

Bruce Springsteen, *Devils and Dust*, Paramount Theater, Oakland, 5/5/2005

The scene outside the Paramount Theater – an art deco beauty in the heart of downtown Oakland – was truly surreal, with at least a hundred Boss die-hards Boss hoping desperately that fate would work in their favor on this occasion, his only tour stop in the San Francisco Bay Area on the *Devils and Dust* tour (so far). As the lottery number was drawn, the fans – some excited, some dismayed – lined up against the theater wall in order according to ticket number, about to begin the long wait to find out how many of us would get tickets. Was it a hundred tickets being released? Was it two? No one seemed to know, and so, accepting that we were all entirely clueless, like acknowledging that we were living in Plato's cave, we began to relax and become acquainted with one another.

Springsteen fans have a unique way of bonding at shows, and by the start of the concert we felt as though we were long-time friends rather than having a relationship that extended only a few hours. Approaching the ticket office, presenting our lottery ticket and wristband, we realized that we were going to get lucky that night, that we were getting into the concert. The woman handed us our tickets and I, still in a daze, could hardly believe my eyes when I saw our seats – dead center, orchestra row CC. Not just seats, but *VIP* seats. Incredible. We took our spot next to the fans with whom I had stood in line, all of us ecstatic over our good fortune. The lights dimmed, the crowd roared, and Bruce Springsteen walked onstage, commanding the attention of all of the Paramount's attendees who were clapping, screaming, and “Bruuuuuuce”-ing wildly for him. The night promised to be spectacular, and it delivered.

The opening performance of “My Beautiful Reward” was truly lovely and marked a departure from the setlist order to which he had loosely followed in the previous five performances on the tour. The title track from the album, “Devils and Dust,” followed closely with the album version, yet in the absence of drums, with only his guitar and harmonica with which to perform, it had a certain starkness about it as he sang of themes of faith and disillusionment (“I’ve got my finger on the trigger and tonight faith just ain’t enough”). Though in concerts from the *Reunion* and *The Rising* tours, “Youngstown” had been played as a rock song, this time it returned to the acoustic version, much more striking and absolutely haunting. Amid our struggles with Iraq, the lines “We’ve sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam, now we’re wondering what they were dying for” seemed to be even more poignant and to ring truer now than in the 1999 shows. Even in the absence of the harmonizing between Bruce and Patti, “Empty Sky” was moving as ever, echoing the sense of loss felt by so many in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

One of the qualities of an acoustic show such as this is that the setting is naturally more intimate and in Bruce's case, that often translates to more storytelling. Before launching into “Long Time Comin’,” Bruce began to talk about his experiences as being a parent and having the opportunity to correct the mistakes of his parents (“I ain’t gonna fuck it up this time”). He told his audience that every now and then, he’ll see one of his children doing something like his father, and he said, “I realize, oh, I let that one slip.” Following this much more upbeat song was “Silver Palamino,” which was well-written and well-performed, stark and haunting.

Taking his seat at the piano, Bruce began to talk about love songs, which he told us his father called “a conspiracy.” He then began to play “The River,” which was a gorgeous performance of a classic song, a stunning and heartbreaking story of young love and pain. One could hear the devastation in his voice as he sang the words, “Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true, or is it something worse?” Following this and carrying on with this theme, he performed, again on the piano, the moving and brutally honest “Two Faces” from the album *Tunnel of Love*.

After a beautiful performance of “Nebraska,” he moved on to “Reno,” a sexually explicit story of a man who is having sex with a prostitute but who drifts off thinking about another woman. The words “It wasn’t the best I’d ever had, not even close” seemed to sum up the character’s feelings of dissatisfaction and unfulfilled desires. “Racing in the Streets” marked a return of Bruce to the piano. He made one mistake about halfway through the song, but he managed to laugh it off and did not lose the audience’s enthusiasm. However, it did serve as a subtle reminder of how integral a role Roy Bittan plays in the concerts in which he performs.

“The Rising” brought the concert into a more religious theme as Bruce encouraged his audience to “come on up for the rising tonight,” hinting at the possibility of a resurrection. The backlighting during the song gave Bruce the appearance of having a golden halo, as though he were a deity. As he returned to the piano to sing “Jesus Was An Only Son,” before beginning it, he spoke of his experience of having a child, saying that it makes you want to do anything for your child. One of his only explorations of mother-child relationships, this song was moving to the point of tears, a definite highlight of this all-around amazing concert. Before performing “Metamoros Banks,” written around the same time as those from the album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* and on the subject of Mexican immigrants, Springsteen made his public service announcement and followed it up saying that “We are in serious need of good immigration policy,” to which he received a round of applause. Though he walked offstage after the end of this song, Bruce never leaves that easily, and after a two-minute standing ovation, he returned for his encores.

In times of such struggle, “Land of Hope and Dreams,” beautifully performed at the piano, was an uplifting reminder to all of us that a brighter future does lie ahead of us and that one day, our “dreams will not be thwarted, faith will be rewarded.” He followed this up with the edgy song “My Best Was Never Good Enough,” filled with acerbic wit and serving to bring a light-heartedness to this more somber part of the concert. He then moved into his closing song, “The Promised Land,” acoustic this time and haunting as ever before. What changed about this version was that he no longer sounded like a believer in the promised land of which he sang, but rather someone whose dreams of it have been broken. Still there was tremendous conviction in his voice as he sang the words, “I’ve done my best to live the right way, I get up every morning and go to work each day. But your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold. Sometimes I feel so weak, I just want to explode.” The entire theater was dead silent as we took in the depth and hope conveyed in the strikingly beautiful and haunting performance. We were blown away to say the very least.

This concert was not a typical Bruce Springsteen experience. It was not a stadium-sized rock show with the E-Street band, but rather a solo acoustic tour. It was not a night during which we would sing and dance along with him for three hours, but rather a sit-down show, he asked the audience for “as much quiet as possible,” and asked us not to clap along so that we would not disrupt his “already tenuous sense of rhythm.” Perhaps it was his not-so-subtle reminder to all of us that he is still the Boss. But this concert was one of tremendous conviction, carrying strong messages of faith, disillusionment, and a hope of reaching the promised land one day. With hints at a second leg of the *Devils and Dust* tour, with any luck we’ll meet him further on up the road.