

Tracks, a Sony Music 4-CD boxed set by Bruce Springsteen

Anthology charts Springsteen's musical journey

By Peter Stavropoulos
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The latest release from American singer-songwriter Bruce Springsteen is a collection of 66 tracks spanning a musical career that has endured for nearly three decades. The four-hour anthology, which includes 56 previously unreleased songs, is an important historical record of the artistic development of Springsteen and his E Street Band.

Over half the tracks have already appeared on illegally recorded concert albums. Springsteen frequently performed unreleased material at his concerts. Bootlegged versions were often produced without his consent. In this collection, Springsteen has asserted creative control over his own material and by re-mixing and re-mastering the songs, produced a quality in the recordings far superior to the unauthorised versions.

It should not be assumed that this is a collection of "second rate" or "rejected" music. On previous albums Springsteen often chose not to use songs that did not match the central focus or theme. *Tracks* is an alternative musical journey to the "officially" recorded and marketed Springsteen albums.

Bruce Springsteen was born in 1949 in Freehold, an industrial town in New Jersey--his family a mixture of Italian and Irish working people. His father was often unemployed and drifted between factory jobs, bus driving and even work as a prison guard. His mother was a legal secretary and the family's main source of economic stability.

Springsteen was pre-occupied with music and learnt the guitar at an early age. His early musical influences included Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson, Sam & Dave, Bob Dylan, Roy Orbison and the Byrds.

Although disqualified from military service due to head and leg injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident Springsteen was deeply affected by the Vietnam War. A close friend, the drummer in his high school band, was killed in Vietnam. Like thousands of youth of his generation, Springsteen was disturbed by the brutal war against the Vietnamese people, and its ongoing social and psychological impact on US soldiers. This became a constant theme in his later, and in many cases, more significant works.

Springsteen began touring at an early age with various bands and gathered around him a talented group of musicians who became known as the E Street Band. The band developed to include saxophonist Clarence Clemons and then later guitarists Stevie Van Zandt and Nils Lofgren--gifted musicians in their own right.

The band's first major recording contract was with Columbia Records. Legendary producer, John Hammond auditioned the then 22-year old Springsteen in June 1972. During his forty-year career

Hammond had discovered and signed such legendary artists as Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Bob Dylan and Aretha Franklin. Hammond later commented: "I've heard so many hundreds of people, and he's the first guy who's ever come through to me this way, much more than Dylan... I knew at once that he would last a generation".

Disc One in the collection draws on material from 1972-77. In five years Springsteen released four great albums: *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ*; *The Wild, The Innocent and the E Street Shuffle*; *Born to Run* and the classic *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. Songs from this period deal with inner city life, the gangs, misfits, street sharks, bright-eyed romance and Springsteen's key to escape--the car and endless highways beyond the edge of town. The music is characterised by a defiant confidence in the future and a youthful cockiness, expressed through lyrics full of fantastic and often nonsensical metaphors.

Springsteen's songs generally adopt a story-telling style and one embracing the best traditions of American folk music and icons like Woody Guthrie. He has an honest approach and respect for his characters whose failings he does not judge. Rather, he celebrates their perseverance in the face of adversity. Brutal at times, Springsteen's approach leaves little room for sentimentality, despite elevating his characters to an almost heroic status.

The first four tracks on Disc One are inspired acoustic versions of songs from *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ*, Springsteen's first album. His style evokes images of a young Bob Dylan. This is followed by live versions of "Bishop Danced", "Santa Ana" and "Seaside Bar Song". Few rock artists in the last decade have released material as passionate, inspiring and honest as this.

Disc Two covers the years 1977-83, a time when Springsteen had attracted enormous commercial success with his hit album *Born in the USA* and a world tour that broke rock concert attendance records. Most of the songs on this disc were not included on *The River* and *Born in the USA*, albums also released at this time.

Some of the tracks on Disk Two are humorous rollicking pieces, others are brazen copies of early rock and roll teenage dramas. But as economic recession and unemployment rose in the late 1970s, Springsteen began to produce powerful and sensitive songs about the social conditions confronting industrial workers in the US.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find (Pittsburgh)", the aspirations and hopes of Springsteen's characters have been shattered:

It's cloudy out in Pittsburgh / It's rainin' in Saigon / Snow's fallin' all across the Michigan line / Well she sits by the light of her Christmas tree / With the radio softly on / Thinkin' how a good man is so hard to

find / Well once she had a fella / Once she was somebody's girl / And she gave all she had that one last time / Now there's a little girl asleep in the back room / She's gonna have to tell about the meanness in this world / And how a good man is so hard to find.

He later commented: "I remember when I did my first record I thought it was dynamite. I had a tremendous amount of confidence for some reason. Then I began to question my work really hard. I was no longer interested in what I was doing well; I was interested in what I wasn't doing well. I felt I was failing because part of the picture was missing. That began with the 'Darkness' record...It was just an album about a lot of things in life and in the world for me, where you can see a lot in a lot of people's faces. They've had the humanity beaten out of them. You see the guys on the street that are just mad, they'll take a slug at anything, the guy with the crazy eyes...events just beat the humanity out of people till there is nothing left".

In 1982, between *The River* and *Born in the USA*, Springsteen released his most powerful social commentary to date--*Nebraska*, a series of songs inspired by *Badlands*, the Terence Malick film, and stories by American novelist, Flannery O'Connor. Already enjoying commercial success with a number of hit singles and increasing pressure to compose more of the same, Springsteen took the artistically courageous decision to produce a minimalist album with an unsparing vision of America as a land wracked by economic and social injustice.

Disc Two also includes an acoustic version of the song "Born in the USA". Recorded originally as a brooding angry revolt against the Vietnam War, the song was to be included on the *Nebraska* album under the title "Vietnam". But to have used this acoustic version on the *Born in the USA* CD would have dramatically altered the entire tone of the album, which the media had already tried to misrepresent as some form of patriotic salute.

It is extraordinary to recall that the Republican Party, under Ronald Reagan, sought to use this song as an election theme song while Chrysler offered \$12 million for the song as an advertising jingle. Springsteen, to his credit refused these offers. Listen, beyond the orchestrated anthem like chorus of the first released version of this song, and you discover the following lyrics:

Born down in a dead man's town / The first kick I took was when I hit the ground / You end up like a dog that's been beat too much / Till you spend half your life just covering up... I had a buddy at Khe Sahn / Fighting off the Viet Cong / They're still there, he's all gone / He had a little girl in Saigon / I got a picture of him in her arms / Down in the shadow of the penitentiary / Out by the gas fires of the refinery / I'm ten years down the road / Nowhere to run, ain't got nowhere to go.

Hardly a patriotic celebration of American society.

Disc Three covers the period 1982-87 with material that did not make it on to *Born in the USA* and *Tunnel of Love* albums. This CD has a distinctly more "pop and dance" feel to it and reflects the more commercial orientation that some of his music was taking. Whilst some of these songs are self-consuming and narrow in their musical ambitions, there are many tracks that still maintain a hard edge. The love songs are desperate rather than exuberant. Springsteen's characters, in the steel and auto cities, have grown up, lost their jobs, divorced, gone to prison or are attempting to come to grips with a society that has coldly shattered their dreams.

Springsteen's music began to change during this period--he is more introspective, soul searching--dealing with the personal and more narrow aspects of life. His own marriage and divorce seem to weigh heavily upon him as he takes time out to measure himself. In "This

Hard Land" he muses:

Hey there mister can you tell me / What happened to the seeds I've sown / Can you give me a reason, sir, as to why they've never grown / They've just blown around from town to town / Back out on these fields / Where they fall from my hand / Back into the dirt of this hard land.

Disc Four consists of tracks from 1989-98 period, a time when *Human Touch*, *Lucky Town* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad* albums were released. Most of this material has never been recorded or bootlegged.

Facing constant pressure to return to more commercially acceptable and marketable songs, Springsteen's material is a mixed bag at this time. Much of it is so personalised that he tends to fade into himself with guilt and remorse. Some tracks are "poppy", the music somewhat directionless and the lyrics less challenging. Springsteen's vocals, and the narrow range of musical style, is in contrast to previous work. Some critics claimed that he had lost his bearings but the release of *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, his sober reflection of a polarised American society, testified to his artistic resilience and strength.

While Springsteen may not be fashionable in the current climate of disposable popular music, his contribution to rock music deserves serious attention. He remains one of the few rock singer/songwriters able to maintain his creative output and relevance in the hedonistic and artistically destructive popular music industry.

If imitation is the highest form of praise then Springsteen's influence is wide. There are over 300 known recorded versions of his songs covered by artists as diverse as are their individual talents. They include Cher, Emmylou Harris, Natalie Cole, Donna Summer, Tori Amos, Linda Ronstadt and Patti Smith, as well as John Hiatt, Steve Earle, Johnny Cash, David Bowie, Eric Burdon, Joe Cocker and The Hollies.

Springsteen, with his re-formed E Street Band, has begun a world tour with 31 concerts in Europe. With an average venue capacity of 30,000, most concerts have already been sold out. The US leg of the tour is due to begin mid-year.

Springsteen's sympathetic and stark portrayal of ordinary lives caught in the economic and social ills now plaguing the United States are the concerns of a serious artist who still has much to contribute. Springsteen's characters have now been pushed up against the wall: the stolen car and endless highways provide no escape; the mythical "Promised Land" has gone and "the river" is no longer a place of redemption, where sins and troubles can be simply washed away. And although Springsteen has no clear answer, he recognises that the problems confronting ordinary people can be only resolved through struggle.

Tracks and his current world tour will no doubt expose a new generation to the significance of Springsteen's work. Whether new to the music of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, or already a fan-- *Tracks* is a rewarding musical voyage, the 4-CD anthology well worth its purchase price.

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