

A Conversation with Nick Seymour of Crowded House
by Frank Goodman (8/2007, Puremusic.com)

I was as excited as any grown up pop fan might be to hear recently of a Crowded House reunion, and the first album in fourteen years. *Temple of Low Men* and *Woodface* were prime candidates for CDs to wear out in many people's collections, certainly ours.

The reunion came together over a Neil Finn record that got band-y, and everybody heard it. Nick Seymour, the original bassist, was on hand, and several studio drummers. The album started with Ethan Johns producing, and later Steve Lillywhite came in to do the last two tunes that turned into four. When Finn and Seymour realized where this session was going, they rang up Mark Hart, who'd been an integral part of the band on the last two records. They picked up L.A. drummer/producer Mark Sherrod, and the game was afoot.

The tragic suicide of original drummer Paul Hester in 2005 is something people never get over, but the band has moved on to making more great music. The spirit of Hester runs through a number of songs that, although the spark of the band's zenith is ever present, are marked by an inevitable gravity that no one escapes. But the groove goes on, and the tunes ring true, and a world tour is underway.

I was surprised to hear that I would not be speaking with Neil Finn, but with the cheeky original bassist Nick Seymour, who was very accommodating in every way. He is also the outrageous painter whose work appears on CH covers, and a producer in his own right. When you catch the band on their global attack, his work may be in the lobby or onstage, so watch for that.

Time On Earth is cause for celebration, and there's not a moment to be wasted. Ladies and germs, Nick Seymour of Crowded House.

Puremusic: It's a happy day when a new Crowded House record appears.

Nick Seymour: Oh, good.

PM: It's been so long, and it sounds so great.

NS: You've had a chance for listening, then.

PM: Oh, yeah, many times. And it's such a satisfying record. I mean, it's the first one in 14 years, right?

NS: Yeah.

PM: Wow, so that's got to be an incredible feeling. And all the classic songwriting and the sound of Crowded House is in full effect, although the mood is a little more serious, is that fair to say?

NS: Yeah, I mean, I guess it depends on the records that you compare. Are you familiar with the last studio record?

PM: Yes, that's true, not so serious compared with that.

NS: *Together Alone*, which was our last studio album, I listen to and find it sometimes quite dark sounding, and yet it had songs like "Distant Sun" on it that were regarded as sort of classic Crowded House. But when I listen to that it always seems to me that because people can remember such upbeat singles from Crowded House on all four studio albums, when they hear a collection of songs they have to re-jig their awareness of what type of band we are. It's hard to define us as a category, but one thing we do have is melancholia. And I think we've always been a band that plays in minor keys.

PM: Right.

NS: But it's just that we are remembered for songs such as "Weather With You" that's got a big chorus at the end of it, or a song like "Something So Strong." But "Don't Dream It's Over" is kind of a dark sounding song, but it has a sense of optimism in the chorus.

PM: Right. In several of those so-recalled upbeat songs, there are plenty of minor chords in the verse that open up on the chorus.

NS: Yeah, absolutely. That's possible. And "Four Seasons in One Day," it's a kind of very mellow, reclusive, someday, rainy day kind of song, and yet some people say, "It sounds so summery." We're *festooned* with contradictions.

[laughter]

PM: Fantastic. I can tell you for sure in the hundreds of interviews I've done, I've never heard that word in an interview. Thank you for that.

[laughter]

PM: And you're right, it's not as much a question of gravity or seriousness, per se, as it is melancholia, which is the artist's prerogative, and everybody's.

NS: Yeah. It's that lovely area between laughter and tears.

PM: Right.

NS: And sometimes it can be described as a "happy hangover"--

[laughter]

NS: Because some of it is like, "I really do have to curb my drinking every now and again, and I'm aware that I'm going to get an incredible hangover the following day." And sometimes I think to myself, "Ah, by God, have another mojito." But sometimes I actually stop, and start drinking water because, "Oh, I don't know if I could deal with a hangover." But there are times when a hangover can actually be your best friend. Some of your best ideas--

PM: Hangovers can be so humbling.

NS: Yeah.

PM: You know how it is with advance copies of records; the worst part is that I don't have your art, first of all.

NS: Oh, okay. All right. Well, there's a whole magical kingdom that [laughs] you're not part of yet.

PM: Oh, really? [laughs]

NS: It's hard to describe over the phone.

PM: How did you come up with what it is?

NS: Well, the cover is actually an urban landscape that's been created out of an editorial from the Melbourne newspaper, *The Age*, lots and lots of printed text. And that forms the shape of a downtown urban landscape. And there is a serpent that is holding a man in his mouth and shaking him, almost like a Godzilla kind of sea creature. Then there's a tree growing out of one of the buildings that's like one of those Roman cypresses that you see, one of those fir-type trees, pine trees that you see in Rome that is always depicted as the tree of life in the old paintings.

PM: Right.

[laughter]

NS: So it is worlds within worlds. And we can go there if you've got the time.

PM: It's interesting to hear an artist talk about how he came up with the work that's on the record when the record itself is not physically available, thanks for that.

NS: A big part of Neil's lyrical obsessions come from impressionist visions that he has, where he gets an overview of something that has some resonance to it, and with a cluster of words, depicts the impression of a moment, and he doesn't particularly--if a lyric is

becoming too--what's the word--too specific, too narrative, he might actually try to shroud it in some kind of poetic place that--

PM: "Zoom out," as they say.

NS: Yeah, exactly. I try to do the same with what would be an appropriate cover, appropriate artwork to go with that overview. And when you come and see us play live--we're touring in August/September in the U.S.--

PM: Oh, I'll be there.

NS: And we've got a lot of my artwork--a lot of the album artwork is going to come alive on stage.

PM: Oh! How exciting for you!

NS: And somehow it will make sense. Yeah. I'm excited. [laughs] I think sometimes it's a pain in the ass, because things always have to be ready at the 11th hour; you know, "I haven't started yet. When does it need to be ready? Oh, Tuesday, oh."

PM: "But we're rehearsing" [laughs]--yeah, right.

NS: "And it's Saturday night, and I'm drunk."

[laughter]

PM: I lack credits with these advance copies. Do you know all about songwriting credits for this record? Is that something you're completely conversant with?

NS: Yeah.

PM: Is it all Neil? Are there a couple of co-writes? Are you in on the writing?

NS: There are a couple of co-writes. The song "Silent House" is a co-write with the Dixie Chicks.

PM: Right, of course, they cut that.

NS: Yeah, the Dixie Chicks' track is also a collaboration with Johnny Marr from The Smiths, and that is a song called "Even a Child." And there is a single that we have out at the moment, "Don't Stop Now," Johnny Marr is playing on that track. He'd be recognized for his guitar playing.

PM: Yeah, he stands out.

NS: Ethan Johns produced the album, or the majority of the record.

PM: Ah.

NS: And then there was a subsequent four tracks that were recorded at RAK Studios in London with Steve Lillywhite producing.

PM: Great.

NS: And a producer is a collaborator, so there's a fairly consistent style through the record, in terms of the sounds. But there's a subtlety between those last four songs, subtle differences in the style of the last four songs.

PM: I would think that the personalities of Ethan Johns and Steve Lillywhite were pretty different, were they not, as studio personas?

NS: [laughs] They are totally different. There's one moment on "Even a Child," Neil was doing a guitar solo. And we listened back to the guitar solo--it was in the control room--and we listened back to the guitar solo, and we could hear this strange sound of magpies squealing right in the middle of the soundtrack. And we're like, "What--what did you play there? How--how is it making that noise?" And we suddenly--we soloed it, and realized it was Steve Lillywhite yelling, "Hooray!" And it was caught through the pickup of the guitar, and went onto tape.

[laughter]

NS: So he's the sort of guy that screams a lot when he's in the control room, screams "Hooray!" and "Fantastic!" and "Stop! Stop! That's horrible!"

[laughter]

NS: He really speaks his mind. He's a great, great producer. I mean, he's legendary, and he's legendary for a reason. Ethan Johns, on the other hand, is a very hands-on producer. He'll pick up an instrument and actually come into the studio and record with you.

PM: Ah. Yeah, and I think he's very tone-y on the board, and very good at getting sounds and all that, very engineering oriented.

NS: Yeah, extremely. I've never experienced a three-mic drum sound. Like he had three mics on the drum kit, and the total sound of the drums from three microphones was extraordinary.

PM: Three, total, is all he used?

NS: Yeah--actually four. There was a kick mic. I mean, he would have a kick drum mic, but the other microphones were ambient mics placed around the drums. If the drummer is playing to the sound of the room, that's the tone that should go to tape.

PM: Right.

NS: I think that's his justification, and it actually works.

PM: Wow.

NS: It works really well. He's a really clever guy.

PM: Yeah, and I hear a great guy.

NS: He comes from a tradition, though. His father is Glyn Johns, and his uncle is Andy Johns, also a huge engineer and producer. [Andy was Eddie Kramer's second engineer on classic Hendrix albums at the age of nineteen. His huge credits are for engineering, but he also produced many records of note.] I get the feeling that Ethan grew up with quite a competitive legacy from uncle and father driving him forward.

PM: Is it the touring band on the tracks in general? I mean, is L.A. drummer Matt Sherrod on the record?

NS: Yeah. What happened was, halfway through the record, Neil and I had realized that we're starting to sound like a band. So we gave Mark Hart a call, who'd we played with on the *Woodface* album and the *Together Alone* album; he had also toured with us since the second studio album. So he'd been an integral part of Crowded House. We rang him.

And we realized that we needed to find a drummer, because there was a deficit there with respect to Paul's passing, and also the fact that Ethan had played drums on so many of the tracks. And another guy, Ricky Gooch--we'd had Joey Waronker play drums on our first session. So we knew we needed to form a band to be able to say, "Let's tour this as a band. Let's basically reform Crowded House." At a certain point, it became obvious that that's what we were doing.

PM: And what an exciting point that had to be.

NS: Yeah. All of a sudden it was sort of like crossing into a creative threshold, realizing that you've pushed through a threshold, and you're suddenly admitting something that--a love that dare not speak its name.

So that's when we auditioned a bunch of drummers. We found Matt in Los Angeles, and we then went on to London, and we recorded the last four tracks with Matt playing drums, and Steve Lillywhite producing. And we really only thought we needed an extra two tracks, but we got four, just because we were on fire for about four days, we just suddenly really felt this burst of energy having Matt on board. And he's a really, really creative person who's done a lot of production work himself over the years, and co-writing. He worked a lot with Macy Gray. And he's obviously played with Beck, but that has been as a sideman.

PM: Right. In that little live clip on the band's site, he comes off as a really cool dude, like a great person.

NS: He is, yeah. He's a charming man. He's got a great smile, an incredible silhouette.

PM: And he's a very good hitter. He's got a nice feel for the material, which is of course, everything.

NS: He does, yeah. Yeah, the drums just disappear to me. When we're playing on stage, I'm never thinking about the drums. Every so often I sort of go over to catch his eye if we're in a section of a song that is instrumental, and we can take it to the next level. We read each other really well. He's a good jamming drummer.

PM: Now, since the band's so-called demise in '96--certainly it turns out to be premature—

NS: [laughs]

PM: --what had your creative life found you doing? What were you up to?

NS: I had moved from Melbourne to Dublin, Ireland, and took up residency in the city of Dublin, and sort of set up a studio with a couple of other guys. And I produced a band called Bell X1, which is the same name as the plane that broke the sound barrier. They have three albums out. I produced their first album. They're possibly the biggest band in Ireland right now in terms of popularity. They're a really good group. But they haven't broken outside of Ireland, particularly. They've had a bit of play on public radio out of Los Angeles, I know, and New York.

Anyway, I produced their first record. I produced a number of other bits and pieces that have been singles or four-tracks for bands, a track here, a track there. I've done film soundtracks, but nothing of great success in respect of the free market. I did a record for Universal Island last year, that's a combination of a lot of Irish artists, including The Thrills and The Frames and Bell X1.

PM: Right. And you're probably always painting.

NS: And I'm painting. I'm painting up a storm. I think I've got one in me right now.

PM: Wow.

[laughter]

PM: Yes. It's the beautiful creative life of the artist.

NS: Look, I pinch myself. Every morning I do. [laughs]

PM: Absolutely. What possesses a Melbourne guy to move to Dublin? What was the impetus there?

NS: I always wanted to live in Europe. And what's great about Ireland is they speak English and it's not England.

[laughter]

PM: All my grandparents are Irish, so I think that's funny.

[laughter]

NS: I'm not sure what the plan is. It's possible that one day I would move back to Australia. My girlfriend and I still haven't had children, and we're planning on that, and if we did there's a possibility of moving back to Australia for the support of the family and all that.

PM: Have you been together a long time?

NS: Yeah, we've been together about 10, 11 years.

PM: Wow. She's seen the whole deal.

NS: She's a little bit younger than me, so she's not banging on the door saying, "My clock is ticking."

PM: Exactly.

NS: "Fertilize that egg, you bastard!"

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, right.

So it's interesting, after all the early hubbub, at least in some areas of the press, about whether the band was Australian or from New Zealand, that now it's half American.

[laughter]

NS: Right, yes. Now it's the weirdest thing, we don't technically qualify as an Australian band anymore! When Paul was alive, it was Nick and Paul were Australian, and Neil was from New Zealand. So we qualified for all the Australian music awards. And New Zealand, of course, claimed us as a New Zealand band because there was a Kiwi. But since we've reformed, Neil is a Kiwi, Nick is an Aussie who's going to an Irish passport, and Mark Hart and Matt Sherrod are both Americans.

PM: Can you guys win a Grammy now?

NS: Yeah, we could! Let's hope. Well, what's amazing about the Grammys is they don't discriminate as to your country of origin.

PM: Of course they don't, right.

NS: I quite like that. That's probably the only thing I like about the Grammys. The rest of it sucks.

PM: I can't even watch it.

NS: Except that they gave the Dixie Chicks a really good pat on the back last year. I thought that was fantastic.

PM: To say the least. I mean, they just seemed to win everything.

NS: It was amazing that there wasn't a single nomination in the country music awards.

PM: Yeah. I live in Nashville, so I know from whence you speak. And it's yeah, it's unconscionable, really, yeah.

NS: Yeah.

PM: The small-mindedness of country radio, Clear Channel, and Nashville in general is never to be underestimated. It's astonishing.

NS: Incredible.

PM: So what are the musical brothers up to, both Neil's brother Tim and your brother, Mark?

NS: Tim has a new album out called *Imaginary Kingdom*. In fact, I think he did that in Nashville.

My brother Mark has got a new album coming out in Australia called *Westgate*. And I think it's coming out in Canada as well. He's got a bit of a groundswell of interest up there.

PM: Wow. And will it come out under his name or a group name?

NS: Yeah. Yeah, it'll be under Mark Seymour.

PM: Cool.

So Crowded House has always been known for making that connection with the audience that is so important, even in big shows. How is that done, would you say?

NS: It's just one foot in front of the other, really. I mean, we just play to the room. So if there's some kind of resonant vibration in the room, we'll try to mine it, find it, and then try to exploit it. We're always changing the set from night to night. There will often be a theme that we sort of come up with in the first couple songs, or the gate that we seem to go back through during the night. But I think it's really just to try and make everything memorable, so that down the track someone will come up to you and say, "Oh, I saw you in Nashville. That was the night where you were discussing whether a cabbage is indeed a vegetable or a legume."

[laughter]

PM: Indeed. Yeah, just make everything new, and make it that night, and just find a way to the room.

NS: But these days, of course, most places have got WiFi and people can sit there with their personal Blackberries and look up on Wikipedia whether a legume is indeed inclusive of cabbage.

[laughter]

PM: And these venues on this tour look pretty dang big, a lot of stadiums in there?

NS: Yeah, yeah. I mean, are we being overly ambitious? I'm not sure.

PM: No, I doubt that.

NS: We'll see when we get there. I mean, the promoters seem to be keen on it.

PM: No, I don't think it's overly so.

Are you much of a book reader? Do you make time for that?

NS: I do. I like to get it in bursts, though, so there will be times between books, when suddenly I say to myself, "Jeez, I need a good book to read." Why do you ask?

PM: Well, the readers like to know what are the people we like to listen to reading.

NS: Yeah.

PM: Anything lately that turned you on?

NS: There's a book I'm reading at the moment called *Witness*, and it's by J. G. Bennett. It was written in the 1950s. It's his autobiography. He was the guy who started the Subud

movement out of the UK. He's kind of an inventor, kind of a scientist and spiritualist, an odd guy.

PM: I haven't heard that word in so long, the Subud movement. I can't recall what it is.

NS: He was a student of the Russian guy, Gurdjieff.

PM: Gurdjieff, right. That's what Subud is related to?

NS: Exactly. And so there's a lot of references to the Whirling Dervish movement of Turkey, and kind of this spiritualism that is not that incumbent of particular religions, but pushes the right buttons in our heads to make us know that we are but specks in a big resonant vibration.

PM: Which is an unpredictable connection to my following question, which is: Are you, in any way, what you might call a spiritual guy?

NS: Not particularly, but I do know that there is--as I said, a kind of a frequency of vibration that all living things are part of. Let's say that.

PM: Yes, sir, I do believe.

NS: And that's probably no more metaphysics than it is quantum physics. There's a little fine line there where it goes between science and spirituality.

PM: Yep. Absolutely. When you like to, or need to get away from it all, where do you go?

NS: I have a little beach house that I built for myself over five years that was completed a year ago in Victoria, in southern Victoria, near Phillip Island, which is just near Melbourne. My place backs onto a surf beach, and there's a local cafe/general store. And I usually get down there as often as I can. It's kind of like a mud brick place. It's really, really cool. But it's very modernist.

PM: And you built it yourself?

NS: I did--myself and a sculptor mate of mine.

PM: Unbelievable.

So in the latter part of July somewhere, I know Crowded House will play a secret show in New York for the Artists Den. I wonder how the hell one gets an inside track on that information?

NS: [laughs] I'm not sure! It's so secret I don't know about it.

[laughter]

NS: But I'm sure you could get in on that if you contact ATO Records.

PM: Right. Yeah, I'm going to try and wind my way there--

NS: I think it's at some kind of Masonic lodge or some kind of building like that in New York.

[laughter]

NS: You just got to scratch the right kneecap at the door, or something.

PM: You got to wear a hood. Because I know you're playing the Ryman here in town with Pete Yorn, on 9/11, of all days.

NS: Oh, wow. Oh, God, we're going to have to be careful about what we say on stage.

PM: I'm coming anyway, of course.

NS: None of the usual transgressions. We will be reverent that night. It will be goodwill to all mankind.

PM: So how long a tour lies in store? It must be all over the world?

NS: Yeah, it is. And if I keep saying that we're going to be recording in January of next year, it will happen.

PM: [laughs]

NS: The management and record company are starting to realize that there's a kind of a little vortex, a little hole in the time continuum that says "January the guys want to be recording." So we're planning around that.

PM: And are there tunes aplenty already, or to be written between now and then?

NS: Yeah, Neil says he's got a few in the breech, he just needs to squeeze them out--

[laughter]

NS: --and fashion them into something combustible.

PM: Well, it's very kind of you to take time with me today, Nick.

NS: Thanks for calling. I'm glad you're interested.