

Thirty years down the road

Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band at Manchester, England

By Robert Stevens
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US singer-songwriter Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band are currently on the European leg of their world tour following the release of their latest album, *The Rising*. The album and the tour mark a “return to form” and importantly mark the reuniting of Springsteen and the E Street Band following an 18-year hiatus.

The album was in the main written after the September 11 terrorist attacks. While most of the songs are not directly about September 11, Springsteen—a native of nearby New Jersey—attempted to infuse the album with themes of love, remorse and mourning. He personally contacted the wife of one of the firemen killed in the World Trade Centre after he read that her husband had been a lifelong fan of his music. Two of the songs on the album were written within one week of September 11.

Following the release of their biggest-selling album *Born in the USA* in 1984 and the subsequent two-year tour that broke records for ticket sales, Springsteen decided to separate from the E Street Band he had worked with for over a decade to pursue other projects. During this period, he released a number of albums, written during and after his divorce from his first wife, his remarriage and his relocation from his native New Jersey to Los Angeles. At that same time, he produced a number of solo projects with assorted musicians including *Tunnel of Love*, *Lucky Town*, *Human Touch* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. He also released an important four-CD collection of 66 unreleased songs entitled *Tracks* in 1999.

His songs have traced in an honest manner the trajectory of numerous social layers and ongoing themes in US society—the worker burdened with the monotony of life in the factory, the laid-off workers and their anxieties, the desperate hardships faced by immigrants who struggle in the face of constant adversity, police brutality, disenfranchised young people in gangs and those with family trouble and personal problems, and the problems people confront in cultivating meaningful relationships.

A number of songs on his albums from the late 1970s and the 1980s were themed around the impact of the Vietnam War and its aftermath on an entire generation. Many of these issues and

this empathy with his “characters” were the subject of *Ghost of Tom Joad*.

In June 2000, Springsteen performed a new song called “American Skin” about the brutal police killing of Amadou Diallo in New York in February 1999. Diallo was slain in a hail of 41 gunfire shots. The police officers were acquitted of his murder. For daring to sing about such an event, he was denounced by police organisations in New York who called for the song to be blacklisted and by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani amongst others.

Speaking about his attitude to his craft, Springsteen said in an interview in 1999, “Part of what we call entertainment should be ‘food for thought.’... That’s what I was interested in doing since I was very young, how we live in the world and how we ought to live in the world. I think politics are implicit. I’m not interested in writing rhetoric or ideology. I think it was Walt Whitman who said, ‘The poet’s job is to know the soul.’ You strive for that, assist your audience in finding and knowing theirs. That’s always at the core of what you’re writing, of what drives your music.”

The band played three shows in the UK and is continuing the European tour in Ireland, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Austria. The Manchester concert saw Springsteen and the E Street Band playing a wealth of material spanning each of their three decades before an audience approaching 50,000.

Springsteen opened the show with a remarkable solo acoustic rendition of “Born in the USA.” The song is the title track from the 1984 album. He began to play the song acoustically in his set a few years ago, and stripped of the anthemic sound and production that went into the studio version, it stands as a searing indictment of the state of social relations in America.

The writer is on record that he is concerned about how the song has been or could be “misconstrued” in a way that diluted the protest themes inherent in it. The new version had its original incarnation during the tour that followed the *Ghost of Tom Joad* album. In his book *Songs*, he addresses this question: “Over the years I’ve had an opportunity to reinterpret ‘Born in the USA’ many times in concert. Particularly on the ‘Tom

Joad' tour, I had a version that could not be misconstrued. But those interpretations always stood in relief to the original and gained some of their new power from the audience's previous experience with the original version."

The track is about a young man who is drafted and sent off to the Vietnam War. The opening stanza is:

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

The man sees one of his friends killed in the war. When he returns, he tries and then fails to get a job amid recession and unemployment. The song ends with the lament of the song's character a decade after the war.

Among the many highlights of the 27-song set list in Manchester were "Born to Run," "Jungleland," "Badlands," "Thunder Road," "Darkness on the Edge of Town," "Born in the USA," "Bobby Jean," "Lonesome Day," "Waiting on a Sunny Day," "Mary's Place," "Worlds Apart," "You're Missing" and "My City of Ruins." The six latter songs are taken from *The Rising*. The tour has also been noticeable for the varied set lists that have been played.

Springsteen and the E Street Band have achieved a deserved status as being among the most brilliant live performers. On stage, Springsteen pushes his artistic and physical abilities to their limits, often over a period of three hours or more. One has the distinct impression that in some way he deliberately punishes himself during a performance and seeks to impart his desires and feelings to the audience in a very emotional and physical way.

The band, whom Springsteen describes as "long-time compadres and collaborators," are all excellent musicians—saxophonist and percussionist Clarence Clemons, drummer Max Weinberg, bass player Garry Tallent, guitarists Nils Lofgren and Steve Van Zandt, keyboardist and pianist Roy Bittan, and organist Danny Federici. Springsteen's wife and band member Patti Scialfa plays acoustic guitar as well as backing vocals. Her harmonies sometimes beautifully complement Springsteen's often raw and bassy voice and help bring out the passion and warmth in his music—though Springsteen himself can display a remarkable vocal range.

One of the most interesting songs on *The Rising* is "My City of Ruins." It was originally written several years ago as a comment on the visible social decline of Springsteen's adopted hometown of Asbury Park. Several of the landmarks featured in some of his earlier songs such as the Palace amusement park in "Born to Run" are rundown and dilapidated today. One of the first clubs that Springsteen regularly performed, the Show Pony, has now closed and become a dance hall. The band rehearsed and prepared for their tour in the Asbury Park convention hall.

One of the verses in "My City of Ruins" runs:

Young men on the corner/Like scattered leaves/The boarded up windows/The hustlers and thieves/While my brother's down

on his knees/My city of ruins

The beautifully crafted ballad "You're Missing" opens with a piano solo and features a haunting violin that plays as Springsteen sings lyrics with a restrained vocal that chronicles the despair of losing a loved one. The lyrics relate to how the possessions of the missing person are still there—"Shirts in the closet, shoes in the hall, Pictures on the nightstand"—but the living person is irrevocably gone.

"Worlds Apart" fuses elements of African and Middle Eastern music including a Sufi choir and tabla drums with a strong guitar, along with a vocal performance from Springsteen. Two lovers—a Muslim and an American—struggle to maintain a relationship amidst widespread animosity. One line is particularly memorable: *May the living let us in before the dead tear us apart.*

Springsteen has always sought to develop a close relationship with his audience, which he has termed a "deep communication." He often introduces his songs with short stories and tales from his childhood and adolescence, including arguments with his father over what he was doing with his life, his hopes and aspirations, as well as comments on contemporary events.

His songs often evoke a feeling of indignation and protest, and he undoubtedly sees his own contribution to music in these terms. In a recent interview he commented on these issues: "For me the greatest pop music was music of liberation: Bob Marley, Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley, James Brown, Public Enemy, the Clash, the Sex Pistols. Those were pop groups that liberated an enormous amount of people to be who they are. That connection, I always thought, was the essence of the great bands that I loved—that they did that for people. It was the spirit of popular music that courses through everybody from Woody Guthrie to Hank Williams, the great Robert Johnson, all the way on, you know. I wanted to be a link in that chain. I wanted to just come and do my part as best as I could."

It is to Springsteen's credit that he has retained his outlook of posing and illuminating certain social and political problems in a period when many artists simply refuse to even acknowledge or consider them. On the basis of his latest album and tour, one would hope that Springsteen will continue to address these themes.

The tour continues in Europe until the end of June and ends in the United States at the end of September. We recommend it.

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