

Springsteen Live landmark release

**Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band —
Live 1975/85
CBS Records**

review by Mike Spindloe

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. Really. There must be. Because after years of rumours, denials and hedging from the Boss, *IT* has finally arrived. The Bruce Springsteen Live Album. Not another half-assed bootleg. Not a teaser track on some soon to be forgotten compilation album. Not a B-side of a single. This is the real thing. Almost three-and-a-half hours of music on three CDs, three cassettes or five LPs. Forty tracks spanning Springsteen's career, including seven tracks never before released in any legal form.

It would be quite easy, for a variety of reasons, to come right out and say that this is the greatest rock and roll record ever made. It surely wins hands down based on the sheer quantity of material, but it is Springsteen's unassailable reputation as the greatest live performer rock and roll has ever known that guarantees the quality. The set, incredibly, is about the length of one Springsteen concert, which is to say about double that of most other performers.

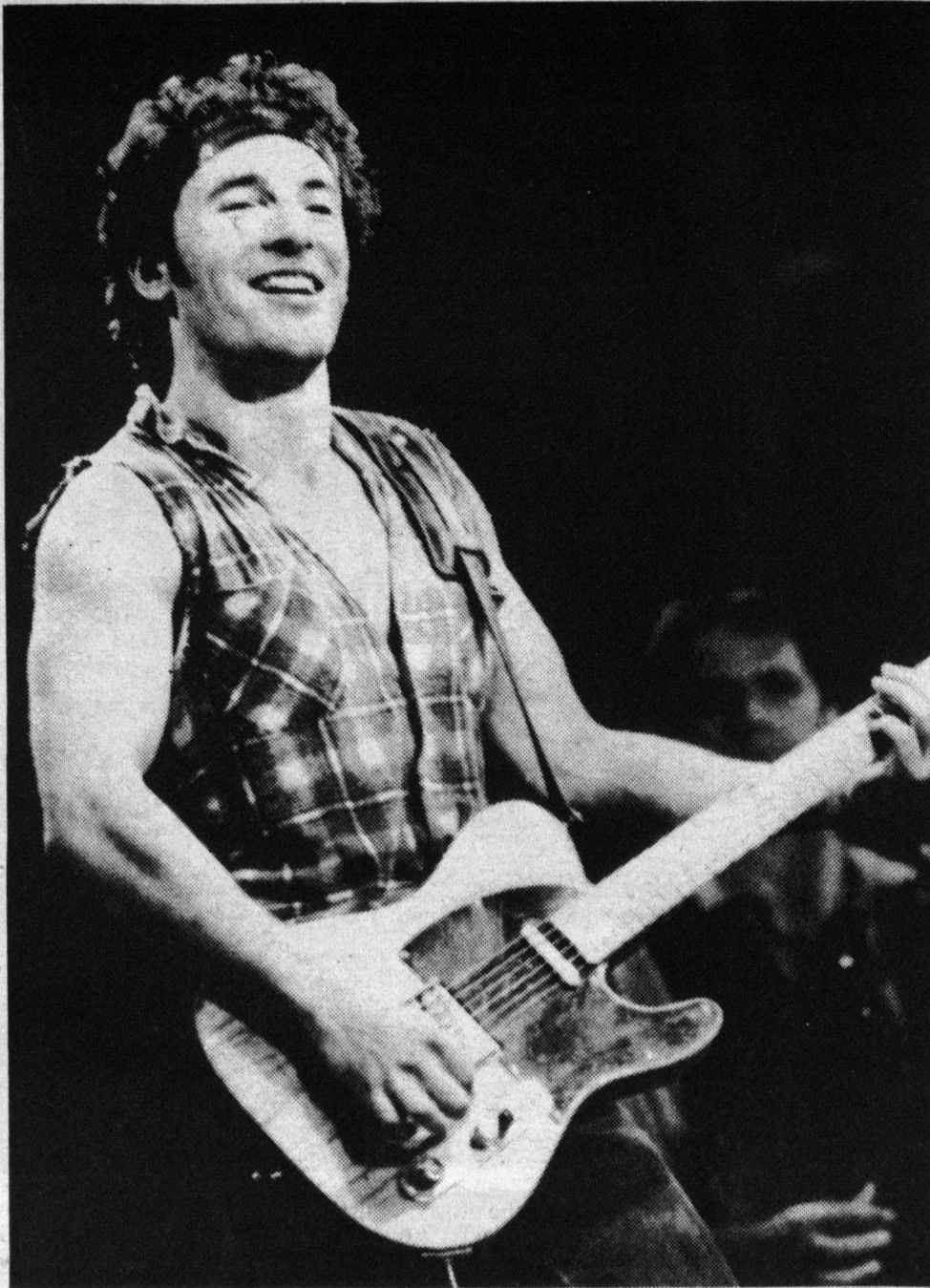
There is *not* a weak song in the bunch, but the even more amazing thing is that this is only a reasonable sampling of Springsteen's repertoire. It could just as easily have been eight or ten LPs in order to comprise a truly retrospective and comprehensive collection. As it is, the omissions from this set will keep fans arguing for years, but herein we will look primarily at what is included because that should be enough to keep this record glued to a lot of turntables for a very long time.

Beginning with the previously unreleased stuff, there are eight tracks if you include the version of Tom Waits' "Jersey Girl" which was previously available only as the B-side of the single "Cover Me." Springsteen's cover of Edwin Starr's 1970 anti-Vietnam hit "War" is the track that commercial radio has jumped all over, and it will apparently be released as a single. Ironically, it's probably the worst song on the album, serving mainly to emphasize Springsteen's superior ability as a writer by comparison.

The other throwaway, in the greater context of the whole, is "Paradise By The 'C,'" a short instrumental workout that serves primarily as a showcase for the saxophone work of Clarence "the Big Man" Clemons. Then there are a couple of tracks originally written for and recorded by other artists; "Fire" (Robert Gordon, Pointer Sisters) and "Because the Night" (Patti Smith) both sound great in their E Street manifestations and can both be considered among the sets' many highlights.

There are two more cover versions: "Raise Your Hand," which used to follow the Detroit medley (Devil With the Blue Dress, CC Rider, etc., not included here, probably since it was on the No Nukes LP) as a concert encore, and Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land." Springsteen introduces the latter as "one of the most beautiful songs ever written." Rounding out the selection of new songs is the Springsteen original "Seeds," a competent if not especially distinguished rocker, which brings us to the bulk of the material.

The emphasis, understandably since it was the album that catapulted Springsteen to superstar status, is on *Born in the USA*



Bruce Springsteen: the sweet smell of success is lingering

songs. Eight tracks from that album are included here, and the majority are simply enlivened copies of the originals. The live setting brings out the full force of songs like "Darlington County" or "Bobby Jean," but the highlights amongst the USA songs are the extended version (not a disco mix) of "Cover Me," and an acoustic version "No Surrender" that conveys a sense of personal intimacy that only the Boss could pull off in a football stadium.

Working backwards, *Nebraska* is represented by a trio of songs: "Nebraska," "Johnny 99" and "Reason to Believe." Again, it is the palpable level of energy that Springsteen infuses the songs with that separate them from the original versions (which, in this case, were live in the studio). These songs, along with a few others, reveal Springsteen as a closet folkie with a rock and roll muse and a deep level of social awareness.

The River is represented by a half-dozen songs, including rip 'em up versions of "Two Hearts" and "Cadillac Ranch." "Hungry Heart," the biggest hit from that album, features an audience singalong from the first word (no waiting for the chorus or endless prompting needed here). The killer, though, is a shining version of

"The River" that *emphasizes* Springsteen's talent as a concert artist; on this song and many others he actually sings them better than he did in the studio.

Darkness On The Edge Of Town is well represented by, again, a half-dozen songs, a much greater proportional representation than that given to *The River*. "Darkness" is my personal favourite, so I could go on about these songs for, well, paragraphs, but suffice to say that "Badlands" comes complete with the epic intro which opened shows on the 1978 tour. "Adam Raised a Cain" makes the studio version sound positively anaemic and "Racing in the Street," clocking in around nine minutes long, is simply breathtaking.

Half of *Born To Run* is here, including a stunning, essential acoustic version of "Thunder Road" which opens the whole set on the right foot, to put it mildly. Also included are fairly straight readings of "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out" and the classic "Born To Run," as well as an extended "Backstreets."

One of the pleasant surprises of the set is the five songs from Springsteen's first two LPs. "Growin' Up" begins with a classic Bruce rap and is followed rapidly by "It's Hard To Be a Saint In the City" and "Rosal-

ita." Like everything else, these songs gain something in their transition to the stage and prove that the E Street band sounded just as tight in 1975 as they do today. In that time, the band has only undergone one personnel change, the departure of Little Steven Van Zandt for solo status and the arrival of Nils Lofgren to take his place, at least in concert.

That about wraps up our overview of the selections; obviously an in-depth review of the material would turn an already long piece (as editors' teeth gnash) into a book. Thus we proceed to some conclusions and mild criticism.

It is the incredible energy Springsteen exudes on stage which has made fans out of many who didn't divine any inspiration from his albums. Of course, no copy in any form will ever capture 100% of that energy, but *Live 1975/85* comes about as close as can be expected, and certainly far closer than the best bootleg ever has.

The digitally mastered sound is crystal clear even on the older recordings, the audience is present, but not intruding, and the performances are consistently compelling. Forget about 'alternative' or 'commercial' divisions; if you like rock and roll, this album is an essential part of your collection of music.

Obviously the price tag is hefty; if you haven't heard yet, it's going for about \$45 for the LP or cassette version and \$65+ for the CD set in Edmonton at the moment. All versions are boxed with a 36 page booklet that consists mostly of lyrics and photographs. No illuminating biographical information, but that's hardly worth splitting hairs over. One might also question why three cassettes sell for the same price as five records; but that, obviously, was the record company's decision. They know they're going to clean up on this one and they're going to sock it to us as best they can.

Fortunately, the set is worth the price. It does represent a summing up of Springsteen's career to date, but the raison d'être from Bruce's point of view probably has more to do with finally beating the bootleggers than making more money than he surely needs at this point. At one point, Springsteen encouraged bootleggers, but the unprecedented number of inferior quality illegal releases that occurred concurrently with the *Born In The USA* tour probably had a lot to do with his decision to relent to pressure and release this epic.

Initial public reaction has borne out the huge demand for this record. In the week since its release, it will have gone platinum in the U.S.A. and Canada (sales of a million and 100,000 respectively). Stories of thousands of copies selling out in hours and people lining up for expected shipments have become commonplace as Bruce-mania, which began with *Born In The USA*, continues to rage unabated. How long he can keep it up is anyone's guess, but for the man who once stated in an interview that "I just try to write stuff that I won't feel silly singing on stage," the sweet smell of success is lingering and should continue to into the foreseeable future.

Live 1975/85 is a landmark release from one of the few remaining artists who makes good old unpretentious rock and roll for the masses. Bruce Springsteen's honesty, work ethic, and deserved success should serve as an example to any aspiring musician and, through his music, to us all.

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