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*Chapter One*

BROKEN ARROW RANCH, SPRING 2011

The Young Family—  
Father Neil, Mother Pegi,  
Children Amber and Ben

I pulled back the plastic sticky tape from the cardboard box. Wrapping paper was on the ground around my feet. Ben watched from his chair, and Amber and 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 Italian-Americans 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 Gen-

eral Models Corporation. It was a beautiful switcher, and it was indeed the prototype that Lionel had used to create its own model. As the letter pointed out, this happened 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. 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. My 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 together was one of our 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 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 for him to see the cause and effect in action. Ben was empowered by this.

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. Which is unfortunate, considering the amount of care that has gone into the display. The display and layout create 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*, a lot of which we did 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. Crosby had recently gotten straight, was recovering from his addiction to freebase, had just completed jail time he got for something 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 came together with Stephen Stills to form Crosby, Stills & Nash around 1970. CSN's first record is a work of art. It defined a sound that has been imitated for years by other groups, some of which have enjoyed greater commercial success, but there can be no mistaking the groundbreaking nature of that first CSN album. Stephen played most of the music then, overdubbing all the parts during the night with Dallas Taylor, the drummer, and Graham. There was so much Stephen had wanted to do with Buffalo Springfield in the years just before—like producing, writing, and arranging harmonies, as well as playing more guitar—and CSN was his first opportunity to be really creative after the Springfield ended, and he went for it big-time. But more about that later . . .

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.

Anyway, now I'm polishing the glass on one of the display shelves that houses 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 that 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 my cars, too. I have a thing for transportation. 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. When I was young, one of my dad's friends, the writer Robertson Davies, lived near us in Peterborough, Ontario. We used to go to his house every Christmas and play charades at a party. 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, tail-lights, 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. It really blew my mind. Only about 1,690 of that model 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 after that, and finally John McKeig 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 from the fifties; a lot of Cadillacs. I was not overly interested in their mechanical condition when I bought them, just wanted those unique shapes. (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, writing at Feelgood's, looking at my cars and a conference table with a whiteboard. Tomorrow is a big meeting with Alex, a representative 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 aims 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 the new online music retailers, such as iTunes, has come terrible quality. An MP3 has about five percent of the data that can be found in a PureTone master file, or even a vinyl record. I have an idea to build a portable player and online 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 drivers. My goal is to restore an art form and protect the original art while serving the music lover.

Tomorrow is the big presentation day, and I am going over my approach, which has been guided by PureTone CEO candidate Mark Goldstein, a start-up specialist introduced to me by friends of mine from the Silicon Valley community. These friends of mine are brilliant and very successful. Unlike me, they have mastered the art of monetizing their ideas. I have big ideas and very little money to show for them. 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 creative field (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.



*With Crazy Horse—left to right, Ralph Molina, Billy Talbot,  
Frank “Poncho” Sampedro—on Malibu Beach, 1975.*



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*Chapter Two*

California, 2011

**N**ot that it matters much, but recently I stopped smoking and drinking.

I am now the straightest I have ever been since I was eighteen. The big question for me at this point is whether I will be able to write songs this way. I haven't yet, and that is a big part of my life. Of course I am now sixty-five, so my writing may not be as easy-flowing as it once was, but on the other hand, I *am* writing this book. I'll check in with you on that later. We'll see how it goes.

My doctor said it would be good for me to stop smoking weed because he sees a sign of something developing in my brain, and I am listening to him. My dad was a great writer and he lost his cognizance to dementia at about age seventy-five, so I am wary of that. When I stopped smoking weed, I threw in drinking, too, because I had never stopped both simultaneously and I thought it might be nice to get to know myself again. When my daughter stopped

drinking a few years ago, I was very impressed by the example she set for our family. I love life with my wife, Pegi, and the kids, and want to live as much of it as I can, but not as a burden to anyone.

Although I have not written any songs in a while, a few songs that mean a lot to me and may have shaped my songwriting are listed here: “Crazy Mama” by JJ Cale is a record I love. The song is true, simple, and direct, and the delivery is very natural. JJ’s guitar playing is a huge influence on me. His touch is unspeakable. I am stunned by it. “Like a Rolling Stone” by Bob Dylan is as fresh as the first day I heard it—I can still remember that afternoon in Toronto. It changed my life. The poetry, attitude, and ambience of that piece are part of my makeup. I absorbed it. “Be My Baby” by the Ronettes has a sound I always will love. It is in my soul. Ronnie sings it so great. The groove, the beautifully resonant background vocals, the track: It is all one thing. Phil Spector is a genius. Jack Nitzsche is a genius. “Evergreen” by Roy Orbison is one of the most beautiful sentiments ever recorded. I can still hear Roy’s voice and feel my girlfriend’s love. “Four Strong Winds” by Ian & Sylvia speaks to me always. It occupies part of my heart. There is a feeling in it. I love the prairies, Canada, my life as a Canadian. Of course I love songwriting, so I know someday I will write again.

I also have been thinking about Crazy Horse. To me, that band is a vehicle to cosmic areas that I am unable to traverse with others. Some people have asked me why I play with them. They say, “Why do you play with Crazy Horse? They can’t play.” The answer is blowin’ in the wind. I can go places with them. Pegi just recorded “I Don’t Want to Talk About It,” written by Danny Whitten, the original Crazy Horse guitar player and singer who’s

all over *Early Daze*, an album of songs from the beginning of Crazy Horse that I have been working on compiling recently. Danny was every bit the artist that I am, but he died of a heroin OD in the early seventies. Every time I hear Pegi sing that song, it makes me tremendously sad. She sings it so beautifully, phrasing it to break my heart. She does it justice. You can see I have some unfinished business there, reckoning with Danny.

I have been working on *Crazy Horse: The Early Daze* for a few months, collecting unreleased tracks that tell a story of the band that no others can tell. Crazy Horse, formed at the beginning of 1969 with myself, Danny Whitten, Ralph Molina, and Billy Talbot, is still together today, in 2011. I love working on this *Early Daze* record. It makes me feel good. I told Ralphie, Crazy Horse's drummer, about this and how cool it was. He remembered that there were a lot of things that never saw the light of day. Now they will. He was very excited. I just have to finish it. At least get it on the road to being done. I will have to be hands-on for that.

Danny's playing is all over those early tracks. I miss him still. He would have grown to be great, and we would have really made history with him. I have some regrets there, but *this* record will set some of it straight. After Danny's passing, I was devastated, but I was also booked on the road doing the Time Fades Away tour in 1973 with Jack Nitzsche, Kenny Buttrey, Tim Drummond, and Ben Keith. The tour went on. Danny was supposed to play in that band. Only Tim and I are left now.

Back to the Horse. In 1974, after Danny's death, Poncho Sampedro was introduced to me by Billy Talbot, our bass player, and we became Crazy Horse again with Poncho on guitar. It was a

different band, great in a new way. To his credit, Poncho would not try to play anyone else's parts. He was Poncho. That was a really good attitude, and it enabled us to stay true to ourselves, pick up the pieces, and move on. So we did, with *Zuma*, *American Stars 'n Bars*, and *Rust Never Sleeps*. We are a great live band, and playing with Crazy Horse is transcendent for me. If I only had a few new songs . . . I need new to get there.

Redoing old songs doesn't work very well. New blood. That's what the Horse needs. So I have a plan: Crazy Horse at the White House. Get together on my ranch in the big White House, a sprawling ranch-style bungalow made of redwood, painted white, located in the redwoods on the Corte Madera Creek. It has been the center of music-related activity on the ranch since I purchased that part of the property in 1972. (This is not to be confused with the little White House, a small home for working folks on the old ranch back in the day that is now used to house visitors who may be working on musical projects.) The plan: Set up in there and record, leave the equipment at the ready for a year or so until we have a great record. Just keep playing and let the *muse* back into the fold. Gently now. No searching. No working. No trying. Just let the *spirit* come back in and don't be greedy. Be ready. That should put my straightness to the test.

I want to use our old tube recording console known as the Green Board (I think it is the best soundboard ever) and record 8-track on two-inch magnetic tape for the fattest analog sound possible. The Green Board is full of history. The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* and "Heroes and Villains," Cream's *Disraeli Gears*, the Monterey Pop Festival, and Wilson Pickett were all recorded through

the Green Board. We will run Pro Tools digital alongside just to have the modern tools for fixing our mistakes, but I want that old tube sound. I love the tubes, with their chemical and gas reactions creating the sound. I think this will be fun and will work, and I am going to get that started today. I'll keep you posted.

I want to release this Crazy Horse recording as my first Pure-Tone release. That would really be cool. You know, the way people experience music today is so different from how it used to be. It's not the same part of the culture that it was. I think a lot of that has to do with the quality of the sound, so I am addressing that with PureTone. The music is not the problem. It's the sound.

Years ago, we always would listen to acetates (reference vinyls that can only be played a few times) and hear what we had done in the studio. That is how we listened. The feeling would be there immediately, and off we would go into the spirit world, listening, feeling, and absorbing the waves of sound. That was an amazing time. It is gone now, but we could get it back with a quality sound that is visceral.

Today music is presented as an entertainment medium, like a game, without the full audio quality. It's like a cool pastime or a toy, not like a message to the soul. So things have changed.

So I am making music again. That is the plan. Go for the music again. So here I go. It's always been good to me. I just want to feel it. I need to feel it in my body, sing lyrics that make me want to play my heart out in long instrumental passages that only the Horse can carry me on. I remember once in the studio we were recording and I caught Ralph's eye. He was in pure ecstasy just for a moment; we made visual contact, and I have never lost that feeling. It is like

we felt the force of the Horse all at once! Now Ralph always says, “Don’t look at me while I’m playing.” I know why. He wants to not think about how he looks. He wants to play. So we ride together, but we also ride alone. Crazy Horse is an animal unto itself. Anyone who has witnessed a full-on barrage from the Horse knows that of which I speak.

When I think about music today, I am struck by the history of it all, how important that has become to the audience. Knowledge of the roots of rock and R&B is coveted. Tracks of that music will live forever. Those times were magic, and I know that they will never be lived again. I know that if I can bring them all back in their pristine glory with PureTone, it will be a revelation for music lovers today, to actually hear these songs the way they were with the original resonance, creating the feeling that moved a generation’s hearts in the beginning. This is getting closer with every passing day . . .

I’m going back to the train barn to see if I can fix the derailment that ended my last visit. It should be easy. After that, I will let a little time pass and see what happens in there. Maybe take my computer with me and keep on writing this. That is the way I wrote the script for *Greendale*, by not stopping for anything. I just carried a pad with me and would write whenever something came to mind. At first I didn’t know I was writing a story, just thought it was a bunch of songs that featured the same characters. Anyway, I’m going to pack this thing up and go over there.

It's summer now and the insects are all out. On the way to the train barn I notice that the swans who live in the lake in front of our house have no way to quickly make it back into the water if they are out walking and sense a bobcat, mountain lion, coyote, or other threat. We have lost a few birds lately, and this is something that needs to be taken care of.

Back at the railroad, the derailment was between two cross-over track switches. That is where two mainlines now coincide. There used to be two mainlines at this location. Originally, Chinese laborers, working for the railroad, had built some beautifully intricate trestle bridges over a feeder track that passed under the original twin mainlines. When an earthquake shattered the ancient structure in the early eighties, the railroad, having fallen on hard times, was unable to finance the reconstruction. To get things moving again and recover lost revenue as quickly as possible, the mainlines were quickly consolidated into a temporary bridge that carried a new single mainline over the underlying feeder track that was still in use. This resulted in a congested location that was not originally planned for and has consequently become the site of more than one derailment and ensuing safety inspections.

It was not an easy task to fix the derailment, and took over five minutes. The two switches had to be placed into manual mode for the reassembly of the train after the derailed cars were re-railed. Once again, my expertise at re-railing by touch instead of vision—the result of many years' experience—saved a lot of time and got the railroad up and running before an official inspection was necessary. Having dodged that bullet, I sit down to continue my writing.