, PureTone. At least, that's what we're calling it this week. It's very early, and we are still changing names. The company is designed to rescue my art form, music, from the degradation in quality that I think is at the heart of the decline of music sales and ultimately music itself in popular culture. With the advent of online music iTunes has come terrible quality. An MP3 has less than 5 percent of the data found in a PureTone master file or a vinyl record. I have an idea to build a portable player and online

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distribution model to present a quality alternative to MP3s with the convenience today's consumers demand. I want to bring the soul of the music industry and the technology of Silicon Valley together to create this new model, using artists as the driver. My goal is to restore an art form and protect the original art, while serving quality to the music lover.

Tomorrow is the big presentation day, and I am going over my approach, which is guided by PureTone CEO candidate Mark Goldstein, who is a start-up specialist introduced to me by Magdalena Yesil and Marc Benioff, two friends of mine from the Silicon Valley community. These two are both brilliant and very successful. Unlike myself, they have mastered the art of monetizing their ideas. I have big ideas and very little money to show for it. I'm not complaining, though. It's not the money that matters; it's doing things right and efficiently that is my goal. I just want to succeed at this so badly. I dislike what has happened to the quality of the sound of music; there is little depth or feeling left, and people can't get what they need from listening to music anymore, so it is dying. That is my theory.

Recording is my first love in the field of creativity, along with songwriting and music making, so this really cuts to the quick. I want to do something about it. So it is important that I get my thoughts together, impress this gentleman, and get some financial backing for this project, which will surely need it. My Skylark is right here with me.