

The River flows on forever

by Bruce Rae

Few things in rock music today inspire as much eager anticipation as a new Bruce Springsteen album. His music is often regarded with a respect bordering on reverence, to a large extent because of his refusal to succumb to the artistically-deadening caution that so many established rock performers fall prey to. Each album has been different from the last as Springsteen constantly probes different corners of life and various music genres, but always clinging to a hard-rock musical edge. The major unifying element has been his search for that one thing in life that will make a man want to survive. What that one thing is has always eluded him, until now, for on his new album, "The River," he has come to an unshakeable faith in two things: that true love is possible and that, once found, it has the power to rescue a man from an otherwise meaningless life.

The album opens with a driving number called "The Ties That Bind," an invocation to avoid self-pity when you've met with rejection in love. He knows that it's easy to become hardened by the loss of love, but he warns that when you let that happen, "you're walkin' blind, to the ties that bind." Springsteen feels that the most fundamental yearning we have as human souls is intimacy with another. It is a need we cannot escape from and the only possible alternative is the pain of loneliness. "Sherry Darling" rocks and rolls with contagious energy along Springsteen's ever-present open highway. The E Street band gives a 'Rosalita'-like performance full of bouncy sax work, a throbbing bass guitar, and a lot of background hoots and hollers in a style that sounds a lot like a Caribbean 'cha-cha'. With "Two Hearts," love reappears as a means of salvation as Springsteen reflects upon his former belief that he had to be fiercely independent with a 'heart of stone' to survive. He now feels that such a role is just a childish dream and that "someday these childish dreams must end. To become a man and grow up to dream again." As old dreams are in-

evitably broken by a disillusioning reality, new dreams are needed to replace them. They resurrect any fading hopes and Springsteen's new dream is of finding his "special one" — a true, permanent love. The first side ends with "Independence Day," an account of Springsteen's severed relationship with his father and his need for freedom — a second theme on the album. Just as he did in 'Adam Raised A Cain' and 'Factory' Springsteen sees his father more as a victim than an adversary and he regrets having to leave, but the love between them has died and he must be free from false love in order to realize his goal of finding true love. A slow, ominous guitar follows along beautifully with Springsteen's sorrowful voice to create the most moving and brutally honest song on the album.

Side Two opens with a very tight rocker, "Hungry Heart," a tune that recreates and transforms a couple of classic vocal genres. The descending background harmonies echo the early black female vocal groups while Springsteen's lead voice conjures up the buoyant innocence of the very early 60s singers. He has never done anything that sounded like this before and his fusing of the different styles into his own image works perfectly. The song is about some poor guy who leaves his wife and kids only to find that he also left his only love behind, and that freedom by itself, though initially enticing, eventually leaves one cold and lonely.

Indeed, in "I Wanna Marry You," Springsteen is even willing to take on the bonds of matrimony if he feels he has found true love. He goes so far as to make a really shocking reference to taking on "responsibilities" as he recognizes that while real love can exist, it is also a compromise on freedom for you are now bound to another heart: "They say in the end true love prevails, but in the end true love can't be no fairytale." The title cut, "The River," follows, in which Springsteen laments the disintegration of a premature marriage and an unstable love. The personal language and references, coupled with Springsteen's lingering unwill-

ingness to part with a weary and despondent tone, creates the feeling of a past irretrievably lost. When the haunting harmonica intro reappears beneath the middle chorus it's like a half-remembered ghost. The river signifies the flow of time and is the current of what he thought was an undying love for Mary. Now "the river is dry," the past is dead, and so is his love. The river, and time, are forever flowing onward, which services to heighten the dramatic impact of the loss. Springsteen asks, "is a dream a lie if it don't come true, or is it something worse?" As the song tells us, it clearly is something worse if you've been dreaming you have a real love and then discover you're locked into a false, impermanent love, because then it is not only a lie but also a loss — a loss of an ideal and a loss of hope.

The next two sides offer still more accounts of true and false love but do it with erratic material. Some of it is excellent — "Point Blank" (his flashing offensive against lies that follows in the tradition of 'Streets of Fire') and "The

Price You Pay," a smoothly-arranged piece that surges to a desperate attempt to find something of value waiting at the end of the road. But in the end there is nothing there and the sweet freedom that kept him alive turns sour when it is not used to realize a more permanent and meaningful end. Here Springsteen's firmly resolute voice coheres with the broad, relentless pull of the E Street rhythm section and the undercurrent of guitar to create a song that drives you to an edge and then saves you from a fateful fall.

The rest of the songs on the second half can safely be categorized as either hard-rocking or slow-moving but always lyrically repetitious. He emphasizes the value of true, as opposed to false, love — admirable, but by this point incredibly overwrought. There is perhaps an album and a half of solid material with the remainder ("Crush On You," "Cadillac Ranch," "I'm a Rocker," "Ramrod") representing a hard-rocking but generally unoriginal collection. Springsteen is above all eclectic in his music — fusing the best elements from each

period in rock's development — and adds his own, personal touch to create his distinctive sound. These songs lack that personal panache that sets the magnificent apart from the mediocre.

The album as a whole is a culmination of all that has gone before, as it bears an overwhelming sense of resolution and a final commitment to an ideal. For Springsteen it is a time of reckoning. The cycle began with the "Wild, Innocent" album which evoked the dark streets and dark life of New York as he desperately sought something worth holding onto only to come away empty-handed. On "Born To Run" he found something that seemed to offer a purpose to life, or least, hope. That was the open road, the highway, a life of movement and change and escape from the asphalt 'Jungleland' of broken faith and twisted values. But he was running scared and in the end was running blind, without direction, still unsure if there was such a thing as real love. The "Darkness" album gave us a more solemn anxious Springsteen who had come to the understanding that sooner or later one must reflect upon one's experiences to put them in the most efficacious light, to separate the good from the bad and then pursue it. With "The River," the 'good' is love and Springsteen pursues every facet of it to the very end. According to Springsteen, we live to find love and, once we find it, it inhabits and animates our entire being. True love is the one value rooted in his experiences that has given his life meaning and importance; nothing else has worked and nothing else will.





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