



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
Clarence Clemons in 1980; Bruce Springsteen and Patty Scialfa; Nils Lofgren, Clemons, Springsteen, Steve Van Zandt, Max Weinberg, Scialfa, and Garry Tallent (from left), 2003; Clemons, Springsteen, Tallent, and Van Zandt (from left), 1980.

AWARD FOR  
MUSICAL EXCELLENCE

# The E Street Band

BY DAVE MARSH

According to Bruce Springsteen, this house-rocking group of singular musicians has always expanded his line of vision – while creating the framework for the marathon live shows that have defined his career.





Clarence Clemons



Nils Lofgren



Garry Tallent



Patti Scialfa



David Sancious

**T**HE E STREET BAND HAS LASTED MORE THAN forty years with an independent and highly individualized identity. The most essential albums of Bruce Springsteen's career – *Born to Run*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *The River*, *Born in the U.S.A.*, *The Rising* – are built around the group. Yet only four albums and an EP, all live except an anthology, bear the group's name on the spine.

You could say that the ESB is the greatest instrument Springsteen plays. He recently said almost exactly that: "I write to live up to the band's abilities and power onstage. That's something that's particularly significant. Even if these days, sometimes the guys are on the records, sometimes it's someone else. But if I go into, say, *Wrecking Ball*, I think okay, this is something we're going to deliver. And it just sets me thinking differently, the way you approach the production. So the band has always expanded my line of vision. It's something they still do. I still think, "What's this going to feel like when we hit the stage?"

Its guise is Jersey Shore bar band. The reality is that every one of its members has a story of his or her own. Everybody has had a solo career: Nils Lofgren, Stevie Van Zandt, Patti Scialfa, David Sancious, and Max Weinberg have had extensive ones. Roy Bittan,

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The E Streeters in 1973: David Sancious, Springsteen, Vini "Maddog" Lopez, Clemons, Danny Federici, and Tallent (from left)

the most virtuosic, produced Lucinda Williams' iconic *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*. Garry Tallent has been a mainstay of Nashville's Americana scene for a couple of decades – as producer, instrumentalist, talent scout, and studio owner. Danny Federici, "the Phantom" from beginning to end, made four solo albums, and recorded and toured with Gary "U.S." Bonds, Graham Parker, the BoDeans, and Joan Armatrading. Vini Lopez played on just a pair of Springsteen albums, but he has been a mainstay of the Jersey Shore rock scene ever since, reviving the prog-metal-blues of this crowd's early years in a band called Steel Mill Retro.

At the start, it was more or less a bar band, mostly made up of guys who'd come up together on the Shore club scene from around 1966 to the early seventies. The original E Street Band, the one that made Springsteen's first album, *Greetings From Asbury Park, New Jersey* (1973), featured Bruce, Federici,

David Sancious, Vini Lopez, Garry Tallent, and Clarence Clemons, who was the late-comer. (The story that he first arrived at a joint on the boardwalk in the middle of a near-hurricane only sounds like a fable; it seems to have actually happened.)

Vini left in early 1974, around the same time that David was signed to a record contract and went off to make a series of excellent jazz-rock-fusion albums. They were replaced by Max Weinberg, a North Jersey kid who had practiced his head off since hearing Ringo for the first time, and had backed strippers and played in the pit of Broadway shows; and Roy Bittan, who'd been in all sorts of bands, not necessarily always as leader but, inevitably, as the most accomplished and ambitious player.

The E Street Band was complete for the next nine years, during which Springsteen established his reputation by making four more crucial albums (including *Nebraska*, on which the ESB did not play), and creating the framework for the marathon live shows that have defined his career.

But in 1984, after completing the exhausting two-year sessions that became *Born in the U.S.A.*, Van Zandt – Springsteen's oldest friend and a key onstage

foil – decided to pursue a solo career. His decision led to two of the best songs on that album, "Bobby Jean" and "No Surrender," both redolent of what Steven brought to the group. It also led to a major musical change. For the band's new guitarist, Bruce brought in not one of the young bucks from the Shore rock scene, but Nils Lofgren, a contemporary with a long history as a recording artist and bandleader himself. Lofgren is a fiery soloist, whereas Van Zandt, in the ESB lineup at least, has restricted himself mainly to rhythm parts. Steve took up more theatrical space, Nils more musical space.

Springsteen has always tinkered with the band lineup. A few times in the seventies and early eighties, he worked with a full horn section in addition to Clarence Clemons' saxophone. Early on, violinist Suki Lahav was a regular member. In 1984, he chose

**BELOW**

The E Street Band – Clemons, Springsteen, Van Zandt, Weinberg, and Tallent (from left) – playing one of its incendiary live shows, 1975



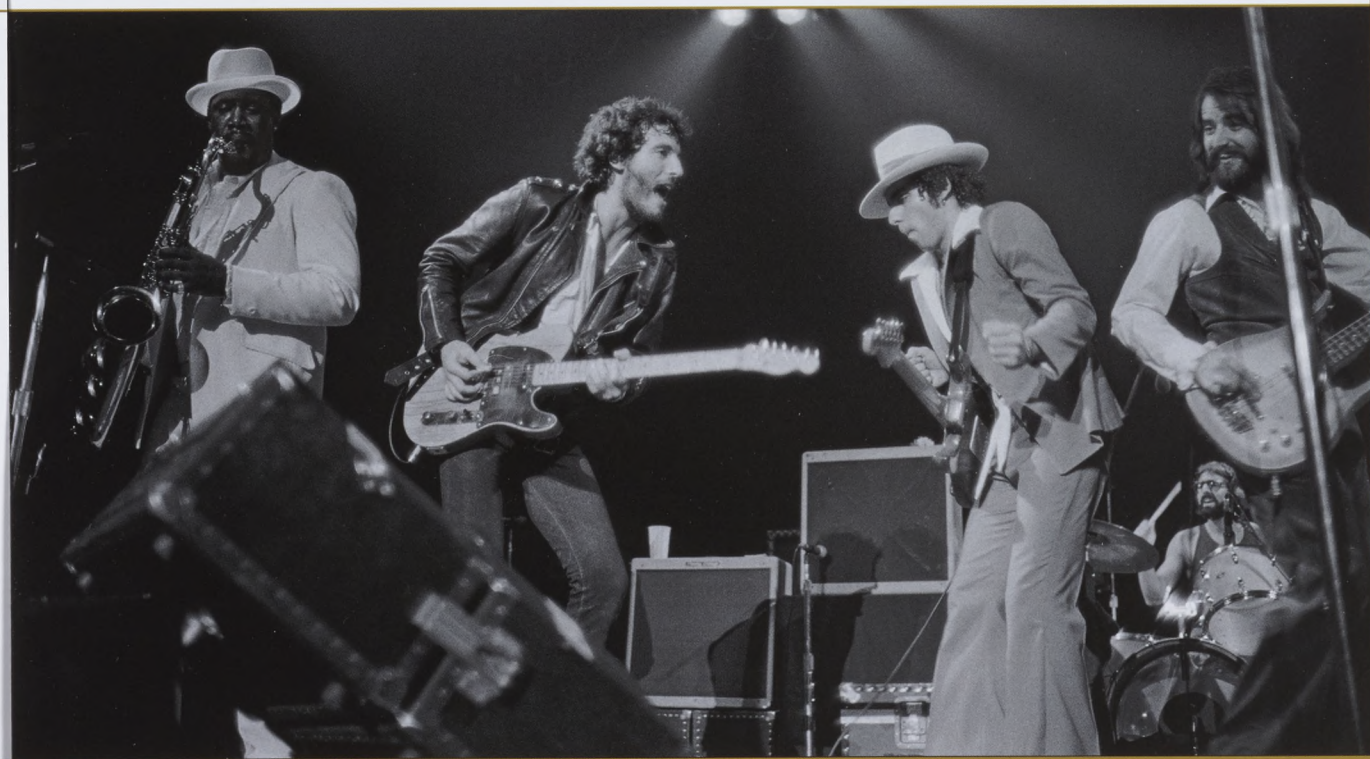
Roy Bittan

Vini Lopez

Steven Van Zandt

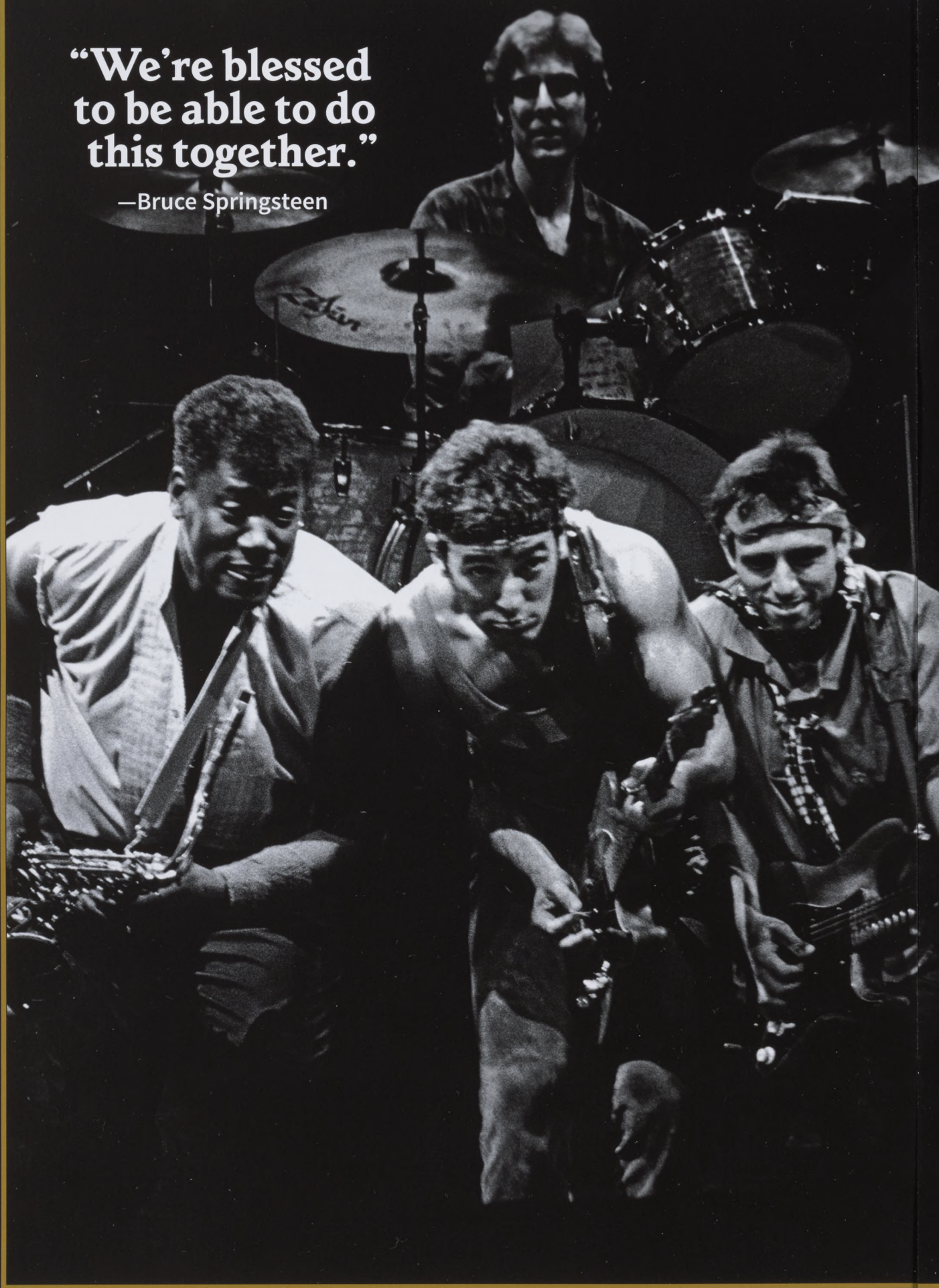
Danny Federici

Max Weinberg



**“We’re blessed  
to be able to do  
this together.”**

—Bruce Springsteen





to add a new singing voice, Patti Scialfa. Scialfa came from down the Shore, but she'd also been around the big time, recording with the Rolling Stones, for instance, and touring with the ESB's Asbury Park brethren, Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes. She and Bruce sparked at the microphone, adding another focal point.

But the main E Street Band focal point was Clarence Clemons, who specialized in tenor (sometimes baritone, rarely soprano) saxophone, hand percussion, and doo-wop bass harmonies. For most of the night, he was standing in the corner, and then he would ignite the show any time he and Bruce decided to strike a pose or trade licks or, for that matter, give each other a smooch. They were a symbol of both what rock & roll could be and what it had been. Their tableaux and skits were both bar-band amateurish and an eloquent if mostly implicit statement about healing division. It wasn't something that separated the two of them from the rest of the band or, for that matter, the audience itself. It was all about bonding, a spiritual endurance test to go with the physical one.

Each night, the climax of the show occurred amid some big rock & roll number, be it Bruce's own "Rosalita," or the Mitch Ryder-derived "Detroit Medley," or a jukebox classic like "Quarter to Three" or "Twist and Shout." As the energy reached its apex, Bruce began to introduce the band, which was, in a sense, the final chisel cutting into the rock of their legend. He declaimed, "The Mighty Max Weinberg," "Professor Roy Bittan," "Garry W. Tallent" (because you'd mess with Garry at your peril), "Miami Steve Van Zandt," "the lovely Miss Patti Scialfa," "the great Nils Lofgren," "now you see him, now you don't, Phantom Dan Federici," and then, at last . . . "Do I have to say his name? Do I have to say his name?" And the crowd would begin to chant, "*Clar-ence, Clar-ence, Clar-ence*," louder even than they'd chanted "*Broooooce*" waiting for the show to begin, and then Max would hit the biggest downbeat of them all, and Bruce would rattle it out: "*The King of the World! On the saxophone, Clarence 'Big Man' Clemons!*"

If that doesn't sound like such a much, you never saw Clarence, who, even when his body began to fail him, had a transcendent face and a physical presence out of proportion to even his own large stature. Give or take Little Richard, there has been no more commanding presence – commanding without moving a muscle – in rock history. This was the glory of the E Street Band.

**I**N 1989, JUST LIKE THAT, BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN told the group he was moving on. The E Street Band was a thing of the past. The guys were shocked. The music world was shocked.

Over the next decade, there was no attempt to revive a Springsteen-free E Street Band. In 1992 to 1993, Bruce put together a touring group that sported two E Street alumni, Roy Bittan and Patti Scialfa (by then Bruce's wife). He did a solo tour – just him, just once. He called when he needed the guys' skill in the studio, when it was time to put out a greatest-hits album in 1995 and he wanted to record a couple of new

**LEFT**

Rocking the Meadowlands:  
Weinberg, Scialfa, Tallent, Lofgren, Springsteen,  
and Clemons (clockwise from top), 1984



songs, and in 1998, when he needed to spruce up a boxed collection of left-offs, *Tracks*.

In early 1999, when Bruce Springsteen was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, he invited them all. When he was done accepting the honor, he called them to the stage. And they played together. It sounded great – organic, fitting, necessary.

Just like that, they were a band again. Although many rejoiced, nobody was surprised when a reunion tour was announced for later that year. It featured both Lofgren and Van Zandt, and was augmented by the inclusion of violinist Soozie Tyrell. They toured America and Europe for a year or so. For most of it, Bruce used just one new song, “Land of Hope and Dreams,” an updated version of their old sound, a restatement of commitment – to one another, to their own lives, maybe to changing the world. Bruce admits that, without the band as his vehicle, he probably wouldn’t have even thought of it.

The reunion has lasted now for fifteen years. Together they have toured more of the globe than before: South Africa, Brazil, Chile, Argentina . . . at last, Mexico. Most of the performances have been in

stadiums. In 2002, they made the first Bruce Springsteen album with the E Street Band since *Born in the U.S.A.*: *The Rising* was not only a hit, it was a resonant assertion of resilience, anger, fear, and compassion in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. It kicked off a remarkably productive period. The group toured as much in the next decade as it had since the early eighties.

It’s not a bar band anymore, of course, except when it needs to be. Like a bar band, though, it seemingly can play any song in the rock and soul repertoire on a moment’s notice. Or at least come close – very, very close. Whatever obscure Springsteen song its members haven’t rehearsed in thirty-five years, or whichever oldie only three or four have even heard of, if someone requests it and Bruce decides it would be fun to try, the E Street

Band comes through. *Always*. It’s a parlor trick and a testament to just how good this band is, and just how much everyone has learned to trust one another, too.

Bruce summed it up in his 2013 interview on SiriusXM’s E Street channel: “I think the time we spent apart ended up being very beneficial to us over a long

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**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**

Clemons, Springsteen, and Van Zandt (from left) at the Bottom Line, 1975; the E Street Band in Padova, Italy, 2013; Bruce and the Big Man, 1980.

period of time. Because I think when we came back together in the late nineties, it all became just what it was about. I do something with you I can't do with anyone else. You do something with me, it's similar. We're blessed to be able to do this together. Let's go do that."

They've done it through thick and thin. In 2007, Danny Federici, the most distinctive organist in rock history, developed melanoma, and in April 2008 he died. He was 58.

Clarence Clemons had looked weary and in pain through much of the 2000s. In June 2011, he died, suddenly, of a stroke. He was 69.

They were not replaced. Other musicians – fine ones – assumed their musical duties. But Danny and Clarence were not replaceable. They were, in a band of individualists, the most singular of all. There is no substitute for the King of the World. There is not a second Phantom Dan. Nevertheless, there *is* an E Street Band. Onstage, it still sounds not young, but something better: fresh, enlivened by what it is doing, and by who it's doing it with.

Sooner or later, of course, the E Street Band story has an ending. It doesn't seem near, but it does stop somewhere. Just like all the shows do, usually right at the point of exhaustion.

You know it's there when Bruce steps up at the end of a lengthy finale, and makes the most outrageous statement of the night. "You've just seen . . . the heart-stopping, pants-dropping, house-rocking, earth-quaking, booty-shaking, Viagra-taking, love-making le-gen-dary E - Street - Band!"

Sure, it's a brag. It's also a fact. 🍷

