

Crazy Horse
Liner notes by Barry Alfonso
October 2004

In a better world than this one, Crazy Horse changed pop music history with its 1971 debut album. All the elements were there – inspired songs, tight arrangements, a palpable energy that crackled through every track. It blew away the haze of mellowness that was settling down upon American rock in those days and showed the way for others to follow. The Crazy Horse LP yielded hit singles like “Downtown” and “Gone Dead Train,” filling the airwaves with the band’s tough yet tender brand of soulful country-rock.

That’s how it should’ve been. Alas, in the real world it wasn’t so. Despite glowing critical reviews, Crazy Horse stumbled in the marketplace. The particular line-up featured on the album – lead singer/guitarist Danny Whitten, bassist Billy Talbot, drummer Ralph Molina, producer/keyboardist Jack Nitzsche and singer/guitarist Nils Lofgren – never came together to record again. With Talbot and Molina as its core, Crazy Horse continued to earn renown as Neil Young’s favorite back-up band. But the peculiar magic that happened on that first Young-less album was never quite equalled .

If Crazy Horse was a near-miss commercially, artistically it was an unqualified success. The songs it contained lay out an alternative vision of what Southern California country-rock might’ve become: something volatile and vulnerable, with a tinge of film noir at the edge of the endless summer. Crazy Horse avoided the self-satisfied blandness that similar country-rockers offered up in the mid-‘70s. Of course, the edginess that surfaced on the album was a symptom of the band’s instability. Danny Whitten was both its focal point and weak link; the same personal demons that added poignant shadows to his songs ultimately ended his career and his life.

There’s a fleeting quality to the Crazy Horse LP, the sense that a rare moment is being caught that won’t come again. This is not to say that the band didn’t have a lot more worthwhile music to make – in tandem with Young, they continue to make it today. But what survived after Whitten’s departure was necessarily a different animal. For better or worse, Crazy Horse sounded a little more sane after Whitten was gone.



Crazy Horse has an interesting bloodline. This quintessentially Californian band was founded by two ex-New Yorkers and a native Georgian at the behest of a Canadian. But we’re getting ahead of the story....

The origins of the bands can be traced to 1962, when 17 year-old Billy Talbot moved from the East Coast to Los Angeles. A month or two later, he met Danny Whitten through a mutual friend at a Hollywood nightclub. Born in Georgia, Whitten had spent time in Ohio with his family before arriving in L.A. Sharing a similar love of vocal harmony groups, Talbot and Whitten got together with another singer, Lou Bisbal, to form a trio. A pair of songs – “Mirror, Mirror” and “Surfin’ Granny” – were recorded for Liberty Records but not released.

From there, the trio added a fourth member when Lou’s cousin Ralph Molina was invited to join. Born in New York City, he had been singing falsetto with high school vocal groups in Florida when he got the call to move out West. Ralph came in, Lou left

and Ben “Dino” Rocco was added – this line-up was christened Danny and the Memories and landed a deal with Valiant Records. A 45 of “Can’t Help Lovin’ That Girl Of Mine” (a rewrite of “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” from the musical Show Boat) appeared on Valiant to little response.

1965 found the group moving to San Francisco, where Whitten took a job as a nightclub singer while the others found work where they could. (Rocco launched a go-go dance act with his future wife and gradually faded out of the picture.) Influenced by the psychedelic vibes around them, they became the Psyrcle (pronounced “circle”) and recorded a pair of tunes with Sly Stone and his backup band. The result was a single that the group pressed but declined to distribute. Around this time, Whitten, Talbot and Molina saw the Byrds perform at a Bay Area club and were inspired to become a full-fledged rock group.

“We went back to Southern California and decided to learn how to play instruments,” Talbot says. “We moved to Laurel Canyon – it was an incredible scene. I remember Ralph would walk three or four miles to hang with Danny and I and play. And I remember Danny used to sleep really late, till four in the afternoon – we’d have to go and wake him up.”

The three young musicians transformed themselves from a singing group into a powerful guitar-bass-drums unit within a few short years. When the time was right, the trio joined forces with brothers George and Leon Whitsell (guitars) and Bobby Notkoff (violin) to launch The Rockets.

Though they never got the chance to tour outside L.A., The Rockets gained a degree of local popularity and released a eponymously-titled LP on White Whale in 1968. The beginnings of Crazy Horse’s trademark sound were evident in the group’s songs and musicianship – but, according to Molina, “I don’t think all the pieces were there... we didn’t have the chemistry.”

A perfect blend or not, The Rockets’ music earned a fan in Neil Young, who jammed with them and later sat in on one of their Whisky a Go Go gigs. At the time, Young was disengaging himself from the Buffalo Springfield and thinking about his direction as a solo artist. After the early 1969 release of his first solo album, he began casting about for band members and decided to look up The Rockets.

“Neil asked Ralph and Danny and I to come up to his house in Topanga Canyon and jam with him,” Talbot says. “We did and that’s when we first played ‘Down By The River’ and ‘Cinnamon Girl.’ It felt really good.”

The Rockets sputtered on for a bit longer, recording two more songs for White Whale before breaking up. Meanwhile, Young asked Whitten, Talbot and Molina to become his back-up group, naming the trio Crazy Horse (a name reflecting his interest in Native American culture). In 1969, their collaboration brought forth the groundbreaking Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere. The four musicians displayed an extraordinary empathy, forging their roughhewn sound as if they’d played together all their lives.

Neil took Crazy Horse out for a trot around the concert circuit in between collaborations with Crosby, Stills and Nash in late 1969 and early 1970. In February ’70 they crossed paths with 17 year-old singer/guitarist Nils Lofgren at Washington DC’s Cellar Door club. Young convinced Lofgren to put aside his own band, Grin, for a time and participate in the sessions for Young’s third album, After The Gold Rush. He also began performing with Young and Crazy Horse live.

Also part of this fluid touring group was Jack Nitzsche, who came along as piano player. L.A. music pros might've blinked twice to see this veteran arranger/producer/songwriter banging away on the ivories. Nitzsche's career dated back to the mid-'50s and included a lengthy stint as the co-builder of Phil Spector's Wall of Sound. His was the arranging genius that gave the Ronettes' "Be My Baby," Ike and Tina Turner's "River Deep, Mountain High" and similar hits such grandeur. His talents were tapped by artists as different as Doris Day and the Rolling Stones. Neil Young began his long association with Nitzsche in 1967, when Jack arranged the strings for "Expecting To Fly," one of Neil's songs for Buffalo Springfield Again.

Playing with Crazy Horse, Nitzsche admired their raw-boned style of rock and saw their potential to become an American version of the Rolling Stones. He got his chance to help shape their sound when the band signed a deal with Reprise to make an album on their own.

As they prepared to record in late 1970, Crazy Horse was either a trio or a quintet, or possibly both. Were Nitzsche and Lofgren actual members? "At that time, yeah," says Talbot. "We rehearsed as a band and then we recorded as a band. If the album had been a bigger success, maybe we would've played together longer as a band. Nils was involved with his own thing with Grin on Columbia Records and so he had to pretend he was hiding, but everyone knew he was playing with us." (This charade can be seen in a photo of the band on the album's back cover -- Lofgren is peeking out through a storefront window behind everyone else.)

Whatever their true status, Nitzsche and Lofgren immersed themselves in the band's music and became part of a tight-knit unit. "We rehearsed until we got things down," says Molina. "We went over and over the songs. We worked on vocals. We didn't do that with Neil."

For its solo debut, Crazy Horse was aiming for something different than what they achieved with Young; this time, the ragged, prickly aspects of its music were sanded and polished. "With Neil, our sound is very rustic," says Talbot. "It's thrown up like a log cabin that still has the bark on it, and that's great. But Danny and Ralph and I had our own thing, and it wasn't exactly the way we were with Neil. It wasn't just three-chords, bashing-away Crazy Horse."

Nitzsche took the group up to Wally Heider Studios in San Francisco to record, co-producing the session with Bruce Botnick (engineer for the Doors, Buffalo Springfield and other notables). "The songs didn't require many takes," Botnick recalls. "Jack had worked with them on arrangements, so it was going to be fast." The band functioned smoothly for the most part: "There was a lot of give and take. Everybody was aware of Danny's affliction and they kind of went with it. He'd disappear for awhile and then come back. The rest of the band was protective -- they realized what a talent he was."

Whitten's affliction was heroin. His addiction was rapidly dominating his life and undermining his role in the band. "What I remember most about those sessions is that it was hard with Danny," says Molina. "I remember Nils having to put his headphones on for him. It was a shame that this 18 year-old kid had to see this. But Danny did it...he played guitar and sang great. There were no arguments."

Adds Talbot: "Danny wrote a song once with the line in it, 'he's such a charming disgrace.' That's what Danny was a lot during that time. When we were doing tracks without live lead vocals, he was not as there as he could've been. But when we did the

final vocals, we talked to him and he was really there for them. Everything ended up good.”

The Crazy Horse album plucked glory from potential disaster thanks in part to its superbly-crafted songs and stellar production. Side One of the LP roared off to a propulsive start with “Gone Dead Train,” co-written by Nietzsche and Russ Titelman and first recorded (with Randy Newman singing) for the soundtrack to the film Performance. The band handed lead vocal duties to Molina on the next track, “Dance, Dance, Dance” – this Cajun stomp-along was written by Neil Young and featured guest player Gib Gilbeau on fiddle. “Look At All The Things” is a bittersweet Whitten original with a spacey phase-shifted chorus. Lofgren takes the spotlight on his straight-up rocker “Beggars Day,” a portrait of a desperate character with at least passing resemblance to Whitten, who sings harmony on the track..

“I Don’t Want To Talk About It” deserves special mention. This heartbreak ballad is one of Whitten’s finest efforts, and he sings it with all the longing he can muster. Ry Cooder (brought in at Nietzsche’s suggestion) adds a high and lonesome slide guitar that underscores the tune’s aching melody line. (Rod Stewart went on to score two hit singles with recordings of this song, reaching #46 on the Billboard pop chart in 1980 and #2 on the Adult Contemporary chart in 1990.)

Side Two kicked off with “Downtown,” a galloping, almost giddy tune with a dark undercurrent. This celebration of midnight kicks and illicit thrills rides on an irresistible country-rock groove. According to Talbot, Whitten wrote most of the song, with Young contributing the verse about “selling stuff” and the Man with the shining light, as well as the riff before the chorus. Scary in its honesty, this may be Whitten’s finest moment with Crazy Horse.

“Carolay” by Nietzsche and Titelman had the feel of Spector-style pop melodrama, along with a touch of down-home grit. Nietzsche’s piano and Cooder’s slide complimented Whitten’s gleeful sarcasm on “Dirty, Dirty.” A more romantic note was struck by Lofgren on “Nobody.” Whitten offered a somewhat woozy pledge of devotion with “I’ll Get By.” Closing Side Two was the odd honky-tonk number “Crow Jane Lady,” featuring a rare lead vocal by Nietzsche (“Jack was so self-conscious he had to be behind a screen when he sang,” says Molina.)

(Disc Two of this CD set contains some outtakes from the album. Of particular interest are Whitten’s poignant “Dear Song Singer,” the instrumental fragment “Scratchy” and a free-flowing alternate version of “Downtown.”)

Released in February 1971, Crazy Horse was a flat-out brilliant album that seemed destined for success. Yet it only reached a disappointing #84 on the charts; the singles “Downtown,” “Dance, Dance, Dance” and “Beggars Day” stiffed. Part of the reason for this may have been the band’s inability to tour. “Danny was too screwed up,” Talbot recalls. “He didn’t leave the group – we told him we couldn’t do it with him anymore. We were kind of bluffing. We wanted him to snap out of it.”

Without Whitten’s involvement, Nietzsche and Lofgren drifted away from the group. For their part, Talbot and Molina wanted to continue as best they could. George Whitsell from The Rockets was asked to join and, after auditions, singer/guitarist Greg Leroy and singer/keyboardist John Blanton were signed up as well. This line-up went into the studio and recorded 1972’s Loose with engineer Fred Catero.

The results were a batch of well-played and sung country-rock songs, more than competent but distinctly below the inspired level attained on Crazy Horse. “Not having Danny really mattered,” says Molina. “I think we came really close and in some places, it’s cool. It’s just that we were trying a little too hard. We should’ve been more relaxed.”

If its title was wishful thinking, Loose did have its moments. Whitsell’s melodic rock ballad “All Alone Now” boasts some stinging lead guitar work. “One Thing I Love” by Leroy is a rolling country tune with a genuine sweetness. Close harmonies bring luster to Blanton’s love ode “Kind Of Woman.” Talbot and Molina acquit themselves well. What’s lacking is a clear sense of identity – there’s nothing much to distinguish Loose from similar early ‘70s country-rock excursions.

The door remained open for Whitten to return if he could free himself from addiction. Treatment failed, though, and his old partners felt they couldn’t take him back. “We were living in L.A. and Danny would come by my house in Echo Park,” says Molina. “I remember I was in my corner chair and he was down on his knees, saying, ‘Come on, Ralph, let me back into Crazy Horse.’ And I said no. It was very hard.”

After failing an audition with Young’s touring band, Whitten died of a heroin overdose on November 18, 1972. Haunted by the loss, Young reunited with Talbot, Molina and Lofgren and embarked on a 1973 European tour. The bleak, sardonic songs featured in these shows became the basis for Tonight’s The Night, recorded in ’73 and released two years later. In a sense, this album was the true follow-up to Crazy Horse, dealing unflinchingly with the self-destruction of Whitten and fellow O.D. victim Bruce Berry, the band’s roadie.

As for the Loose line-up, it took another stab at success by recording a version of Young’s “When You Dance I Can Really Love”; Reprise passed on releasing it. Whitsell and Blanton left, brothers Rick and Michael Curtis joined, and Crazy Horse signed with Epic to record At Crooked Lake (1973). Another line-up change followed, leaving Talbot and Molina free to find a more simpatico partner in guitarist Frank “Poncho” Sampedro. For the most part, this trio has remained stable since then, continuing to work with Young and recording on its own occasionally.

Crazy Horse won its spurs as a rock legend decades ago. Its sometimes rocky career path has been vindicated many times over. Looking back, though, you can’t help but feel a twinge of sadness that Whitten, Talbot and Molina didn’t get a chance to take their music further. It was a quite a ride while it lasted. They held together long enough to record an album that skirted the wild side gracefully. It was crazy, but beautiful.

-- Barry Alfonso

