

ear candy

NEW YORK INNOCENCE

BY KAY CORDTZ

No one in the stripped-down, straight-ahead rock 'n' roll world today writes better songs than Willie Nile, who's been at it for the past 30 years, with one significant hiatus after early critical acclaim led to epic record label mismanagement. Since his return to recording in 1991, he has put out four masterpieces, and a few live gems recorded in New York's Central Park and at The Turning Point upriver in Piermont. His latest record, *The Innocent Ones*, proves that he can still work that magic, with the assistance of his right-hand man, Frankie Lee,

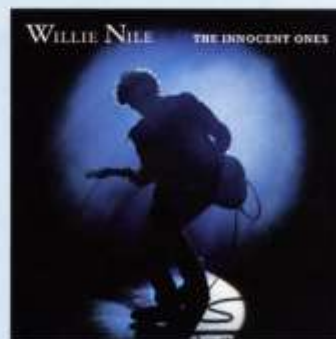
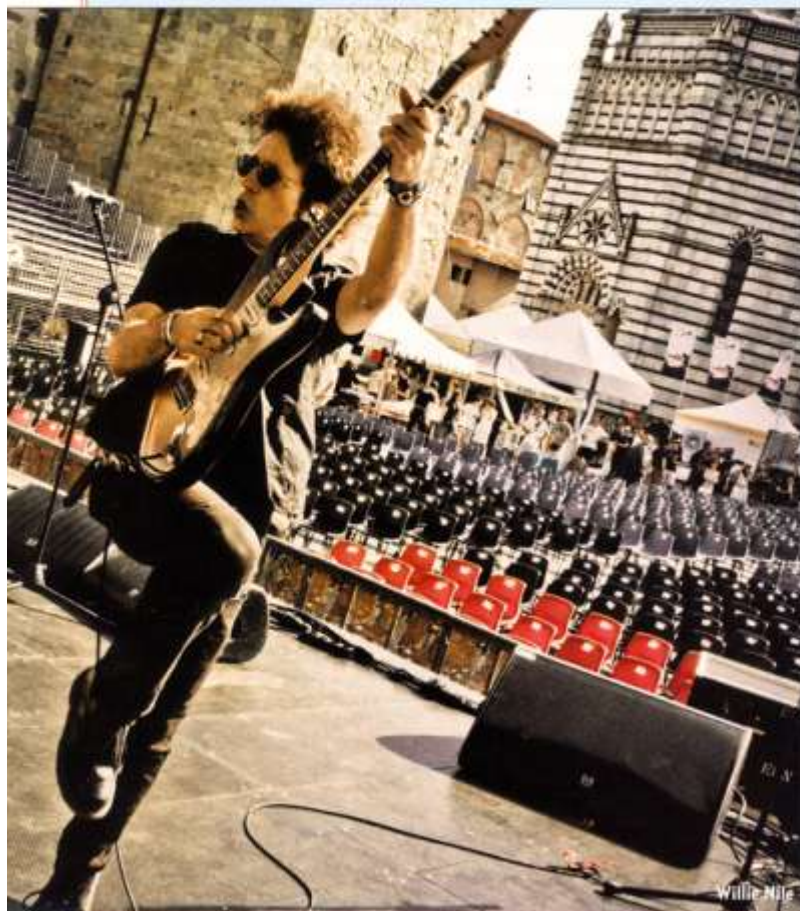
who co-wrote most of its 11 tracks.

Songs like the title track and "One Guitar," a guitar-playing troubadour's manifesto of the power of song, represent glowing examples of Nile's forte, catchy social justice anthems. The lovely "Song for You" uses an uplifting, hymn-like melody, embellished with beautiful piano lines and a repeated-question intro ("Can anybody hear me?") to effectively deliver a message of universal care and concern. "For every heart that's broken in two/I'm speaking your name/I'm

lighting a flame/I'm singing this song for you."

Nile and his bandmates also cook up a half dozen love songs, both straightforward appreciations of good women ("Hear You Breathe," "My Little Girl" and "Sideways Beautiful") and quirky odes to some difficult ones ("Topless Amateur," "Rich and Broken" and "Can't Stay Home"). Nile's distinctive vocals convey such sincere affection for all his characters that their flaws only make them seem more real and sympathetic: "I love my baby but she's never here/She's down at Kenny's drinking shots and beer/She makes my measly paycheck disappear/And though she's always gone/I know there's nothing wrong."

As a diehard Willie Nile fan, I have heard most of these songs at his live shows over the past year or two, but he and his team of musicians and producers have perfected them with gorgeous but spare orchestration that lifts up the lovely melodies and makes the memorable riffs and hooks shine. Case in point: "Far Green Hills," which I have heard him sing a few times in concert, was never fully revealed until I heard the version on the record, which soars with a vibe so pure and encouraging that it would be a love song even without the words. Nile knows the secret to crafting music that touches hearts and lifts spirits, and nobody does it better.



Willie Nile
The Innocent Ones
(Riven House)

WILLIE NILE: CRISTINA ARBON; COURTESY OF CONQUEROR; RAY CHARLES: COURTESY OF THE RAY CHARLES FOUNDATION