



BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

When both *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines splashed the face of a largely unknown singer/songwriter across their covers in the fall of 1975, the event was as much about fiercely competitive journalism as it was publicity hype and record-company hope. ☞ Still, it was an unlikely scenario, even for pop music. Here was a twenty-six-year-old, scraggly-faced street poet from Asbury Park, New Jersey, who had not sold millions of albums or toured the world to great acclaim or impacted the music and its culture. Not yet, anyway. But there he was on the cover of not one but two of the most powerful magazines in the world, an honor usually bestowed only on presidents, prime ministers and popes. ☞ Looking back nearly twenty-five years later, what happened that week in 1975 wasn't as risky or as crazy as it seemed then. Many of the bold predictions made about Bruce Springsteen in those cover stories came true. He *did* help save rock & roll by becoming one of its most distinctive voices. He *did* eliminate the distance between the singer and the song, the storyteller and the listener. He *did* become a performer nonpareil, making the concert experience something akin to a religious revival meeting, where the glories of pure, unadulterated rock & roll were confirmed and celebrated in the most emotional manner. ☞ Riding the rave reviews of his then recently released third album, *Born to Run*, on Columbia Records – a masterwork that brought rock's past into its present and hinted at its future – Bruce Springsteen began a long and scenic journey through rock & roll, taking hundreds of snapshots turned into songs along the way. The trip ultimately made him one of the music's

Bruce Springsteen, around the time of his fourth album, 1978's *Darkness on the Edge of Town*

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greatest writers, whose work would stand alongside that of Robert Johnson, Bob Dylan, Hank Williams and Woody Guthrie as musical interpretations of the American experience.

A baby boomer born on the Jersey Shore halfway between New York City and Philadelphia, Bruce Springsteen created rock & roll in his own image. As a kid he played Rolling Stones and Animals covers in his first band, the Castiles. In the late Sixties his musical vision broadened as it absorbed the sounds and styles of everyone from Tim Buckley to Otis Redding. One of his groups, Steel Mill, was a blend of the Allman Brothers Band and Led Zeppelin, with soaring lead-guitar work, heavy jams and bluesy vocal wailings. Another, the

Springsteen hangin' in Atlantic City; the early E Street Band: Vini Lopez, Danny Federici, Springsteen, Garry Tallent, Clarence Clemons (from left); on tour, Dallas, 1975



Bruce Springsteen Band, made him the King of Jersey Shore Rock with its deep, soul-strutting licks fortified with blaring horns, back-up singers and frequent bows to Stax-Volt.

By 1972, however, Springsteen had cut back on the musical experimentation and embarked on a solo career, commuting by bus to New York City to play the Greenwich Village folk clubs. His songs, particularly the lyrics, had grown more personal and detail-driven; many of them featured Jersey Shore settings and characters who were full of hope one moment and hopelessness the next. When John Hammond heard Springsteen's music, he signed him to Columbia Records, envisioning a new Dylan.

Someone once compared Springsteen's songs about New Jersey to William Faulkner's novels about Mississippi. On the surface it sounds far-fetched: How could a rock songwriter be likened to an American literary genius? But the analogy isn't far off the mark. As evidenced on his first two albums, *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* and *The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle*, Springsteen's penchant for writing convincingly about the roads to nowhere crisscrossing the state, the greasy landscape of the boardwalk, the urban melodrama that plays out nightly in places like Asbury Park and the surreal characters drawn from a subculture without parameters was often as moving as Faulkner's depictions of Mississippi. The artistic medium may have been different, but the results were the same.

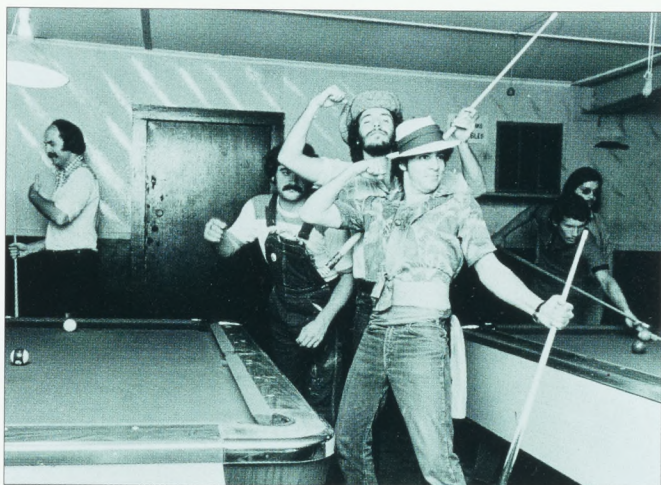
As Springsteen cultivated his craft, his songwriting became less like Dylan's, to whom he was frequently compared in the early 1970s, and more the work of an original voice clamoring to be heard. In the process, Springsteen reintroduced rock & roll roman-

ticism, guided by what he had learned from listening to Roy Orbison, Chuck Berry and Beach Boys records and by how rock & roll had informed and inspired his own life. By his third album, Springsteen had become a songwriter whose inspiration wasn't limited to his own Jersey turf but now drew from all America.

Born to Run was, in many ways, the perfect rock record. The songs flowed like a collection of short stories, the characters so real you could touch them. "Jungleland," "Backstreets," "Thunder Road" and the title track absorbed the conflict and contradictions of Seventies America.

"As a songwriter, I always felt one of my jobs was to face questions that evolve out of my music and search for answers as best I could," Springsteen recollected in his book, *Songs* (Avon, 1998). "For me, the primary questions I'd be writing about for the rest of my work life first took form in the songs on *Born to Run*. It was the album where I left behind my adolescent definitions of love and freedom. *Born to Run* was the dividing line."

Live, Springsteen turned many of these songs into mini-rock operas, acted out by characters/musicians onstage who became an integral part of the action. Saxophonist Clarence Clemons was the Big Man, a perfect foil for Springsteen's wild theatrics. Drummer Max Weinberg, with his booming backbeat, became Mighty Max. Longtime friend and production partner Steve Van Zandt was guitarist Miami Steve, projecting all the sass and sense of cool you'd expect from a guy with such a nickname. Roy Bittan was the Professor, Danny Federici, the Phantom; together they balanced out Springsteen's and Van Zandt's guitar work with the lush sounds of piano and organ. Garry Tallent was called Funky Garry W. Tallent, in tribute to his bass playing. Other E Street alumni



included drummers Vini "Mad Dog" Lopez, Ernest "Boom" Carter and David Sancious, whom nearly everyone referred to as a musical genius. Later, guitarist Nils Lofgren and singer (and Springsteen's eventual wife) Patti Scialfa would be added to the

cast. And so it went.

Three-hour shows were not uncommon for Springsteen and the E Street Band. Night after sweaty night they pushed themselves to the limits of exhaustion and proved that rock & roll, in the right hands, could still transform the lost into the living. A Springsteen concert became a triumph of song and a celebration of spirit.

By the time of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, the 1978 follow-up to *Born to Run*, Springsteen had endured a bitter breakup with his first manager and had confronted the hard realities of superstardom with its often impossible demands. Once again, Springsteen reinvented himself as a writer. No longer were his songs passion plays about love and danger, getting hurt and getting out. Springsteen perceived that Americans are spiritually bound to the land and its history and so began writing songs in a way that beautifully reflected the consequences of all that.

If Springsteen's next album, *The River*, was a return to the bar-band basics of rock & roll, *Nebraska* was a stark portrait of America's underbelly, where stripped-down charac-

With Steve Van Zandt at Lee Dorsey's Ya Ya Lounge, New Orleans, ca. 1975; relaxing in Haddonfield, New Jersey, 1978

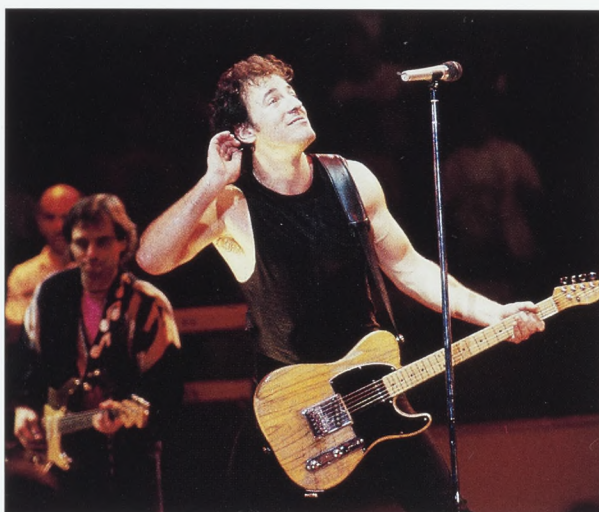


ters struggled to buy time while the world around them crumbled. Confessional in tone, confrontational in attitude, songs such as "Used Cars," "Highway Patrolman," "State Trooper" and "Atlantic City" haunted the listener until he came to grips with the cold-blooded truth: The good that was locked up inside many of Springsteen's characters had rotted away. The lyrics were raw, stark and jolting, and they unveiled a songwriting side of Springsteen far removed from the brighter, more innocent imagery of his earlier work.

The release of the multimillion-selling *Born in the U.S.A.* in 1984 and the subsequent world tour that followed made Springsteen a household name and an American icon. It didn't seem to matter that the title song was misread by many of his fans, who preferred to interpret it as a celebration of red, white and blue patriotism rather than a reopening of the wounds of Vietnam and a probing for answers. The showstopping title song remains one of Springsteen's greatest works and the album a testament of his determination to never make the same record twice.

On *Tunnel of Love* Springsteen turned inward, leaving the big issues of America behind, while exploring the possibilities – and impossibilities – of love. The songs were deceptively simple: They had accessible melodies, but their lyrics were so emotionally complex that they had taken courage to write. Both *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* continued the process of Springsteen's self-discovery, but on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* he returned to broader issues and again proved that some parts of the American saga are best told in song.

"No matter how you may



Listening to Nils; riding high with Clarence, 1987; with Patti Scialfa, Amnesty International concert, Paris, 1988

choose a story or a set of characters that you may have had no experience with, the job is to connect and create understanding, to see yourself in them and have your audience do so, too," Springsteen recalled in a recent interview. "You try to find that place where

there's a fundamental human commonality around very basic issues of work, faith, hope, family, desperation, exuberation, joy."

Neither rock & roll nor songwriting is a precise art. The former is nothing short of spontaneous combustion, the latter a delicate process of touch and go. In Springsteen's hands, however, both idioms reflect a deep-seated need to tell a story, to single out a sound and, most important, to create something that others might find of lasting value. For the past quarter-century, Bruce Springsteen has done these things, and we have been the better for it. ✽



