

“Springsteen Rocks the House at his 63rd Birthday Party”

By Miranda Yaver

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It's more than three hours past the scheduled start time, which means that it's more than two hours after the true fans know that Bruce and his E-Street Band are scheduled to roll on to the stage of MetLife Stadium. Rain continues to trickle town and form small puddles on the tarp that has been laid out for the general admission and other floor ticket holders. Many arrived as early as 7am in anticipation of the lottery to determine the order of entry on to the floor, though the hours of waiting – and inevitably, drinking – induced a dose of disarray into the typically orderly system adhered to in each of his many shows across the nation. What's more, given Bruce's legendary show lengths and the concert's scheduling on September 22nd, it is becoming apparent to all that the concert will stretch into September 23rd, Bruce's birthday. It has not yet truly begun, and yet all know as the lightening subsides and the tension builds, this will be a night to remember. As anyone who has spent their last paycheck on a ticket to his show, or conveniently scheduled “work” and “family” travels around his tour schedule knows, at a Bruce concert, anything can happen.

And so in the darkness and mist, Bruce emerges, walking to the mic with great purpose, the sounds of Wilson Pickett's “In the Midnight Hour” booming through the stadium, and says, “I think I just invited 55,000 people to my birthday party!” before launching into the familiar (yes, perhaps too familiar) and classic “Out in the Streets,” which has been featured among the first few songs in many shows on his recent tours. Thirty-two years after its release on *The River*, the 1980 album filled with classic songs of yearning and sadness, along with a number of hits and entertaining numbers (“Cadillac Ranch,” “Ramrod,” etc.) that often find themselves sprinkled through his legendary concerts, “Out in the Streets” holds up as well as ever as Bruce and the band rock the stage, leaving room for wonder whether sparks will actually fly given the heat of the music and the rain still trickling on the stage as it booms to Max's drumbeat. “The Ties That Bind” follows to perfection, after which the band launches into the less well-known tour premier of “Cynthia” from *Tracks*, singing “I just like knowing Cynthia you exist at all in a world like this,” with beauty though to a crowd somewhat less enthusiastic than a few minutes previously.

An excellent cover song by Creedence Clearwater Revival and an inevitable appearance in the setlist given the rain delay, “Who'll Stop the Rain” appears in spot number four on the setlist. Of course, the thousands of fans, some adorning parkas and others braving the elements, have long forgotten the rain and dampness that has pervaded the evening, and the wetness of rain has been replaced with sweat among those on the general admission dance floor, packed tightly with those antsy from now over twelve hours at the Meadowlands. This is followed immediately by the *Born in the USA* treat “Cover Me,” Bruce sexy and seductive as he moves across the stage and “look[s] for a lover to come on in and cover” him, then leading into the more bleak and despairing “Downbound Train,” which should remind Bruce's listeners of the true – though sometimes forgotten – powerful political and economic message of this album often touted for patriotism and sometimes overlooked on other dimensions.

As with the concert previous, Gary U.S. Bonds joins Bruce onstage for “Jole Blon” and “This Little Girl,” every person at MetLife brought to their feet in delight, though admittedly perhaps hoping for new musical pairings for this last night in the Garden State.

At the stroke of midnight, with impressive unison, the audience sings happy birthday to Bruce (“Forever Young” would have been equally appropriate to sing to him, though obviously would have required greater coordination on the part of the audience), and Bruce and the band launch into “In the Midnight Hour,” which had been playing as the band took the stage but which marked a tour premier as a band performance. The E-Street band has returned to many of its soul roots in this tour – particularly with the Apollo Medley, which was absent from this leg of the tour – and this was an addition most welcome to the setlist given its rhythms and given the ironic trajectory of the night, which will be unforgettable for all, for better or worse (almost entirely for the better, late commutes home notwithstanding).

There are a number of additional highlights to the show. “Because the Night” is not a rare treat, but is a treat nonetheless as Nils’ flawless and searing guitar solo pierces the air. The tour premier of “Meeting Across the River” is lovely and might have been aimed at giving the audience and the band a bit of a breather after the always energetic “Waiting on a Sunny Day,” but the audience is all a-whisper because they know exactly what is coming next. Bruce, for the first time on this tour in New Jersey, without Clarence by his side, was about to perform “Jungleland.” And as Roy’s keys play the introductory notes, the audience squeals with excitement. The anticipation is almost as good as the song itself, which is played to perfection, Jake both filling Clarence’s shoes well and taking on a presence of his own. (Shout-out: his solo music is really excellent). Bruce’s voice is sweat and gravel, faith and yearning, and the sax solo – which some of us wondered whether we would hear again live – performed familiarly and with great beauty as Bruce launches into the last verse, his fist pumping the air and the audience savoring every second.

The night ends with Bruce’s mother joining the band for their rendition of “Twist and Shout,” and Bruce’s receiving of a Fender-shaped birthday cake which he generously cuts and dispenses to a handful of people standing in the front of the general admission pit. And despite the late night, people continue to linger in the stadium, because one thing of which fans can be sure at a Bruce show is that you never *really* know when it’s really over.

If there is one song from *Wrecking Ball* that fans should look to for guidance about the E-Street Band’s message moving forward, it seems to be “We Are Alive.” The E-Street Band and its followers have suffered two great losses in recent years – Danny Federici and Clarence Clemons – and those losses are honored every show in “My City of Ruins” as Bruce asks the audience during the band intros whether they are missing anybody, to which Bruce responds, “If you’re here, then they’re here, so raise your voices and let them hear you,” turning with conviction his mic back to the audience. And so they have moved forward with a beauty and vigor, grasping every moment on stage as though it is the last, making every concert filled with a sense of urgency and importance that can be conveyed to no greater degree than Bruce himself.