

He's chronicled his country's rise and fall for more than five decades, in songs that define a people and a place. So what does Bruce Springsteen do ahead of one of the most consequential US presidential elections in history? Return to the recording studio, of course.

NEARLY 12 years ago, Bruce Springsteen stood before an estimated 400,000 people on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., acoustic guitar slung over his shoulder, to sing *The Rising*, his achingly sad, faith-filled anthem to the firefighters who gave their lives during the September 11, 2001 attacks. Framed by the Doric columns of the Lincoln Memorial and a gospel choir, this great chronicler of American life was performing the musical opening for president-elect Barack Obama's inauguration. *The Rising* seemed to capture perfectly the calamity of 9/11, but also, perhaps, the "audacity of hope" and spiritual renewal the first African-American president in US history promised.

*Your burnin' wind fills my arms tonight
Sky of longing and emptiness (a dream of life)
Sky of fullness, sky of blessed life (a dream of life)
Come on up for the rising.*

During that 2008 election campaign – almost quaint in its civility by today's standards – Springsteen made it abundantly clear why Obama was his preferred choice for president over Republican candidate John McCain. Obama, he said, spoke "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".

The admiration between the Hawaiian-born former senator from Illinois and the working-class boy from New Jersey was clearly mutual, and would only deepen in the coming years. In 2009, President Obama would

pay tribute to Springsteen at a White House reception acknowledging recipients of the Kennedy Centre Honours for their lifetime contribution to American culture. In 2016, at the end of his second term in office, he would deliver a masterful summation of Springsteen's career before presenting him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

"He was sprung from a cage out on Highway 9," Obama told the star-studded gathering. "Quiet kid from Jersey just trying to make sense of the temples of dreams and the mystery that dotted his home town – pool halls, bars, girls and cars, altars and assembly lines. And for decades, Bruce Springsteen has brought us all along on a journey consumed with the bargains between ambition and injustice, and pleasure and pain, the simple glories and the scattered heartbreak of everyday life in America..."

"He didn't stop there. Once he told us about himself, he told us about everybody else: The steelworker in *Youngstown*, the Vietnam vet in *Born in the USA*, the sick and the marginalised on the *Streets of Philadelphia*, the firefighter carrying the weight of a reeling but resilient nation on *The Rising*, the young soldier reckoning with *Devils & Dust* in Iraq, the communities knocked down by recklessness and greed in the *Wrecking Ball*.

"All of us, with our faults and our failings, every colour and class and creed, bound together by one defiant, restless train rolling toward *The Land of Hope and Dreams*. These are all anthems of our America, the reality of who we are and the reverie of who we want to be... [For decades] Bruce Springsteen has been carrying the rest of us on his journey, asking us all, 'What is the work for us to do in our short time here?'"

IN THIS TEMPLE
AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE
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THIS AMERICAN LIFE

BY *David Leser*



Bruce Springsteen at Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration, a leader who spoke to the America he pictured in his music.

GETTY IMAGES



Above: Bruce Springsteen campaigning for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Below: receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Barack Obama the same year.

It seems like an eternity since we heard such flourishes of language and love emanating from the White House. But now, on the eve of this heart-thumping American presidential election, Springsteen is asking his countrymen and women that same question again, only with more urgency:

What is the work for us to do in our short time here?

“Vote [out Donald Trump]”, he told listeners to his Sirius XM radio show *From My Home to Yours* earlier this year. “God help us all. Vote before it’s too late.”

Springsteen never thought he’d have to utter those words back in 2016, prior to Donald Trump defeating Hillary Clinton to become the 45th US President. Like almost everyone, he was convinced the business mogul turned reality-television huckster stood no chance of winning. “[Trump] has a feeling he’s going to lose now,” he told Britain’s *Channel 4 News*, one month before the November 2016 polls. “Of course, he is going to lose.”

Channel 4 News: You’re confident?

Springsteen: “Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. He’s going to lose and he knows that. He knows he’s going to lose. And he’s such a flagrant, toxic narcissist that he wants to take down the entire democratic system with him if he goes.”

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN is no political pundit, but through his lyrics and prose we see the impulses of a poet and truth-seeker, a man determined to understand, not just who he is, but who we are; and in the case of his own country, what it means to be American, and how one measures one’s responsibilities against one’s personal freedoms.

He once said he’d spent most of his life as a musician “measuring the distance between the American Dream and American reality”, and by that yardstick – only days before this presidential election – the distance between the two appears nothing short of terrifying.

With hundreds of thousands dead and millions infected from the coronavirus pandemic; with an economic tsunami that has wiped out tens of millions of jobs; with race riots roiling the nation, and a series of extreme weather events having devastated great swathes of the country, far from *The Rising*, America appears to be in



“If Trump is re-elected – which he will not be ... but if by some happenstance he should be, I’ll see you on the next plane.”

the midst of *The Great Unravelling*. What path, then, amid all this, for one of the most indestructible artists of our times, a man who exploded on to the national and international stage in 1975, shortly after president Richard Nixon resigned from office in disgrace?

Back into the studio – that’s where – to record over four days and nights, together with the men and women of his beloved E Street Band, his 20th studio album in 47 years, *Letter to You*, as well as a companion documentary of the same name. Released just over a week ago, the album and documentary (streaming on Apple TV+) form an undying love letter to both his fellow musicians and his fans.

“I’m in the middle of a 45-year conversation with these men and women I’m surrounded by,” he says of his band at the beginning of the film. “And with some of you. I started playing the guitar because I was looking for someone to speak to and correspond with. [And] after all this time I still feel that burning need to communicate... It’s there when I wake every morning. It walks alongside of me throughout the day. And it’s there when I go to sleep each night.”

“Over the past 50 years it’s never once ceased, owing to what, I don’t really know. Is it loneliness, hunger, ego, ambition, desire, a need to be felt and heard, recognised, or all of the above? All I know is that it is one of the most consistent impulses in my life; as reliable as the rhythmic beating of my own heart is my need to talk to you.”

Just over two years ago, Springsteen stood at the bedside of George Theiss, his old New Jersey band mate from The Castiles, as Theiss struggled through the last stages of lung cancer. The Castiles were Springsteen’s first “real band” and with Theiss’s death in July 2018, Springsteen realised he’d become “the last living member” of the band he’d joined as a teenager, one that had taken the New Jersey music scene by storm in 1965.

Over the next 55 years, Springsteen would go on to sell 150 million albums worldwide; fill stadiums around the world; win 20 Grammy Awards, two Golden Globes, an Academy Award and a Tony Award. He’d be inducted into America’s Songwriters Hall of Fame and Rock & Roll Hall of Fame; he’d grace the covers of both *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines in the same week; be the subject of numerous documentaries and films; and receive that Presidential Medal of Freedom from Obama.

But the death of George Theiss – indeed the death of so many loved ones over the years, including E Street Band keyboardist Danny Federici and legendary saxophonist Clarence Clemons – would plunge Springsteen into the deepest of meditations on what it means to live and love well, and the nature of death. “Where do we go when we die?” he asks us now, in the 72nd year of his life. “Maybe we go nowhere. Or maybe everywhere. Maybe our soul resides in the ether, in the starless part of the sky that resonates outward like a stone dropped into a still lake [that] circles with the lives of people we’ve touched over the course of our lives. No one knows where, or how far, their soul may sound, may travel.”

Wherever we go, Springsteen muses, those whom we’ve cherished are never completely lost to us. They exist, beyond words, in the talismans left behind, in the shadowlands of our memories, in our thoughts and in our dreams.

*I’ll see you in my dreams
Up around the riverbend
For death is not the end.*



SEVEN YEARS ago, some of Bruce Springsteen's fans helped make a film – *Springsteen and I* – testifying to their adoration for the man known universally as “The Boss”. One British factory worker recalled saving up for 20 years to cross the Atlantic with his wife to see his rock idol perform over two nights at Madison Square Garden. On the first night, their tickets had them walking up into the rafters, to the very back row, until one of Springsteen's employees stopped them and asked to see their tickets. “I think we can do better than that,” he told the couple, clipping orange bands to their wrists and handing them new tickets. They were then guided downstairs, through to the centre of the front row, into the best seats in the house.

One woman told of being invited on stage by Springsteen to dance with him during a performance of his 1984 classic, *Dancing in the Dark*. (He'd done that many times, even with his – at the time – 87-year-old mother, Adele.) A truck driver named Kitty explained how every significant moment in her life had been born aloft by a Springsteen song; that even though her work was gruelling and unsung, his songs gave her the feeling she was part of America's backbone.

I am not that kind of fan. I came to Springsteen relatively late in life, after seeing him perform solo his *The Ghost of Tom Joad* album in 1996 at Sydney's Capitol Theatre. I'd been spellbound by the title track, for the way it transported me immediately into John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*; and I added this to earlier ballads of Springsteen's that had left their mark: the harmonica-fuelled sense of hopelessness in *The River*, the sexual tension of *I'm on Fire*, the spiritual allegiance to a dying hometown in *My Hometown*, the seductive undertow of *Secret Garden* and, of course, the boundless despair in *Streets of Philadelphia*, for which he'd won an Academy Award in 1994. (It is now, 26 years later, the theme song for a powerful new advertisement for Democrat presidential nominee Joe Biden in the swing state of Pennsylvania.)

I'd loved all those songs, but still didn't quite get the superlatives, the hype, the mass adulation that Springsteen elicited. That was because I'd never seen him perform live with the E Street Band.

That all changed in 2014 when I travelled with a group of friends to the Hunter Valley for the *High Hopes* album tour. Then the truth of the Springsteen phenomenon hit me – right in the heart, the throat, the solar plexus. Along with 10,000 others I stood before possibly the fittest, most intense, joyous, passionate, inspirational, ludicrously attractive 64-year-old man I'd ever seen. He was singing, roaring, soothing and seducing us in song; playing guitar, harmonica and piano; jumping, leaping, dancing – and keeping this up, no breaks, for over three hours.

And behind him – as Springsteen would say – the “heart-stoppin', pants-droppin', hard-rockin', booty-shakin', love-makin', earth-quakin', Viagra-takin', justifyin', death-defyin', legendary E Street Band”. As a unit, this was about as masterful and joyful a congress of musicians as you could possibly witness, with Springsteen, their curator, their visionary, their jubilant, demonic presence, out front.

David Remnick summed it up perfectly in *The New Yorker* in 2012 when he described Springsteen's style as being “as close as a white man of Social Security age can get to James Brown circa 1962, without risking a herniated disc or a shattered pelvis...”

“The display of energy,” he wrote, “and its depletion is part of what is expected of him [and] 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.”

After this life-altering experience, I was hooked. I read his 500-page 2016 memoir *Born to Run*, and then, the



Springsteen featured on two different magazine covers in the same week in 1975.

following year, saw him again – twice – the first time after driving through a hailstorm to get to the Hunter Valley once more, then, a few weeks later, at Sydney's Qudos Arena. By this point I was dancing along to his songs as if I'd been singing *Thunder Road* all my life.

In 2018 I happily paid a small fortune to see his one-man, Tony Award-winning show on Broadway. By now I was almost convinced that American entertainer Jon Stewart had been right in 2009 when he'd joked that Bruce Springsteen could only have come from miraculous beginnings. “I believe that Bob Dylan and James Brown had a baby,” Stewart said. “And they abandoned this child... on the side of the road, between the exit interchanges of 8A and 9 on the New Jersey Turnpike. That child is Bruce Springsteen.”

Springsteen possessed the moves of Elvis Presley, his childhood hero; the raw-attack guitar abilities of Pete Townsend; and, at his best, the songwriting abilities of Bob Dylan, the man whom Springsteen has described as the “father” of his country, his “mentor” and the “brother” he never had.

Springsteen had the ability to characterise America in ways that only Dylan could realise. He summoned characters and melodies from the ether – his self-declared “magic trick” – and transported you not only across his nation, but right down into its very depths, where all the struggles, heartbreaks and losses resided. And he could do this because he'd spent a good part of his own life honing his craft, while wrestling with the seeds of a depression that had been planted in his soul as a child growing up on the shores of New Jersey.

Despite the love and unfailing support he'd always received from his mother Adele and her Italian side of the family, it was the afflictions of the Irish, on his father Douglas's side, that caused him to suffer from “a black melancholy”. His father, broken on the wheel of his own misfortune, was a cynic and misanthrope. “Nobody's any good,” he'd say, “and so what if they are.”

As a young boy, Springsteen regularly encountered the whiplash of his father's

With the E Street Band: “I'm in the middle of a 45-year conversation with these men and women,” Springsteen says.

drunken rages, sullen silences and paralysing depression, and it produced in Springsteen a crippling sense of emotional abandonment that he would tap into for his songwriting. Springsteen's songs became a way of talking to his father, of using music and lyrics to try to repair old wounds – *his wounds*, but also the wounds of millions of Americans, working-class and otherwise.

Since that night in New York in 2018, I have watched *Springsteen on Broadway* four more times on Netflix, and each time, as it draws to a close and he's remembering sitting outside his old house in Freehold, I find myself almost in tears. He is paying homage to his “childhood friend”, a towering copper beech tree that once stood 50 metres from his family home. As a boy, he lived under its branches, deployed its roots as a fort for his toy soldiers, and climbed into its upper reaches to make way for all “the dreaming room” he needed.

That tree is gone now, replaced by a parking lot, and Springsteen's heart sinks and roars at the senselessness of that tree's erasure from this earth. History matters and this tree had witnessed too much to have been done away with so easily. “When we live amongst ghosts,” he says, “always trying to reach us from that shadow world, they are with us every step of the way. My dead father is still with me every day and I miss him, and if I had a wish, I wish he could have been here to see this.”

“But I visit with him every night. It's a grace-filled thing [because] the soul is a stubborn thing. Souls remain. They remain here in the air, in empty space, dusty roots and sidewalks. And in the songs that we sing. That is why we sing. We sing for our blood and for our people because that is all we have at the end of the day. Each other.”

IF IT isn't obvious by now, let me say loud and clear that of all the people on this precious, overpopulated planet that I would most like to interview, Bruce Springsteen stands alone. Such is my shameless, late-life devotion, that I would probably walk naked through the CBD if I thought this would help secure an audience with him.

Imagine my excitement, then, when, a few weeks ago, the *Good Weekend* editor informed me that we'd been offered a one-on-one interview via Zoom with “The Boss”. Imagine the thrill of thinking that for an hour I'd be able to talk to the man who's owned America's heart and soul for half a century, about everything, including the national crisis gripping his country.

Imagine again, then, my disappointment when, a few days later, I was told by the publicist that, sorry, the one-on-one interview was now impossible. Complications had arisen. There were new guidelines from Sony Music Entertainment in New York stipulating that 16 other journalists from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Japan would be joining me on the virtual hook-up





with Springsteen. And, no, I would not be allowed to discuss politics in general, nor the presidential elections in particular, and I'd have to submit my (non-political) questions beforehand for vetting.

What does any self-respecting journalist do in a case like this? He walks away, right? He says – with all the professional integrity and self-righteous indignation he can marshal – that he will not be dictated to by a publicist or corporate juggernaut. Not now, and certainly not at such a hinge point in US history as this, not with such a fiercely made-in-America man as Bruce Springsteen.

But that's not what I do. As a supplicant fan, what I do is reluctantly accept these crumbs in the hopes of transforming them into freshly baked loaves for the masses. I submit five questions (leaving a politically flavoured one for the end because, *yes, there is a limit to my capitulation*) and then, on the appointed morning, I sit before my computer and await the moment that Bruce Springsteen appears on my screen.

Five minutes later, here he is.

"Hello everybody," he says.

"Hello Bruce," we chorus.

"Hello Bruce, how are you?" says Australian author, musician and singer-songwriter Sean Sennett, who has known Springsteen for years and who – I realise now – is facilitating this virtual press conference.

"I'm very good," says Springsteen, speaking from his home recording studio on his farm in New Jersey. I can see at least 12 guitars lining one wall. I can see he's wearing a dark duffle jacket and T-shirt; that his face looks thinner, his receding hairline greyer, but that he's tanned and chiselled and those brooding hazel eyes, jutting jaw and perfect Roman nose of his still produce an impossibly handsome visage for any age, let alone a septuagenarian.

I know from Springsteen's record company that one of my questions has been chosen overnight as the last question for this "press conference" and, much to my surprise, it is the political one. I wait for my appointed moment. In the meantime, other journalists' questions come.

"I understand the entire album you wrote was [composed using] a guitar given to you by a fan?" one says. "What kind of magic powers did this guitar have?"

"It had something going for it," Springsteen replies, "because I was coming out of my [Broadway] play and there was a young man on the sidewalk holding a guitar, so I figured he was wanting me to sign it. But he said, 'No, no, no, I want to give it to you,' and I looked at it and could tell right away that it was beautifully made.

Above: with Patti Scialfa, his wife of 29 years, in the new documentary, Letter to You.



"It dawns on you rather quickly: there's only so much time left, only so many star-filled nights, rainy midsummer days."

"So I brought it home and...it played beautifully, it sounded gorgeous...it was a real piece of craftsmanship. I left it in my living room and when I started to feel the urge to write, I just picked it up because it was such an easy play. And most of the songs came pouring out of it, so I owe a debt to whoever that young man is, wherever he is."

Another journalist asks Springsteen about the songwriting process and whether it's more satisfying now than, perhaps, when he was younger.

"Songwriting is generally a terrifying and incredibly fulfilling experience," one of the most prolific songwriters in the world replies. "It's terrifying because you never know if you're ever going to do it again. How it happens I don't know. I've done it for 50 years. I don't know how a song takes place and I don't know anyone who's ever been able to explain it.

"Because you pull something from nothing and you create something physical from it. It's just in the air, it's in your emotions, it's in your mind, your soul, your spirit, your heart, your intellect...and you just pull something out of the air and create something.

"So there's an element of it that's quite frightening in a sense, and then there's another element that, when it does happen and something is good, it is one of the most wonderful feelings in my life. It's like, 'Yes, there's another one!' It's still an incredible experience, the act of writing a song."

Another question, this time from a Japanese journalist, although it's less a question, more a declaration of love. He tells Springsteen he first became hooked on rock music because of him.

"*Arigato*," says The Boss. He closes his eyes like a Zen monk sitting atop Mount Fuji. He blinks. He closes his eyes once more. His face turns sombre. His face turns beatific. He laughs. He chuckles. He cackles. He closes his eyes once more. And, then, after 45 minutes, my time finally arrives.

"David Leser is here from the *Good Weekend*," Sean Sennett says. "David has a question for you."

Springsteen: "Hi."

Me: "Hi Bruce, thanks for having me and congratulations on a beautiful album and film."

Springsteen: "Thank you."

Me: "We are speaking today 19 days before, arguably, the most consequential US presidential election in all of our lifetimes."

Springsteen: "Right."

Me: "How much trepidation are you feeling and would you consider relocating to Australia...?"

Springsteen: [*Laughs*]

Me: "...If the current incumbent is returned?"

Springsteen: "I would consider that [*cackles*]. I love Australia [*chuckles*]. Every time...we have nothing but good times down there, man. Whoa. It's always a treat to come. Love the people. Love the geography. Great place for motorcycle trips. You know it's close to our hearts. And if Trump is re-elected – which he will not be, I'm predicting right now he's going to lose – but if by some happenstance he should be [re-elected], I'll see you on the next plane."

MANY YEARS ago, in the fading light of a small town in Texas, Bruce Springsteen had a breakdown, one of the worst moments of anxiety he'd ever experienced. He had no idea what overcame him that evening, only that the despair was so deep there was no alternative but for him to nosedive into its dark centre.

In his memoir *Born to Run*, he recalls that moment and the instructions he chose to take from it: "All I know is as we age the weight of our unsorted baggage becomes heavier...much heavier. With each passing year, the price of our refusal to do that sorting rises higher and higher."

Springsteen has done more sorting than most men, and you can see the passing years in the worry lines and creases of happiness that map his striking face. You can also hear, through his words, the clarity and perspective that age brings, and all its accompanying intimations of mortality.

"It dawns on you rather quickly," he says in his documentary, "there's only so much time left, only so many star-filled nights, snowfalls, brisk fall afternoons, rainy midsummer days. So how you conduct yourself and do your work matters. How you treat your friends, your family, your lover.

"On good days, a blessing falls over you. It wraps its arms around you and you're free and deeply in – and of – this world. That's your reward. Being here. That's what gets you up the next morning – a new chance to receive that benediction while you're buttering your toast, getting dressed or driving home from work.

"And you realise how lucky you are. Lucky to be alive. Lucky to be breathing in this world of beauty, horror and hope. Because this is what there is: a chance, a world where it's lucky to love, to be loved."

For half a century, Bruce Springsteen has been confirming his destiny as one of the greatest artists America has produced. By his own confession he has tried, through his songs, to understand where to place his own mind and heart, and where to help us place our own.

When he's with his E Street Band, it helps him to dream big about who we might be. And when he dwells in that sanctuary, in what he calls his "House of a Thousand Dreams", he tries to speak in the voice of his better angels.

"We have been given," he says, "the tools and the property of the soul to be attended to and accountable for. And that takes work, work that we might build on the principles of love, liberty, fraternity; ancient ideas that still form the basis for a good life and a humane society. What happens in this house matters. So, brothers and sisters, wherever you are, let's light up this house."

This is the America I love and pray for. Never more so than today. ■