

# THE NEW YORKER

PROFILES

## WE ARE ALIVE

*Bruce Springsteen at sixty-two.*

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JULY 30, 2012



Springsteen wants his audience to leave the arena, as he commands them, with “your back hurting, your voice sore, and your sexual organs stimulated.” Photograph by Julian Broad.

Nearly half a century ago, when Elvis Presley was filming “Harum Scarum” and “Help!” was on the charts, a moody, father-haunted, yet uncannily charismatic Shore rat named Bruce Springsteen was building a small reputation around central Jersey as a guitar player in a band called the Castiles. The band was named for the lead singer’s favorite brand of soap. Its members were from Freehold, an industrial town half an hour inland from the boardwalk carnies and the sea. The Castiles performed at sweet sixteens and Elks-club dances, at drive-in movie theatres and ShopRite ribbon cuttings, at a mobile-home park in Farmingdale, at the Matawan-Keyport

Rollerdrome. Once, they played for the patients at a psychiatric hospital, in Marlboro. A gentleman dressed in a suit came to the stage and, in an introductory speech that ran some twenty minutes, declared the Castiles “greater than the Beatles.” At which point a doctor intervened and escorted him back to his room.

One spring afternoon in 1966, the Castiles, with dreams of making it big and making it quick, drove to a studio at the Brick Mall Shopping Center and recorded two original songs, “Baby I” and “That’s What You Get.” Mainly, though, they played an array of covers, from Glenn Miller’s “In the Mood” to the G-Clefs’ “I Understand.” They did Sonny and Cher, Sam and Dave, Don & Juan, the Who, the Kinks, the Stones, the Animals.

Many musicians in their grizzled late maturity have an uncertain grasp on their earliest days on the bandstand. (Not a few have an uncertain grasp on last week.) But Springsteen, who is sixty-two and among the most durable musicians since B. B. King and Om Kalthoum, seems to remember every gaudy night, from the moment, in 1957, when he and his mother watched Elvis on “The Ed Sullivan Show”—“I looked at her and I said, ‘I wanna be *just . . . like . . . that*’ ”—to his most recent exploits as a multimillionaire populist rock star crowd-surfing the adoring masses. These days, he is the subject of historical exhibitions; at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum, in Cleveland, and at the National Constitution Center, in Philadelphia, his lyric sheets, old cars, and faded performing duds have been displayed like the snippets of the Shroud. But, unlike the Rolling Stones, say, who have not written a great song since the disco era and come together only to pad their fortunes as their own cover band, Springsteen refuses to be a mercenary curator of his past. He continues to evolve as an artist, filling one spiral notebook after another with ideas, quotations, questions, clippings, and, ultimately, new songs. His latest album, “Wrecking Ball,” is a melodic indictment of the recessionary moment, of income disparity, emasculated workers, and what he calls “the distance between the American reality and the American dream.” The work is remote from his early operettas of humid summer interludes and abandon out on the Turnpike. In his desire to extend a counter-tradition of political progressivism, Springsteen quotes from Irish rebel songs, Dust Bowl ballads, Civil War tunes, and chain-gang chants.

Early this year, Springsteen was leading rehearsals for a world tour at Fort Monmouth, an Army base that was shut down last year; it had been an outpost since the First World War of military communications and intelligence, and once employed Julius Rosenberg and thousands of militarized carrier pigeons. The twelve-hundred-acre property is now a ghost town inhabited only by steel dummies meant to scare off the ubiquitous Canada geese that squirt a carpet of green across middle Jersey. Driving to the far end of the base, I reached an unlovely theatre that Springsteen and Jon Landau, his longtime manager, had rented for the rehearsals. Springsteen had performed for officers’ children at the Fort Monmouth “teen club” (dancing, no liquor) with the Castiles, forty-seven years earlier.

The atmosphere inside was purposeful but easygoing. Musicians stood onstage noodling on their

instruments with the languid air of outfielders warming up in the sun. Max Weinberg, the band's volcanic drummer, wore the sort of generous jeans favored by dads at weekend barbecues. Steve Van Zandt, Springsteen's childhood friend and guitarist-wingman, keeps up a brutal schedule as an actor and a d.j., and he seemed weary, his eyes drooping under a piratical purple head scarf. The bass player Garry Tallent, the organist Charlie Giordano, and the pianist Roy Bittan horsed around on a roller-rink tune while they waited. The guitarist Nils Lofgren was on the phone, trying to figure out flights to get back to his home, in Scottsdale, for the weekend.

Springsteen arrived and greeted everyone with a quick hello and his distinctive cackle. He is five-nine and walks with a rolling rodeo gait. When he takes in something new—a visitor, a thought, a passing car in the distance—his eyes narrow, as if in hard light, and his lower jaw protrudes a bit. His hairline is receding, and, if one had to guess, he has, over the years, in the face of high-def scrutiny and the fight against time, enjoined the expensive attentions of cosmetic and dental practitioners. He remains dispiritingly handsome, preposterously fit. (“He has practically the same waist size as when I met him, when we were fifteen,” says Steve Van Zandt, who does not.) Some of this has to do with his abstemious inclinations; Van Zandt says Springsteen is “the only guy I know—I think the only guy I know at *all*—who never did drugs.” He's followed more or less the same exercise regimen for thirty years: he runs on a treadmill and, with a trainer, works out with weights. It has paid off. His muscle tone approximates a fresh tennis ball. And yet, with the tour a month away, he laughed at the idea that he was ready. “I'm not remotely close,” he said, slumping into a chair twenty rows back from the stage.

Preparing for a tour is a process far more involved than middle-aged workouts designed to stave off premature infarction. “Think of it this way: performing is like sprinting while screaming for three, four minutes,” Springsteen said. “And then you do it again. And then you do it again. And then you walk a little, shouting the whole time. And so on. Your adrenaline quickly overwhelms your conditioning.” His style in performance is joyously demonic, as close as a white man of Social Security age can get to James Brown circa 1962 without risking a herniated disk or a shattered pelvis. Concerts last in excess of three hours, without a break, and he is constantly dancing, screaming, imploring, mugging, kicking, windmilling, crowd-surfing, climbing a drum riser, jumping on an amp, leaping off Roy Bittan's piano. The display of energy and its depletion is part of what is expected of him. In return, the crowd participates in a display of communal adoration. Like pilgrims at a gigantic outdoor Mass—think John Paul II at Gdansk—they know their role: when to raise their hands, when to sway, when to sing, when to scream his name, when to bear his body, hand over hand, from the rear of the orchestra to the stage. (Van Zandt: “Messianic? Is that the word you're looking for?”)

Springsteen came to glory in the age of Letterman, but he is anti-ironical. Keith Richards works at seeming not to give a shit. He makes you wonder if it is harder to play the riffs for “Street Fighting Man” or to dangle a cigarette from his lips by a single thread of spit. Springsteen is the opposite. He is

all about flagrant exertion. There always comes a moment in a Springsteen concert, as there always did with James Brown, when he plays out a dumb show of the conflict between exhaustion and the urge to go on. Brown enacted it by dropping to his knees, awash in sweat, unable to dance another step, yet shooing away his cape bearer, the aide who would enrobe him and hustle him offstage. Springsteen slumps against the mike stand, spent and still, then, regaining consciousness, shakes off the sweat—*No! It can't be!*—and calls on the band for another verse, another song. He leaves the stage soaked, as if he had swum around the arena in his clothes while being chased by barracudas. “I want an *extreme* experience,” he says. He wants his audience to leave the arena, as he commands them, “with your hands hurting, your feet hurting, your back hurting, your voice sore, and your sexual organs *stimulated!*”

So the display of exuberance is critical. “For an adult, the world is constantly trying to clamp down on itself,” he says. “Routine, responsibility, decay of institutions, corruption: this is all the world closing in. Music, when it’s really great, pries that shit back open and lets people back in, it lets light in, and air in, and energy in, and sends people home with that and sends me back to the hotel with it. People carry that with them sometimes for a very long period of time.”

The band rehearses not so much to learn how to play particular songs as to see what songs work with other songs, to figure out a basic set list (with countless alternatives) that will fill all of Springsteen’s demands: to air the new work and his latest themes; to play the expected hits for the casual fans; to work up enough surprises and rarities for fans who have seen him hundreds of times; and, especially, to pace the show from frenzy to calm and back again. In the past several years, Springsteen has been taking requests from the crowd. He has never been stumped. “You can take the band out of the bar, but you can’t take the bar out of the band,” Van Zandt says.

The E Street Band members are not Springsteen’s equals. “This is not the Beatles,” as Weinberg puts it. They are salaried musicians; in 1989, they were fired en masse. They await his call to record, to tour, to rehearse. And so when Springsteen sprang out of his chair and said, “O.K., time to work,” they straightened up and watched for his cue.

*Huh . . . two . . . three . . . four.*

As the anthemic opener, “We Take Care of Our Own,” washed over the empty seats, I stood at the back of the hall next to the sound engineer, John Cooper, a rangy, unflappable Hoosier, who was monitoring a vast soundboard and a series of laptops. One hard drive contains the lyrics and keys for hundreds of songs, so that when Springsteen calls for something off the cuff the song quickly appears on TelePrompters within sight of him and his bandmates. (The crutch is hardly unique—Sinatra, in late career, used a TelePrompter, and so do the Stones and many other bands.) Although more than half the show will be the same from night to night, the rest is up for grabs.

“This is about the only live music left, with a few exceptions,” Cooper said. Lip-synchers are legion. Coldplay thickens its sound with heaps of pre-taped instruments and synthesizers. The one

artificial sound in Springsteen's act is a snare-drum sound in "We Take Care of Our Own" that seemed to elude easy reproduction.

That afternoon at Fort Monmouth, Springsteen was intent on nailing "the opening four," the first songs, which come rapid fire. The band and the crew gave particular attention to those lingering seconds between songs when the keys modulate and the guitar techs pass different instruments to the musicians. It is intricate work; the technicians have to move with the precision of a Daytona pit crew.

Before the tour officially began, in Atlanta, there were a few smaller venues to play, including the Apollo Theatre, in Harlem. There are usually more African-Americans onstage than in the seats, but Springsteen is steeped in black music, and he was especially eager to play the date in Harlem. "All of our teachers stood on those boards at the Apollo," he said. "The essence of the way this band moves is one of soul. It's *supposed* to be overwhelming. You shouldn't be able to catch your breath. That's what being a front man is all about—the idea of having something supple underneath you, that machine that roars and can turn on a dime."

**R**ock tours generally have a theme: a band's coltish arrival, a new style or look, a reunion, a new set of songs, a political moment. Springsteen was salting the show with the political material from "Wrecking Ball," but the most vivid theme on this tour was to be time passing, age, death, and, if Springsteen could manage it, a sense of renewal. The surviving core of the band—Van Zandt, Tallent, Weinberg, Bittan, and Springsteen—had been playing together since the Ford Administration; Lofgren and Patti Scialfa, Springsteen's wife, who is a singer and guitar player, joined in the eighties.

The run of tragedy, debility, and erosion has seemed relentless in recent years. Nils Lofgren has had both hips replaced, and both his shoulders are a wreck. Max Weinberg has endured open-heart surgery, prostate-cancer treatment, two failed back operations, and seven hand operations. The morning after a concert, he told me, he feels like the Nick Nolte character in the football movie "North Dallas Forty": bruised and barely able to move. Lofgren has compared the backstage area to "a MASH unit," with ice packs, heating pads, Bengay tubes, and masseuses on call. More alarmingly, Jon Landau, Springsteen's manager and closest friend, was recovering from brain surgery.

There have been deeper, permanent losses. In 2008, Danny Federici, who played organ and accordion with Springsteen for forty years, died of melanoma. Springsteen's body man on tour, a Special Forces veteran named Terry Magovern, died the year before. Springsteen's trainer died at the age of forty.

The most shocking loss came last year, when Clarence Clemons, Springsteen's saxophone player and onstage foil and protector, died of a stroke. Clemons was a colossus—six-four, a former football player. As a musician, he possessed a raspy tone reminiscent of King Curtis. He was not a great improviser, but his solos, painstakingly scripted over long hours in the studio with Springsteen, were set pieces in every show. Then, there was his sheer stage presence. Clemons gave Springsteen a mythic companion who embodied the fraternal spirit of the band. "Standing next to Clarence was like standing

next to the baddest ass on the planet,” Springsteen said of him in tribute. “You felt like no matter what the day or the night brought, nothing was going to touch you.”

Clemons’s life style was considerably less disciplined than Springsteen’s, and, in recent years, his body had been breaking down, requiring hip replacements, knee replacements, back surgery. On the last tour, Clemons was driven around the arena tunnels in a golf cart. Onstage, he was spending less time exerting himself on the horn and more time resting on a stool and banging on a tambourine. When he did play, it was clear that he was losing the high notes. After one of his last concerts, he told a friend, “I deserve a God-damned Academy Award.” He said that he felt like Mickey Rourke’s character in “The Wrestler”; he was portraying a powerful figure onstage even as he was falling apart physically.

At the funeral, held in a chapel in Palm Beach, Springsteen paid passionate homage to Clemons, recalling that he had put up with a “world where it still wasn’t so easy to be big and black.” He recalled his friend’s “raunchy mysticism,” his appetites, even his dressing room, which was draped in exotic scarves and dubbed the Temple of Soul: “A visit there was like a trip to a sovereign nation that had just struck huge oil reserves.” At the same time, Springsteen gestured toward Clemons’s erratic family life (he was married five times) and the occasional tensions in their relationship. Speaking to Clemons’s sons, he said, “C lived a life where he did what he wanted to do, and he let the chips, human and otherwise, fall where they may. Like a lot of us, your pop was capable of great magic and also of making quite an amazing mess.”

Months later, Springsteen was still feeling the loss. He was twenty-two when he met Clemons, on the Asbury Park music circuit. Losing Clemons was like losing “the sea and the stars,” and it was clear that Springsteen was anxious about performing without him. “How do we continue? I think we discussed this more than anything in our history,” Van Zandt told me. “The basic concept was, we need to reinvent ourselves here a little bit. You can’t just replace a guy.” Clemons was replaced not by a musician but by a contingent—a five-man horn section.

Rehearsals were partly a matter of figuring out how to acknowledge the losses without turning the concert into a lugubrious memorial service. “The band is a little community up there,” Springsteen said, “and it gathers together, and we try to heal the parts that God broke and honor the parts that are no longer with us.”

During the breaks, I noticed that one of the horn players, a young tenor player wearing a considerable Afro, oblong eyewear, and an intent expression, was wandering around, nervously playing snatches of familiar solos on his horn: “Tenth Avenue Freeze Out,” “Jungleland,” “Badlands,” “Thunder Road.” This was Jake Clemons, Clarence’s thirty-two-year-old nephew. For years, Jake had been touring second-rate halls and clubs with his own band. Now he had the assignment of filling his uncle’s shoes in front of audiences of fifty thousand. He would do so literally. Jake wore his uncle’s size-16 shoes—snakeskin boots, slick loafers, whatever was left to him. Nearly all of his horns, too,

had been gifts from Uncle Clarence.

In January, Springsteen invited Jake to his house, and they played long into the night. Bruce introduced the idea of his joining the band. “But you have to understand,” Springsteen told him. “When you blow that sax onstage with us, people won’t compare you to Clarence on the last tour. They’ll compare you to their *memory* of Clarence, to their *idea* of Clarence.” That gave Jake Clemons pause. Raised on gospel in a family led by a Marine-band officer, he knew Springsteen’s catalogue only casually. The audience would know the songs, not to mention the history of the band, much more intimately than he did. After Clarence died, Jake did a few tribute shows, and he could sense the audience making comparisons.

“I don’t know if anyone can perform in the shadow of a legend,” Jake said. “To me, Clarence is still on that stage, and I don’t want to step on his toes.”

Springsteen believed that these worries, and the larger sense of loss and injury, might provide an energy that the tour could draw on. After all these years onstage, he can stand back from his performances with an analytic remove. “You’re the shaman, a little bit, you’re leading the congregation,” he told me. “But you are the same as everybody else in the sense that your troubles are the same, your problems are the same, you’ve got your blessings, you’ve got your sins, you’ve got the things you can do well, you’ve got the things you fuck up all the time. And so you’re a conduit. There was a series of elements in your life—some that were blessings, and some that were just chaotic curses—that set fire to you in a certain way.”

When Springsteen was touring behind the “Born to Run” album, in the mid-seventies, he would stand at the lip of the stage in a spotlight, vamping on a chord, and tell the story of growing up in a dingy two-family house next to a gas station in a working-class section of Freehold known as Texas, because it was first populated by hillbilly migrants from the South. I was in the balcony at a show, in November, 1976, at the Palladium, on Fourteenth Street, when Springsteen laid things out in the starkest terms:

My mom, she was a secretary, and she worked downtown. . . . And my father, he worked a lot of different places. He worked in a rug mill for a while, he drove a cab for a while, and he was a guard down at the jail for a while. I can remember when he worked down there, he used to always come home real pissed off, drunk, sit in the kitchen. At night, nine o’clock, he used to shut off all the lights, every light in the house, and he used to get real pissed off if me or my sister turned any of them on. And he’d sit in the kitchen with a six-pack, a cigarette. . . .

He’d make me sit down at that table in the dark. In the wintertime, he used to turn on the gas stove and close all the doors, so it got real hot in there. And I remember just sitting in the dark. . . . No matter how long I sat there, I could never ever see his face. We’d start talking about nothing much, how I was doing. Pretty soon, he asked me what I thought I was doing with myself. And we’d always end up screaming at each other. My mother, she’d always end up running in from the front room crying, and trying to pull him off me, try to keep us from fighting with each other. . . . I’d always end up running out the back door and pulling away from him. Pulling away from him, running down the driveway screaming at him, telling him, telling him, telling him, how it was my life and I was going to do what I wanted to do.

At the end of the story, an entirely accurate one, Springsteen would segue into “It’s My Life,” by the Animals, a spine-jangling declaration of independence. In Springsteen’s voice, it was a declaration

of independence from a household in which threats were shouted, telephones were ripped off the wall, and the police were summoned.

Doug Springsteen was an Army driver in Europe during the Second World War who came home and seethed at his crabbed circumstances. Van Zandt told me that Springsteen's father was "scary" and best avoided. In those days, "*all* fathers were scary," Van Zandt said. "The torture we put these poor guys through, when you think of it now. My father, Bruce's father—these poor guys, they never had a chance. There was no precedent for us, none, in history, for their sons to become these long-haired freaks who didn't want to participate in the world they built for them. Can you imagine? It was the World War Two generation. They built the suburbs. What gratitude did we have? We're, like, 'Fuck you! We're gonna look like girls, and we're gonna do drugs, and we're gonna play crazy rock and roll!' And they're, like, 'What the fuck did we do wrong?' They were scared of what we were becoming, so they felt they had to be more authoritarian. They *hated* us, you know?"

Doug Springsteen grew up shadowed by the death of his five-year-old sister, Virginia, who was hit by a truck while riding a tricycle, in Freehold in 1927. His parents, according to a forthcoming biography of Springsteen by Peter Ames Carlin, were ravaged by grief. Doug dropped out of school after ninth grade. In 1948, he married Adele Zerilli. Bruce was born the next year. For long stretches of Bruce's childhood, his grandparents lived with his family, and, as Springsteen told Carlin, he always sensed that much of the affection he received from them was a way "to replace the lost child," which was confusing: "The dead daughter was a big presence. Her portrait was on the wall, always front and center." Decades after the event, the whole family—the grandparents, Doug and Adele, Bruce and his sister Ginny—went to the cemetery every weekend to visit Virginia's grave.

In biographies and clippings, Doug Springsteen is described with adjectives like "taciturn" and "disappointed." In fact, he seems to have been bipolar, and he was capable of terrible rages, often aimed at his son. Doctors prescribed drugs for his illness, but Doug didn't always take them. The mediator in the house, the source of optimism and survival, and the steadiest earner, was Bruce's mother, Adele, who worked as a legal secretary. Still, Bruce was deeply affected by his father's paralyzing depressions, and worried that he would not escape the thread of mental instability that ran through his family. That fear, he says, is why he never did drugs. Doug Springsteen lives in his son's songs. In "Independence Day," the son must escape his father's house because "we were just too much of the same kind." In the ferocious "Adam Raised a Cain," the father "walks these empty rooms / looking for something to blame / You inherit the sins / You inherit the flames." The songs were a way of talking to the silent father. "My dad was very nonverbal—you couldn't really have a conversation with him," Springsteen told me. "I had to make my peace with that, but I had to have a conversation with him, because I needed to have one. It ain't the best way to go about it, but that was the only way I could, so I did, and eventually he did respond. He might not have liked the songs, but I think he liked that they existed. It meant that he mattered. He'd get asked, 'What are your favorite songs?' And he'd



say, ‘The ones that are about me.’ ”

The past, though, is anything but past. “My parents’ struggles, it’s the *subject* of my life,” Springsteen told me at rehearsal. “It’s the thing that eats at me and always will. My life took a very different course, but my life is an anomaly. Those wounds stay with you, and you turn them into a language and a purpose.” Gesturing toward the band onstage, he said, “We’re repairmen—repairmen with a toolbox. If I repair a little of myself, I’ll repair a little of you. That’s the job.” The songs of escape on “Born to Run,” the portrait of post-industrial struggle on “Darkness on the Edge of Town” were part of that job of early repair.

Doug and Adele Springsteen left Freehold for northern California when Bruce was nineteen, and they were puzzled when, several years later, their son, a long-haired misfit in their eyes, came visiting, as he puts it, “lugging a treasure chest behind” and telling them to buy the biggest house around. “The one satisfaction you get is that you do get your ‘See, I told you so’ moment,” Springsteen said. “Of course, all the deeper things go unsaid, that it all could have been a little different.”

Doug Springsteen died in 1998, at seventy-three, after years of illness, including a stroke and heart disease. “I was lucky that modern medicine gave him another ten years of life,” Springsteen said. “T-Bone Burnett said that rock and roll is all about ‘Daaaaddy!’ It’s one embarrassing scream of ‘Daaaaddy!’ It’s just fathers and sons, and you’re out there proving something to somebody in the most intense way possible. It’s, like, ‘Hey, I was worth a little more attention than I got! You blew that one, big guy!’ ”

**T**he redemptive moments in Springsteen’s youth were musical: the songs coming out of the transistor radio and the television set; his mother taking out a bank loan for sixty dollars to buy him a Kent guitar when he was fifteen. Springsteen became one of those kids who escape into an obsession. He believed, as he sings in “No Surrender,” “We learned more from a three-minute record, baby, than we ever learned in school.” At St. Rose of Lima, the Catholic school in Freehold, he was a screwup, disdained by the nuns. The hip, literary kids were far away. (“I didn’t hang around with no crowd that was talking about William Burroughs,” he told Dave Marsh, an early biographer.) After graduating from high school, Springsteen attended classes at Ocean County Community College, where he started reading novels and writing poems, but he quit after a nervous administrator, on the lookout for hippies and other undesirables, made it plain to Springsteen that there had been “complaints” that he was strange. “Remember, we didn’t go into this life because we were courageous or brilliant,” Van Zandt said. “We were the last guys standing. Anyone with a choice to do something else—be a dentist, get a real job, *whatever*—took it!”

The place where Springsteen went looking for his future was just a short drive east of Freehold—the Asbury Park music scene. In the sixties and seventies, there were dozens of bands that played in the bars along the boardwalk. Asbury Park became Springsteen’s Liverpool, his Tupelo, his Hibbing.

On a spring afternoon, I stood out in front of the best-known club in Asbury Park, the Stone Pony,

and waited for an aging drummer named Vini (Mad Dog) Lopez, the unluckiest man in the E Street saga. Lopez was thrown out of the Springsteen band just before they hit it big. Springsteen's bandmates may be employees, but they have been handsomely paid and are worth many millions of dollars each. The drummer who made it for the long haul, Max Weinberg, owns houses in the New Jersey countryside and Tuscany. Lopez works as a caddy. On weekends, he plays in a band called License to Chill. The band's mascot is Tippy the Banana. "We're at the bottom of the food chain," Lopez told me. "We like to say that we're exclusive but inexpensive."

Lopez pulled up to the Pony in a beat-up Saturn. He climbed out of the car creakily, as if out of a space capsule after an interplanetary voyage. He squinted in the ocean light and limped toward me. He'd been in a car wreck on the way home from a memorial concert for Clarence Clemons. His knee was shot, and so was his back. Also, someone had dropped an amplifier on his foot at a gig a couple of nights before. "That didn't help," he said.

We walked along the boardwalk for a while and settled on a place to eat. On the way, and throughout lunch, people stopped him to say hello, to get an autograph.

In 1969, Lopez invited Springsteen to jam at an after-hours loft, called the Upstage, above a Thom McAn shoe store in Asbury Park. Eventually, Springsteen and Lopez formed a band called Child, which they soon renamed Steel Mill. It featured Lopez on drums, Danny Federici on organ and accordion, and Steve Van Zandt on bass. The boys lived for a while in a surfboard factory run by their manager. "Bruce lived in the front office, and Danny and I had daybeds in the bathrooms," Lopez said. They made around fifty dollars a week. Some of the band members held manual jobs to make ends meet: Van Zandt worked construction, Lopez put in time at a boatyard and on commercial fishing boats. Springsteen declined. The future working-class clarion never really worked.

Lopez took a long sip of his Bloody Mary and stared out at the ocean, where a surfer bobbed on a wave and fell. Springsteen still throws some extra royalties his way from the first two albums—"He does it out of the goodness of his heart," Lopez said—but it's not a living.

The Springsteen Lopez describes was a young man of uncommon ambition who was also prone to bouts of withdrawal. For all the girls around, for all the late-night Monopoly games and pinball marathons, Springsteen wasn't easily distracted. "Bruce would come to a party where people were doing all kinds of things, and he would just go off with his guitar," Lopez said.

For Van Zandt, that intensity was a lure. He recognized in Springsteen a drive to create original work. In those days, he said, you were judged by how well you could copy songs off the radio and play them, chord for chord, note for note: "Bruce was never good at it. He had a weird ear. He would hear different chords, but he could never hear the *right* chords. When you have that ability or inability, you immediately become more original. Well, in the long run, guess what: in the long run, original wins."

Asbury Park, for all its brassy bar bands and boardwalk barkers, was not immune to the times. On the July 4th weekend in 1970, race riots broke out. Young blacks in town were especially angry that

most of the summer jobs in the restaurants and stores along the boardwalk were going to white kids. Springsteen and his bandmates watched the flames on Springwood Avenue from a water tower near their surfboard-factory home. Nevertheless, Bruce's crowd remained almost completely apolitical. "The riots just meant that certain clubs didn't open and certain ones did," Van Zandt said.

As Steel Mill dissolved, Springsteen dreamed up a temporary lark: Dr. Zoom and the Sonic Boom, a kind of Noah's-ark carnival act, with two of everything—guitarists, drummers, singers—plus Garry Tallent on tuba, a baton twirler, and two guys from the Upstage who played Monopoly onstage. Then Springsteen got serious. He formed his own band. He called it the Bruce Springsteen Band.

**A** week after closing down rehearsals at Fort Monmouth, Springsteen and the band start rehearsing at the Sun National Bank Center, the home of the Trenton Titans, a minor-league hockey team. The theatre at Fort Monmouth was secluded and cheap, but not nearly large enough for the crew to set up the full travelling stage, with all the proper lights, risers, ramps, and sound system.

Inside the arena, Springsteen is walking around the empty seats, a microphone in his hand, giving stage directions. "We can't see the singers from this angle," he says. "One step to the right, Cindy!" The crew moves the riser. Cindy Mizelle, the most soulful voice in the new, seventeen-piece version of the E Street Band, takes one step to the right.

Springsteen lopes to another corner, and, as he sets his gaze on the horn section, a thought occurs to him. "Do we have some chairs for those guys when they aren't playing?" he says. His voice ricochets around the empty seats. Chairs appear.

The band gets in position and starts to rip through the basic set list in preparation for the Apollo show. Lofgren plays the slippery opening riff of "We Take Care of Our Own"—a recession anthem in the key of G—and the band is off. Springsteen rehearses deliberately, working out all the spontaneous-seeming moves and postures: the solemn lowered head and raised fist, the hoisted talismanic Fender, the between-songs patter, the look of exultation in a single spotlight that he will enact in front of an audience. ("It's theatre, you know," he tells me later. "I'm a theatrical performer. I'm whispering in your ear, and you're dreaming my dreams, and then I'm getting a feeling for yours. I've been doing that for forty years.") Springsteen has to do so much—lead the band, pace the show, sing, play guitar, command the audience, project to every corner of the hall, including the seats behind the stage—that to wing it completely is asking for disaster.

In the midst of the fifth song in the set, he introduces the band. As they run through a vamp of "People Get Ready," the old Curtis Mayfield tune, Springsteen grabs a mike and strolls across the stage. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he says to the empty arena. "I'm so glad to be here in your beautiful city tonight. The E Street Band has come back to bring the power, hour after hour, to put a whup-ass session on the recession. We got some old friends, and we got some new friends, and we've got a story to tell you . . ."

The tune, thick with horns and vocal harmonies, elides into "My City of Ruins," one of the elegiac,

gospel-tinged songs on the 9/11 album, “The Rising.” The voices sing “Rise up! Rise up!” and there comes a string of horn solos: trombone, trumpet, sax. Then back to the voices. Springsteen quickly introduces the E Street horns and the singing collective. Then he says, “Roll call!” And, with the music rising bit by churchly bit, he introduces the core of the band: “Professor Roy Bittan is in the house. . . . Charlie Giordano is in the house. . . .”

When he finishes the roll call, there is a long ellipsis. The band keeps vamping.

“Are we *missing* anybody?”

Two spotlights are now trained on the organ, where Federici once sat, and at the mike where Clemons once stood.

“Are we *missing* anybody?”

Then again: “Are we missing anybody? . . . That’s right. That’s right. We’re missing some. But the only thing I can guarantee tonight is that if you’re here and we’re here, then they’re here!” He repeats this over and over, the volume of the piano and the bass rising, the drums hastening, the voices rising, until finally the song overwhelms him, and, if Springsteen has calculated correctly, there will not be an unmoved soul in the house.

For the next hour and a half, the band plays through a set that alternates tales of economic pain with party-time escape. While the band plays the jolly opening riff of “Waiting on a Sunny Day,” Springsteen practices striding around the stage, beckoning the imaginary hordes everywhere in the arena to sing along. There is a swagger in his stride. He is the rare man of sixty-two who is not shy about showing his ass—an ass finely sausaged into a pair of alarmingly tight black jeans—to twenty thousand paying customers. “Go, Jakie!” he cries, and brings Jake Clemons downstage to solo. He practically has to kick him into the spotlight.

A bunch of songs later, after a run-through of the set-ending “Thunder Road,” Springsteen hops off the stage, drapes a towel around his neck, and sits down in the folding chair next to me.

“The top of the show, see, is a kind of welcoming, and you are getting everyone comfortable and challenging them at the same time,” he says. “You’re setting out your themes. You’re getting them comfortable, because, remember, people haven’t seen this band. There are absences that are hanging there. That’s what we’re about right now, the communication between the living and the gone. Those currents even run through the dream world of pop music!”

It’s a sweet day for Springsteen. “Wrecking Ball” is the No. 1 album in the U.S. and in the United Kingdom, passing Adele’s blockbuster “21.” “This is great news, but we’ll see where we are in a few weeks,” Landau says. Springsteen will never again have huge sellers like “Born in the U.S.A.,” but he will always get an initial burst of sales from his fan base. How sales sustain over time is the question. (The answer is that they don’t: after a month, “Wrecking Ball” dropped to No. 19. By summer, it had fallen off the charts.) What makes Springsteen an economic power at this point is his status as a live performer.

Onstage, an impromptu party is forming. The crew passes out flutes of champagne and plates of cake to celebrate the news about “Wrecking Ball.”

“That never gets old,” Springsteen says, before heading off to join the party. “I’m still excited hearing the music on the radio! I remember the first time I ever saw someone hearing me on the radio. We were in Connecticut playing at some college. A guy was in his car, a warm summer night, and his window was rolled down, and ‘Spirit in the Night’ ”—a song from Springsteen’s debut album—“was coming out of the car. Wow. I remember thinking, That’s it, I’ve realized at least a part of my rock-and-roll dreams. It still feels the same to me. To hear it come out of the radio—it’s an all-points bulletin. The song’s going out . . . *there!*”

**B**y 1972, Springsteen was fronting a band and writing songs to be performed solo. He wasn’t a big reader at the time, but he was so consumed by Bob Dylan’s songs that he read Anthony Scaduto’s biography. He was impressed by Dylan’s coming-to-New York saga: the snowstorm arrival, in 1961, from the Midwest; the pilgrimages to Woody Guthrie’s bedside at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital; the first appearances at Café Wha? and Gerde’s Folk City; and then the audition for John Hammond, the legendary Columbia Records executive. This was what he wanted, some version of it.

Springsteen’s manager at the time was a rambunctious hustler named Mike Appel. Before joining Springsteen, Appel wrote jingles for Kleenex and a song for the Partridge Family. Appel was old school—passionate but exploitative. He signed Springsteen to lopsided contracts. And yet he was so ballsy and unhinged in his devotion to his client that he would do wild things on his behalf, like calling a producer at NBC to suggest that the network have Springsteen perform his antiwar song “Balboa vs. the Earth Slayer” at the Super Bowl. (NBC declined.) Somehow, Appel did manage to get an appointment with John Hammond.

On May 2, 1972, Springsteen travelled to the city by bus, carrying a borrowed acoustic guitar with no case. The meeting didn’t begin well. Hammond, a patrician of Vanderbilt stock, made it clear that he was pressed for time, and he was repelled when Appel put on the hard sell about the singer’s lyrical gifts. But the vibe changed when Springsteen, sitting on a stool across from the desk, sang a string of songs ending with “If I Was a Priest”:

Well, now, if Jesus was the sheriff  
And I was the priest,  
If my lady was an heiress  
and my mama was a thief . . .

“Bruce, that’s the damnedest song I’ve ever heard,” Hammond said, delighted. “Were you brought up by nuns?”

Columbia signed Springsteen to a record contract and tried to promote him as “the new Dylan.” He was not the only one. John Prine, Elliot Murphy, Loudon Wainwright III, and other singer-songwriter

sensitivos were also getting the “new Dylan” label. (“The *old* Dylan was only thirty, so I don’t even know why they needed a fucking *new* Dylan,” Springsteen says.) To Hammond’s disappointment, Springsteen recorded his first two albums—“Greetings from Asbury Park” and “The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle”—with a band made up of his Jersey Shore mates, including Vini Lopez, on drums, and Clarence Clemons, on tenor sax. Hammond was convinced that the solo demos were better. Despite boosts from a few critics and d.j.s, the albums hardly sold at all. Springsteen was, at best, a gifted obscurity, a provincial who was running out of chances.

**I**n June, 1973, when I was fourteen, I got on a Red & Tan 11-C bus in north Jersey with a couple of friends and went to the city to see a resolutely un-hip and unaccountably popular band called Chicago, at Madison Square Garden. I am not quite sure why I went. We were Dylan fanatics. “Howl,” the Stanley Brothers, Otis Redding, “Naked Lunch,” Hank Williams, Odetta—practically anything I knew or read or heard seemed to come through the auspices of Dylan. Chicago was about as far from the Dylan aesthetic as you could get.

All the same, I’d paid my four dollars, and I was going to see whatever I could glimpse from our seats. Out trundled the opening act: someone named Bruce Springsteen. The conditions were abysmal, as they often are for opening acts: the houselights were up, the crowd was alternately inattentive and hostile. What I remember was a bandleader as frenetic as Mick Jagger or James Brown, a singer bursting with almost self-destructive urgency, trying to bust through the buzzy indifference of the crowd. After that show, Springsteen swore to Appel that he would never open or play big venues again. “I couldn’t stand it—everybody was so far away and the band couldn’t hear,” he told Dave Marsh. It was time to woodshed, time to build an audience through constant, intense performance in clubs, small theatres, and university gyms.

These were lean times. After Appel had paid expenses and taken his considerable cut, the pay was next to nothing. Sometimes the band slept in the van. Clemons nearly got arrested before a gig for failing to pay child support. Lopez was especially vocal about playing for seeds: “What if I want to take my girlfriend out for a burger?”

In the late afternoon, after lunch, Lopez and I were driving around Asbury Park and he started laughing and pointing. “That’s where we went to get food stamps—all of us, Bruce, too,” he said.

Lopez was a lot of drummer, too much drummer, perhaps—a chaotic Ginger Baker type. He was also fiery in his style of labor unrest. In early 1974, he roughed up Mike Appel’s brother in a dispute over money (“I did *push* him a little”). Soon afterward, Springsteen told Lopez that he was fired.

“I used to keep his guitars at my house, and he had to come get them,” Lopez said. “I asked for a second chance, and he said, ‘Vini, there are no second chances.’ *Christ*. Danny got all kinds of second chances after being a bad boy—for drugs, for not showing up or for being late. But for me no second chances.” The argument grew more heated, and Springsteen finally suggested that Lopez was an inadequate drummer.

“I put his guitars down in front of him, and I said, ‘There’s the door. You know what it’s used for.’ To this day we haven’t talked about it. There’s nothing to talk about. I’d have been in the biggest band in the land if that hadn’t happened. But, historically, at least, I was in the E Street Band. Bruce knows that, and everyone knows that.”

We drove past the low-slung building that used to house the surfboard factory where Lopez lived with Springsteen. The sign on the door now reads, “Immunostics Inc: Quality microbiological, serological and immunological reagents.” Around ten times over the years, Springsteen has had Lopez sit in with the band, including at Giants Stadium for a rendition of “Spirit in the Night.” When Lopez asked if he could start a band that played all the old Steel Mill songs, Springsteen smiled and said sure, go ahead.

“But it’s hard to sell Steel Mill now,” Lopez said. “People know that Bruce wrote all the stuff and so they expect Bruce to show up, and that just ain’t gonna happen.”

If Vini Lopez is the unluckiest drummer in American history, Jon Landau is surely the most fortunate of rock critics. During a break in the rehearsals for the 2012 tour, I drove up to northern Westchester, where Landau lives with his wife, Barbara. Landau is just three years older than Springsteen, but he is a man of more ordinary physical presence. Landau has been getting a healthy cut of the Springsteen business for more than thirty years. The profits did not go up his nose; they went on the walls. His art collection (mainly Renaissance painting and sculpture, with some nineteenth-century French painting thrown into the mix) is what is called “important.” At the risk of alarming his insurance company, I can report the presence of works by, among others, Titian, Tintoretto, Tiepolo, Donatello, Ghiberti, Géricault, Delacroix, Corot, and Courbet.

But Landau has not escaped time unscathed. Last year, he had a growth surgically removed from his brain, and, because the growth was lodged near a tangle of optic nerves, he lost the vision in one eye. The recovery was not easy, and, at times, as we toured the paintings, Landau seemed winded. After the surgery, Springsteen was with Landau nearly every day. “He knew I was going through something, and I thought I was going to die,” Landau said. “It wasn’t rational, but the fear was there. . . . We shared a lot of deep talk.” Then he smiled. “The deep thinkers did some deep thinking.”

Landau began his life in a profession that didn’t really exist. Even by 1966, three years after the rise of the Beatles, there really was no such thing as rock criticism. That year, Landau, a precocious teen-ager from Lexington, Massachusetts, was working in a Cambridge music store called Briggs & Briggs. His father was a left-wing history teacher who moved the family from Brooklyn during the blacklists and got a job at Acoustic Research. Landau grew up on folk music, and in high school he went to every rock concert he could afford. At Briggs & Briggs, he met a Swarthmore student named Paul Williams, who had just started a mimeographed, three-staple magazine called *Crawdaddy!*, perhaps the first publication devoted to rock criticism. As an undergraduate at Brandeis, Landau wrote for *Crawdaddy!* When he was a junior, Jann Wenner invited him to write a column for a biweekly he

was starting, to be called *Rolling Stone*.

As a critic, Landau was nothing if not bold. For the inaugural issue of *Rolling Stone*, in 1967, he panned Jimi Hendrix's classic "Are You Experienced?" The next year, he walloped Cream for the loose bombast of their live shows, adding that Eric Clapton, the band's lead guitarist, was a "master of the blues clichés of all the post-World War II blues guitarists . . . a virtuoso at performing other people's ideas." At the time, Clapton was known as "God." The review gave God a fit of self-doubt. "The ring of truth just knocked me backward; I was in a restaurant and I fainted," Clapton said years later. "And after I woke up, I immediately decided that that was the end of the band." Cream broke up.

Landau loved the well-wrought single, whether by the Beatles or Sam and Dave; he was suspicious of arty self-indulgence. "More and more people expect of rock what they used to expect of philosophy, literature, films, and visual art," he wrote. "Others expect of rock what they used to get out of drugs. And in my opinion, rock cannot withstand that kind of burden because it forces onto rock qualities which are the negation of what rock was all about in the first place."

In those days, there wasn't a sharp line between the rock industry and rock journalism; in 1969, Jann Wenner produced a Boz Scaggs record. Landau produced albums with Livingston Taylor and the MC5. Landau admired musically savvy executives, like Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler, and he approved of musicians who understood the virtues of popularity. In his senior honors thesis at Brandeis, he wrote admiringly of Otis Redding's willingness to be an entertainer "openly and honestly concerned with pleasing crowds and being successful."

By the end of 1971, Landau was living in Boston and married to the critic Janet Maslin. Although he had Crohn's disease and was ailing, he was the energetic center of a circle of emerging young critics: Dave Marsh, John Rockwell, Robert Christgau, Paul Nelson, Greil Marcus. Landau took notice of Springsteen's first album, "Greetings from Asbury Park," assigning the review to Lester Bangs, in *Rolling Stone*; he reviewed the second, "The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle," in the alternative weekly *The Real Paper*, calling Springsteen "the most impressive new singer-songwriter since James Taylor," but he added that "the album is not as well-produced as it ought to have been." It was "a mite thin or trebly-sounding, especially when the band moves into the breaks."

Landau, who was twenty-six at the time, accepted an invitation from Dave Marsh to go to Charley's, a club in Cambridge, to check out Springsteen's act. "I went to this club, and it was completely empty," he told me. "He had the smallest of cult followings. Before the show, I asked the guys in the bar where Bruce was, and they pointed outside."

Springsteen was standing in the cold—a skinny bearded guy in jeans and a T-shirt, hopping up and down to keep warm. He was reading Landau's record review, which the management had put in the window.

"I stood next to him and said, 'What do you think?'" Landau recounted. "And he said, 'This guy is usually pretty good, but I've seen better.' I introduced myself, and we had a good laugh."



The next day, he got a call from Springsteen. “We talked for hours,” Landau said. “About music, about philosophy. The core of him then was the same as it is now. And, you know, we’ve been having that conversation for the rest of our lives: about growth, about thinking big thoughts, about big things.”

A month later, Landau went to see Springsteen at the Harvard Square Theatre, where he was opening for Bonnie Raitt. It was the eve of Landau’s twenty-seventh birthday, and he was feeling prematurely worn out. His career was at a standstill. The Crohn’s disease was making it hard to eat or work. His marriage was falling apart. But that night, May 9, 1974, he felt rejuvenated as Springsteen played everything from the old Fats Domino tune “Let the Four Winds Blow” to a new song about escape and liberation called “Born to Run.”

The article that Landau wrote for *The Real Paper* is the most famous review in the history of rock criticism:

Last Thursday, at the Harvard Square Theatre, I saw my rock ’n’ roll past flash before my eyes. And I saw something else: I saw rock and roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen. And on a night when I needed to feel young, he made me feel like I was hearing music for the very first time. . . . He is a rock ’n’ roll punk, a Latin street poet, a ballet dancer, an actor, a joker, bar band leader, hot-shit rhythm guitar player, extraordinary singer, and a truly great rock ’n’ roll composer. He leads a band like he has been doing it forever. . . . He parades in front of his all-star rhythm band like a cross between Chuck Berry, early Bob Dylan, and Marlon Brando.

Columbia Records used the line “I saw rock and roll future” as the centerpiece of an ad campaign. Springsteen befriended Landau, who came to stay with him at his ramshackle house, in Long Branch. “Modest doesn’t even begin to describe the house,” Landau recalled. “There was a couch, his bed, a guitar, and his records. And we were up till 8 A.M. talking.” The two men listened to music and talked about Springsteen’s third record. Columbia was not likely to keep investing in Springsteen if the third record failed. Springsteen appreciated Appel’s loyalty, but his way of making high-handed judgments grated. Landau was more subtle, asking questions, flattering, suggesting, recommending. Springsteen invited Landau into the studio, where he helped Springsteen cut “Thunder Road” from seven minutes to four and advised him to revise the opening of “Jungleland.”

“I had a youthful conviction that I knew what I was doing,” Landau said. Springsteen told Appel that he was bringing in Landau as co-producer.

“**B**orn to Run,” which was released in August, 1975, transformed Springsteen’s career, and the ten-show stand at the Bottom Line early in the tour remains a rock date to rival James Brown at the Apollo or Dylan at Newport. At the Bottom Line, Springsteen became himself. By adding Van Zandt as a second guitar player, he was liberated from some of his musical duties, and he became a full-throttle front man, leaping off amps and pianos, frog-hopping from one tabletop to the next.

Landau quit his job as a critic and became, in essence, Springsteen’s adjutant: his friend, his adviser in all things, his producer, and, by 1978, his manager. After a prolonged legal battle that kept Springsteen out of the studio for two years, Appel was bought off and cast out.

Landau fed Springsteen's curiosity about the world beyond music. He gave Springsteen books to read—Steinbeck, Flannery O'Connor—and movies to see, particularly John Ford and Howard Hawks Westerns. Springsteen started to think in larger terms than cars and highways; he began to look at his own story, his family's story, in terms of class and American archetypes. The imagery, the storytelling, and the sense of place in those novels and films helped fuel his songs. Landau was also a catalyst in making Springsteen into a big business, pressing him to play bigger halls, overcoming his nightmarish early performances at Madison Square Garden. And he pressed him to think of himself the way Otis Redding did—as both an artist and an entertainer on a large stage.

Some critics have depicted Landau as an avaricious Svengali, a Colonel Parker, or worse. But the people I've talked to in the music business dismiss any idea of malign or overweening influence on Springsteen. "The idea that he'd be manipulated is so preposterous," Danny Goldberg, who has known Springsteen for more than thirty years, says. As Goldberg, who has managed Nirvana and Sonic Youth, puts it, "It's Bruce who uses Jon, to achieve complete artistic control." Landau is sensitive to any claim that he is somehow controlling his client or responsible for his trajectory. "The first principle of being a manager is being a fiduciary for the artist—his interests come first," he says. "So when you are working with him, no matter what the issue is, the first question is, What's the best thing for Bruce?" Springsteen, he went on, "is the smartest person I've ever known—not the most informed or the most educated—but the *smartest*. If you are ever confronted with a situation—a practical matter, an artistic problem—his read of the people involved is exquisite. He is way ahead."

At one point a decade ago, Springsteen rewarded Landau, who had once dreamed of becoming a rock star himself, by calling him onstage. "Bruce told me one night I should strap on a guitar when we got to 'Dancing in the Dark,' and for five or six nights I came out," Landau told me one night backstage. "It's just a tremendous high. But then on the seventh night he said, 'You know, it's great you comin' out onstage. But I was thinking that maybe we should give that a rest tonight.' "

"You mean I'm fired?" Landau said.

Springsteen smiled and said, "Well, yeah. That's about the size of it."

**A**s Springsteen grew more worldly, he became far more political. He did not start out that way. In 1972, he played a small benefit for George McGovern, at a movie theatre in Red Bank, but, as a young man, his interest in the music was almost completely as a source of personal liberation. He had not made the connection between his father's drift and the politics of unemployment, the depression of Freehold and the wave of deindustrialization.

A political consciousness could be felt on "Darkness on the Edge of Town," and it grew in the years that followed. He began to find the voice for that by reading—Landau's enthusiasms played a role here—and by travelling, and, crucially, by listening to country and folk music: to Hank Williams and Woody Guthrie. Springsteen knew he had run out of things to say about desperate nights on the Turnpike; he wanted to write songs he could sing as an adult, about marriage, about being a father, and

about larger social issues. As he listened again and again to Hank Williams, he said, the songs went from “archival to alive.” What had seemed “cranky and old-fashioned” now had depth and darkness; Williams represented “the adult blues,” and the music of the working class. “Country by its nature appealed to me, country was provincial, and so was I,” Springsteen said in a recent speech, in Austin. “I felt I was an average guy with a slightly above-average gift . . . and country was about the truth emanating out of your sweat, out of your local bar, your corner store.” He read Joe Klein’s biography of Guthrie. He read memoirs by the civil-rights lawyer Morris Dees and the antiwar activist Ron Kovic. All this fed into the working-class anthems of “Darkness on the Edge of Town,” the acoustic howl of “Nebraska,” and even the anthemic pop of “Born in the U.S.A.” He was singing now about Vietnam veterans, migrant workers, class, social divisions, deindustrialized cities, and forgotten American towns, but never in an idiom that threatened “Bruce”—the iconic family-friendly rock star. From the stage, he began to deliver paeans to his causes and ask for donations to local food banks, but the language was never threatening or alienating, and the gate receipts and record sales were beyond fabulous.

Some detected in all this the stink of sanctimony. In 1985, James Wolcott, a punk and New Wave enthusiast, found himself weary of Springsteen’s “cornball” sincerity and the level of praise accorded him by the “city-slick Establishment.” “Piety has begun to collect around Springsteen’s curly head like mist around a mountaintop,” Wolcott wrote in *Vanity Fair*. “The mountain can’t be blamed for the mist, but still—the reverence is getting awfully thick.” For Tom Carson, the problem was insufficient radicalism—the fact that Springsteen remained, at heart, conventionally liberal. Springsteen “thought rock and roll was basically wholesome,” Carson wrote in *L.A. Weekly*. “It was an alternative, an escape—but not a rebellion, either as a route to forbidden sexual or social fruit, or, by extension, as a rejection of conventional society. To him, rock *redeemed* conventional society.”

In the marketplace of arena rock, that measure of conventionality was a strength, not a limitation. By the mid-eighties, Springsteen was the biggest rock star in the world, capable of selling out Giants Stadium ten shows in a row. He was so unthreatening to American values that, in 1984, George Will went to see him. Wearing a bow tie, a double-breasted blazer, and earplugs, Will watched Springsteen perform in Washington and wrote a column called “A Yankee Doodle Springsteen”: “I have not got a clue about Springsteen’s politics. . . . He is no whiner, and the recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful affirmation: ‘Born in the U.S.A.!’ ” A week later, Ronald Reagan went to New Jersey to give a campaign speech. Taking his cue from Will, Reagan said, “America’s future rests in a thousand dreams inside your hearts; it rests in the message of hope in songs so many young Americans admire: New Jersey’s own Bruce Springsteen.”

Springsteen was appalled. He later said that “Born in the U.S.A.” was “the most misunderstood song since ‘Louie, Louie,’ ” and he began to sing an acoustic version that leached it of its bombast and made its dark shadings plainer. From the stage, he said, “Well, the President was mentioning my name

in his speech the other day, and I kind of got to wondering what his favorite album of mine must've been, you know? I don't think it was the 'Nebraska' album. I don't think he's been listening to this one." Springsteen played "Johnny 99," the bleak story of a laid-off Jersey autoworker who, in drunken despair, kills a night clerk in a botched robbery.

Someone once said to Paul McCartney that the Beatles were "anti-materialistic." McCartney had to laugh.

"That's a huge myth," he replied. "John and I literally used to sit down and say, 'Now, let's write a swimming pool.'"

With the "Born in the U.S.A." album, Springsteen combined political virtue and popular appeal, protest and party time. When he was writing the songs for the album that became "Born in the U.S.A.," Landau told him that they had a great record, but they still didn't have a swimming pool. They needed a hit.

"Look, I've written seventy songs," Springsteen replied. "You want another one, you write it!" Then he sulkily retreated to his hotel suite and wrote "Dancing in the Dark." The lyrics reflected the played-out frustration of an artist who "ain't got nothing to say," but the music—a pop confection buttressed by a hummable synthesizer line—went down easy. "It went as far in the direction of pop music as I wanted to go—and probably a little farther," Springsteen recalled in a text for his book of lyrics, "Songs." "My heroes, from Hank Williams to Frank Sinatra to Bob Dylan, were popular musicians. They had hits. There was value in trying to connect with a large audience." "Born in the U.S.A." went platinum and became the best-selling record of 1985 and of Springsteen's career.

When Springsteen and Van Zandt were young, they had "pink Cadillac" dreams, fantasies of wealth and rock-and-roll glory. "I knew I was never going to be Woody Guthrie," Springsteen recalled, in Austin. "I liked Elvis, I liked the pink Cadillac too much, I like the simplicity and the tossed-off temporary feeling of pop hits, I like a big fuckin' noise, and, in my own way, I like the luxuries, and the comforts, of being a star." He bought a fourteen-million-dollar estate in Beverly Hills. He remained friends with his old running mates from Jersey, but he also made new friends, famous friends. When he married an actress named Julianne Phillips, in 1985, they honeymooned at Gianni Versace's villa on Lake Como. Later, there were vintage cars and motorcycles, a state-of-the-art home recording studio, horses, and, the ultimate sign of class ascent, organic farming. Tours grew to corporate scale: private jets, five-star hotels, elaborate catering, massage therapists, efficient management.

Springsteen was aware of the comical contradiction: the multimillionaire who, in his theatrical self-presentation, is the voice of the dispossessed. Very occasionally, twinges of discomfort about this have leaked into his lyrics. In the late eighties, Springsteen played "Ain't Got You," which appeared on his album "Tunnel of Love," for Van Zandt. The lyrics tell of a fellow who gets "paid a king's ransom for doin' what comes naturally"—who's got "the fortunes of heaven" and a "house full of Rembrandt and priceless art"—but lacks the affections of his beloved. Van Zandt recognized the self-mockery but

didn't care. He was aghast.

“We had one of our biggest fights of our lives,” Van Zandt recalled. “I’m, like, ‘What the fuck is this?’ And he’s, like, ‘Well, what do you mean, it’s the truth. It’s just who I am, it’s my life.’ And I’m, like, ‘This is bullshit. People don’t need you talking about your life. Nobody gives a *shit* about *your* life. They need you for *their* lives. *That’s your thing*. Giving some logic and reason and sympathy and passion to this cold, fragmented, confusing world—that’s your gift. Explaining their lives to them. *Their* lives, not yours.’ And we fought and fought and fought and fought. He says ‘Fuck you,’ I say ‘Fuck you.’ I think something in what I said probably resonated.”

Springsteen was also experiencing intervals of depression that were far more serious than the occasional guilt trip about being “a rich man in a poor man’s shirt,” as he sings in “Better Days.” A cloud of crisis hovered as Springsteen was finishing his acoustic masterpiece “Nebraska,” in 1982. He drove from the East Coast to California and then drove straight back. “He was feeling suicidal,” Springsteen’s friend and biographer Dave Marsh said. “The depression wasn’t shocking, *per se*. He was on a rocket ride, from nothing to something, and now you are getting your ass kissed day and night. You might start to have some inner conflicts about your real self-worth.”

Springsteen began questioning why his relationships were a series of drive-bys. And he could not let go of the past, either—a sense that he had inherited his father’s depressive self-isolation. For years, he would drive at night past his parents’ old house in Freehold, sometimes three or four times a week. In 1982, he started seeing a psychotherapist. At a concert years later, Springsteen introduced his song “My Father’s House” by recalling what the therapist had told him about those nighttime trips to Freehold: “He said, ‘What you’re doing is that something bad happened, and you’re going back, thinking that you can make it right again. Something went wrong, and you keep going back to see if you can fix it or somehow make it right.’ And I sat there and I said, ‘That *is* what I’m doing.’ And he said, ‘Well, you can’t.’ ”

Extreme wealth may have satisfied every pink-Cadillac dream, but it did little to chase off the black dog. Springsteen was playing concerts that went nearly four hours, driven, he has said, by “pure fear and self-loathing and self-hatred.” He played that long not just to thrill the audience but also to burn himself out. Onstage, he held real life at bay.

“My issues weren’t as obvious as drugs,” Springsteen said. “Mine were different, they were quieter—just as problematic, but quieter. With all artists, because of the undertow of history and self-loathing, there is a tremendous push toward self-obliteration that occurs onstage. It’s both things: there’s a tremendous finding of the self while also an abandonment of the self at the same time. You are free of yourself for those hours; all the voices in your head are *gone*. Just *gone*. There’s no room for them. There’s one voice, the voice you’re speaking in.”

**S**pringsteen’s life in the past two decades has been, from all appearances, notably stable. In 1991, he married Patti Scialfa, a denizen of the Asbury Park music scene who had joined the band as a

singer. Scialfa's father was a real-estate developer, and she had studied music at N.Y.U.

While Springsteen was on the road, I drove to Colts Neck, where he and Patti live on a three-hundred-and-eighty-acre farm. They have three children, two sons and a daughter, and when the kids were small the family lived closer to the shore, in Rumson, New Jersey. Rumson is wealthy in a suburban way. Colts Neck looks more like Middleburg, Virginia. Horsey people live there. So does Queen Latifah. The Springsteens also own houses in Beverly Hills and in Wellington, Florida.

Springsteen is hardly immune to the charms of his own good fortune ("I live high on the hog"), yet Patti, who grew up near him but with a great deal more money, has a grander eye. When they moved to Colts Neck, she hired Rose Tarlow, an interior designer who had worked for their friend David Geffen, to do the house. When I arrived, a security guard led me to a garage complex that had been re-made into a recording studio and a series of sitting rooms. The walls are decorated with photographs of, most conspicuously, Bruce Springsteen; the tables and shelves are heavy on the literature of popular music, with an emphasis on Presley, Dylan, Guthrie, and Springsteen. There's a big TV, an espresso machine, and a framed walking stick that Presley once owned and, in 1973, shattered in a fit of pique.

Patti Scialfa showed up after a while, trailed by two big, shambly German shepherds. A tall, slender woman in her late fifties with a startling shock of red hair, she was warm and smiling, offering water in the modern way; she also seemed a little nervous. Scialfa, like her husband, enjoys a magnificently cosseted life, but hers is a strange position and she doesn't often talk about it publicly. At concerts, she performs two microphones to her husband's left, a perfect vantage point from which to inspect, night after night, the thousands of hungry eyes directed his way. Scialfa has recorded three albums of her own. In the E Street Band, which she joined twenty-eight years ago, she plays acoustic guitar and sings, but, as she told me, "I have to say that my place in the band is more figurative than it is musical." Onstage, her guitar is barely audible, and she is one of many supporting voices. Yet no one in the crowd is unaware that she is Springsteen's wife—his "Jersey girl," his "red-headed woman," as the songs go—and, at any given theatrical moment onstage, she can flirt, rebuff, swoon, or dance. The E Street Band is an ensemble of characters, as well as musicians, and Scialfa expertly plays her role as Love Interest and Bemused Wife, just as Steve Van Zandt plays his as Best Friend. "Sometimes my frustration comes when I would like to bring something to the table that is more unique," she said, "but the band, in the context of the band, has no room for that."

On the last couple of tours, Scialfa has been an intermittent presence. She skips concerts to be with the children: the eldest, Evan, just graduated from Boston College; their daughter, Jessica, is at Duke and rides on an international equestrian circuit; and the youngest, Sam, will be a freshman this fall at Bard College. Being around for the kids has been a priority. "When I was young, I felt really, really vulnerable," Scialfa said. "So I wanted things to be relaxed and stable and have somebody in the house and make sure they felt supported when they went off to school." She added, "The hardest part is splitting yourself, the feeling that you're never doing any one job really well."

It took some doing to get Springsteen, an “isolationist” by nature, to settle into a real marriage, and resist the urge to dwell only in his music and onstage. “Now I see that two of the best days of my life,” he once told a reporter for *Rolling Stone*, “were the day I picked up the guitar and the day that I learned how to put it down.”

Scialfa smiled at that. “When you are that serious and that creative, and non-trusting on an intimate level, and your art has given you so much, your ability to create something becomes your medicine,” she said. “It’s the only thing that’s given you that stability, that joy, that self-esteem. And so you are, like, ‘This part of me no one is going to touch.’ When you’re young, that works, because it gets you from A to B. When you get older, when you are trying to have a family and children, it doesn’t work. I think that some artists can be prone to protecting the well that they fetched their inspiration from so well that they are actually protecting malignant parts of themselves, too. You begin to see that something is broken. It’s not just a matter of being the mythological lone wolf; something is broken. Bruce is very smart. He wanted a family, he wanted a relationship, and he worked really, really, really hard at it—as hard as he works at his music.”

I asked Patti how he finally succeeded. “Obviously, therapy,” she said. “He was able to look at himself and battle it out.” And yet none of this has allowed Springsteen to pronounce himself free and clear. “That didn’t scare me,” Scialfa said. “I suffered from depression myself, so I knew what that was about. Clinical depression—I knew what that was about. I felt very akin to him.”

In their early days as a couple, Bruce and Patti’s idea of a perfect vacation was to get in the car and drive to Death Valley, rent a cheap hotel room with no TV and no phone, and just hang out. Now they are more likely to take a trip with the kids or cruise the Mediterranean on David Geffen’s yacht. “I remember when my family became pretty wealthy, and some people tried to make us feel bad about being wealthy,” she said. “Here’s the bottom line. If your art is intact, your art is intact. Who wrote ‘Anna Karenina’? Tolstoy? He was an aristocrat! Did that make his work any less true? If you are lucky enough to have a real talent and you’ve fed it and mined it and protected it and been vigilant about it, can you lose it? Well, you can lose it by sitting outside and drinking Ripple! It doesn’t have to be the high life.”

As Springsteen sees it, the creative talent has always been nurtured by the darker currents of his psyche, and wealth is no guarantee of bliss. “I’m thirty years in analysis!” he said. “Look, you cannot underestimate the fine power of self-loathing in all of this. You think, I don’t like anything I’m seeing, I don’t like anything I’m doing, but I need to change myself, I need to transform myself. I do not know a single artist who does not run on that fuel. If you are extremely pleased with yourself, nobody would be fucking doing it! Brando would not have acted. Dylan wouldn’t have written ‘Like a Rolling Stone.’ James Brown wouldn’t have gone ‘Unh!’ He wouldn’t have searched that one-beat down that was so hard. That’s a motivation, that element of ‘I need to remake myself, my town, my audience’—the desire for renewal.”

“Wrecking Ball” is as political a record as “What’s Going On?,” “Rage Against the Machine,” or “It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back.” After Springsteen’s political run-ins in the eighties, he grew even more engaged with social issues. He sang of AIDS (“Streets of Philadelphia”), dislocation (“The Ghost of Tom Joad”), abandonment (“Spare Parts”), and Iraq (“Last to Die”). He made speeches from the stage about “rendition, illegal wiretapping, voter suppression, no habeas corpus.” For his trouble, he was attacked by Bill O’Reilly, Glenn Beck, and even a *Times* columnist, John Tierney, who wrote, “The singer who recorded ‘Greetings from Asbury Park’ seems to have made an ideological crossing of the Hudson: ‘Greetings from Central Park West.’” In 2004, he campaigned for John Kerry and, in 2008, he was even more enthusiastic about Barack Obama, posting a statement on his Web site saying that Obama “speaks to the America I’ve envisioned in my music for the past 35 years, a generous nation with a citizenry willing to tackle nuanced and complex problems, a country that’s interested in its collective destiny and in the potential of its gathered spirit.” At a concert at the Lincoln Memorial before Obama’s inauguration, Springsteen sang “The Rising” with a gospel choir and, with Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land,” including, at Seeger’s suggestion, the two last, “radical” verses. (“There was a great high wall there / that tried to stop me; / A great big sign there / Said private property; / But on the other side / It didn’t say nothing; / That side was made for you and me.”)

The songs on “Wrecking Ball” were written before the Occupy Wall Street movement, but they echo its rage against the lack of accountability. “We Are Alive” draws a line between ghosts of oppressed strikers, civil-rights marchers, and workers, while the chorus is a kind of communion among the dead and a call to the living: “We are alive / And though our bodies lie alone here in the dark / Our spirits rise / To carry the fire and light the spark.” For all that, the political vision—in “Wrecking Ball,” as in its predecessors—isn’t really radical. It’s shot through with a liberal insistence that American patriotism has less to do with the primacy of markets than with a Rooseveltian sense of fairness and a communal sense of belonging.

One night, I asked Springsteen what he hoped his political songs would do for people who come to concerts for a good time. He shook his head and said, “They function at the very edges of politics at best, though they try to administer to its center. You have to be satisfied with that. You have to understand it’s a long road, and there have been people doing some version of what we’re doing on this tour going all the way back, and there will be people doing it after us. I think one thing this record tries to do is to remind people that there is a continuity that is passed on from generation to generation, a set of ideas expressed in myriad different ways: books, protests, essays, songs, around the kitchen table. So these ideas are ever-present. And you are a raindrop.”

Springsteen admires Obama for the health-care bill, for rescuing the automobile industry, for the withdrawal from Iraq, for killing Osama bin Laden; he is disappointed in the failure to close



Guantánamo and to appoint more champions of economic fairness, and he sees an unseemly friendliness toward corporations—the usual liberal points of praise and dispraise. He’s wary about joining another campaign. “I did it twice because things were so dire,” he said. “It seemed like if I was ever going to spend whatever small political capital I had, that was the moment to do so. But that capital diminishes the more often you do it. While I’m not saying never, and I still like to support the President, you know, it’s something I didn’t do for a long time, and I don’t have plans to be out there every time.”

Springsteen has been faulted for taking himself too seriously, and the microworld around him takes him so seriously that to an outsider it can occasionally seem like a cocoon of piety. But Springsteen can also be funny about himself. Two years ago, on Jimmy Fallon’s show, he agreed to dress up as himself circa “Born to Run”—beard, aviator shades, floppy pimp cap, leather jacket—and went on with Fallon, who was dressed as Neil Young, to sing a mock-serious version of the Willow Smith ditty “Whip My Hair.” It’s hard to imagine, say, Bob Dylan putting on a Bob Dylan work shirt circa “The Times They Are A-Changin’ ” and sending up his younger self. In a more recent show, Fallon, again dressed as Neil Young, again brought out Springsteen, this time dressed in his muscled-up eighties regular-Jersey-guy regalia—complete with sleeveless denim shirt. They sang a duet of the party-song pop duo LMFAO’s “Sexy and I Know It”: “I’m in a Speedo tryin’ t’ tan my cheeks. . . . I’m sexy and I know it!”

As a writer and as a performer, Springsteen is in command of a variety of themes and moods: comic and grandiose, political and mindless. As the tour developed, he altered the set lists so that each show felt specific to the occasion. At the Apollo, he declared that soul music had been the band’s education: “We studied all our subjects. Geography? We learned the exact location of ‘Funky Broadway.’ History? ‘A Change Is Gonna Come.’ Math? ‘99 and a Half Won’t Fucking Do.’ ” In Austin, Springsteen celebrated the centenary of Woody Guthrie’s birth by opening the show with Woody’s itinerant worker’s lament “I Ain’t Got No Home” and closed it with “This Land Is Your Land.”

In Tampa, Springsteen played “American Skin (41 Shots),” which was written in the wake of the police shooting of Amadou Diallo, but was now for Trayvon Martin, the unarmed black teen-ager who was killed in Sanford, Florida. On the first of two nights in Philadelphia, Springsteen paid homage to his Shore roots by playing two semi-obscurities from his first years as a recording musician, “Seaside Bar Song” and “Does This Bus Stop at 82nd Street?” On one foray into the audience, he found Max Weinberg’s ninety-seven-year-old mother and gave her a kiss. The next night, he pulled his eighty-seven-year-old mother, Adele, onto the stage and danced with her to “Dancing in the Dark.” In New Jersey, Springsteen heightened the tribute to Clarence Clemons. During the final song, “Tenth Avenue Freeze Out,” he stopped the music after the line “The Big Man joined the band,” and a film of Clemons rolled on the screens above the stage. (“Man, I could barely *stand* that,” the percussionist Everett

Bradley told me later. “I was crying so bad!”)

At each show, the most striking musical difference between the old E Street Band and the new was the increasing prominence given to Jake Clemons. His playing grew stronger, his willingness to take center stage more pronounced. After a few performances, he was moon-walking across the stage. And yet every time Springsteen paid tribute to Clarence Clemons Jake seemed overcome, pounding his chest with a double tap of respect for his uncle and appreciation of the crowd’s response. “Everyone wants to be part of something bigger than themselves,” Jake said. “A Springsteen show is a lot of things, and it’s partly a religious experience. Maybe he comes from the line of David, a shepherd boy who could play beautiful music, so that the crazy become less crazy and Saul the king finally chills out. Religion is a system of rules and order and expectations, and it unites people in a purpose. There really is a component of Bruce that is supernatural. Bruce is Moses! He led the people out of the land of disco!”

One night, as Springsteen was waiting to perform, I asked how he thought his inner constitution led to his being the artist and performer he is. “I probably worked harder than anybody else I saw,” he said. But there was, he thought, a core psychological component as well: “I searched out something that I needed to do. It’s a job that’s filled with ego and vanity and narcissism, and you need all those things to do it well. But you can’t let those things completely swamp you, either. You need all those things but in *relative* check. And in relative check for me, if you ask some of my friends or some members of my family, might not be considered in check to them! It’s in relative check as far as people who do what I do. But you need those things, because you are driven by your needs out there—the raw hunger and the raw need of exciting people and exciting yourself into some higher state. People have pursued that throughout the history of civilization. It’s a strange job, and for a lot of people it’s a dangerous job. But those things are at the root of it.”

In May, the tour set off for a three-month run of stadium performances in Europe. In Barcelona, Springsteen was staying in a suite, with a private deck and a Jacuzzi, at the Florida, a glorious hillside hotel overlooking the city; the band and the crew stayed at the Hotel Arts, a five-star hotel on the beach. A caravan of black Mercedes vans whisked the musicians (some band members have their own travelling assistants) to the Olympic Stadium in the afternoon for sound check. Banish any images of rock legend: forget about dissipated drummers slumped in a junkie haze in some stadium locker room, forget roadies hurling televisions and empty bottles of Jack Daniels from hotel balconies into the pool. The Springsteen road show is about as decadent as the Ice Capades. Band members talk about missing their kids, jet lag, Wi-Fi reception at the hotel.

“To be a success these days, you are more likely to be an athlete than a drug addict,” Van Zandt told me. “You go through the phase of drugs and drinking, and if you get through it you see that all the rewards are in longevity. Longevity is more fun than the drugs. Then, there’s the business. For that you need a clean head.”

The upper echelon of the pop-music touring business is, like Silicon Valley, dominated by a small number of enterprises: Lady Gaga, Madonna, U2, Jon Bon Jovi, Jay-Z, and a very few others. The drop-off in scale from there is precipitous. Springsteen is no longer in the Beatlemania phase of the mid-eighties—a period of mini-riots around his hotels—but he is still able to sell out stadiums on the I-95 corridor and other cities in the United States. He is even more popular in Europe. The rhythmic stomping of his fans at Ullevi, a football venue in Gothenburg, in 1985, damaged the foundation, an episode known in Springsteen lore as “the time Bruce broke a stadium.” In Europe, that spirit persists.

The “Wrecking Ball” tour is likely to go on for a year. James Brown played many more shows a year, but he never played so long or with such absolute exertion. Some nights, Springsteen stays a little longer in his dressing room, ginning himself up for all the running, jumping, and screaming, but there is never the thought of taking a pass.

“Once people have bought those tickets, I don’t have that option,” he told me. We were alone in a vast, makeshift dressing room in Barcelona. “Remember, we’re also running a business here, so there is a commercial exchange, and that ticket is my handshake. That ticket is me promising you that it’s gonna be all the way every chance I get. That’s my contract. And ever since I was a young guy I took that seriously.” Although there are nights when, in the dressing room, he feels tapped out, the stage always works its magic: “Suddenly the fatigue disappears. A transformation takes place. That’s what we’re selling. We’re selling that possibility. It’s half a joke: I go out onstage and—*snap*—‘Are you ready to be transformed?’ What? At a rock show? By a guy with a guitar? Part of it is a goof, and part of it is, Let’s do it, let’s see if we can.”

One kindness that Springsteen has afforded his body is more days off, leaving time for his family, for exercise, for listening to music, watching movies, reading. Lately, he has been consumed with Russian fiction. “It’s compensatory—what you missed the first time around,” he said. “I’m sixty-some, and I think, There are a lot of these Russian guys! What’s all the fuss about? So I was just curious. That was an incredible book: ‘The Brothers Karamazov.’ Then I read ‘The Gambler.’ The social play in the first half was less interesting to me, but the second half, about obsession, was fun. That could speak to me. I was a big John Cheever fan, and so when I got into Chekhov I could see where Cheever was coming from. And I was a big Philip Roth fan, so I got into Saul Bellow, ‘Augie March.’ These are all new connections for me. It’d be like finding out now that the Stones covered Chuck Berry!”

Springsteen was sitting near a low table covered with picks, capos, harmonicas, and sheets of paper with lists of songs written in thick black marker. After sound check, he tries to imagine that night’s performance. The rest of the band and the crew are down the hall at “catering”—an improvised commissary. Tonight, the menu is veal shank, grouper, and various vegetarian options, to say nothing of half a dozen kinds of salad and a pâtisserie of desserts. (“Did you try that Spanish banana thingy? Amazing!”) The band members wait for Springsteen to distribute the night’s set list. The old-timers are calm, but the newer members wait with a measure of anxiety. “I’m always flipping out, having

nightmares that he's gonna call something that I never even heard of fifteen minutes before we go onstage," Jake Clemons said.

Thousands of fans, many of whom had been waiting outside since morning, were allowed to enter the stadium grounds at six o'clock for a show that would not begin until ten. I noticed a few young Spaniards carrying a sign, in English, reading, "Bruce, Thanks for Making Our Lives Better." I tried to imagine a sign like that for—whom? Lou Reed? AC/DC? Bon Jovi? ("Richie Sambora, Thanks for making our lives better." Doubtful.) The ultra-sincere interchange between Springsteen and his fans, which looks treacly to the uninitiated and the uninterested, is what distinguishes him and his performances. Forty years on, and an hour before going onstage yet again, he was trying to make sense of that transaction.

"You are isolated, yet you desire to talk to somebody," Springsteen said. "You are very disempowered, so you seek impact, recognition that you are alive and that you exist. We hope to send people out of the building we play in with a slightly more enhanced sense of what their options might be, emotionally, maybe communally. You empower them a little bit, they empower you. It's all a battle against the futility and the existential loneliness! It may be that we are all huddled together around the fire and trying to fight off that sense of the inevitable. That's what we do for one another.

"I try to put on the kind of show that the kid in the front row is going to come to and never forget," he went on. "Our effort is to stay with you, period, to have you join us and to allow us to join you for the ride—the *whole* ride. That's what we've been working on the whole time, and this show is the latest installment, and, in many ways, it's the most complicated installment, because in many ways it has to do with the *end* of that ride. There are kids who are coming to the show who will never have seen the band with Clarence Clemons in it or Danny Federici—people who were in the band for thirty years. So our job is to honor the people who stood on that stage by putting on the best show we've ever put on. To do that, you've got to acknowledge your losses and your defeats as well as your victories. There is a finiteness to it, though the end may be a long time away. We end the night with a party of sorts, but it's not an uncomplicated party. It's a *life* party—that's what we try to deliver up."

A couple of weeks earlier, one of Springsteen's beloved aunts died. And now, the day before the first concert in Barcelona, Mary Van Zandt, Steve's mother, died, in Red Bank. "When I was a child, deaths came regularly," Springsteen said. "Then there's a period, unless accidents happen, death doesn't happen, and then you reach a period where it just happens regularly again. We've entered that part."

A little while later, having changed from his regular jeans to his stage jeans, Springsteen walked with the band through a stadium tunnel and toward the stage. The last thing he saw before heading to the mike and a blast of stage lights was a sign taped to the top step that read "Barcelona." A few years ago, at an arena show in Auburn Hills, he kept greeting the crowd with shouts of "Hello, Ohio!" Finally, Van Zandt pulled him aside and told him they were in Michigan.

Springsteen glanced at the step and stepped into the spotlight.

“*Hola, Barcelona!*” he cried out to a sea of forty-five thousand people. “*Hola, Catalunya!*” ♦

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