

Springsteen Serenades NYC Metro for Four Hours

By Miranda Yaver

“Let’s go for a road trip,” Bruce says with a smile, guitar in hand, between “Working on the Highway” and “Darlington County” (alas, absent the Nils-sized hat accompaniment). And indeed, that comment is quite apt for a concert by Bruce Springsteen, whose fans are known to take planes, trains, and automobiles to attend his shows, even crossing oceans to experience Boss Time in all its glory.

For those who do not know the love for his music, it is strange to invest so much time, money, and energy into a concert. For those who are his devoted followers, happily spending a day in a New Jersey Meadowlands parking lot during sound checks to hopefully fare well in the general admission pit lottery, it is more than a concert. It is a religion. It is faith. It is spirit. It is “getting gotten” by 60,000 strangers who for that four hours are sharing a spiritual experience in which redemption and hope are fair game as sparks fly on E Street.

There are times in life when hope feels elusive, when we are left wondering when or if we will, to paraphrase Hemingway, come to find strength in the broken places of our lives. There are times when even providing our pound of flesh still leaves us thinking, to quote a certain Boss, “Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true, or is it something worse?” Enter Bruce Springsteen, long-time champion of America’s working class heroes, instilling in tens of thousands of followers each concert some much needed assurance that faith can and will be rewarded, and renewing belief in the promised land.

Bruce’s sound checked songs do not reliably make their way onto final setlists, but this first of three MetLife shows in East Rutherford, which began at 8:05pm and went until midnight, was an exception as the string section walked onstage in advance of the full E-Street Band, which then not just played, but *opened* with “New York City Serenade,” a fantastic concert rarity from his second album, *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E-Street Shuffle* (1973). From that moment onward, it promised to be a special show and it delivered, the entire audience serenaded and on its feet for four hours.

Seeing Bruce in New Jersey always comes with a couple of downsides (at times aggressive fans and a poorly-located venue), but the perks outweigh them tenfold, from the extra cheers for local spots (“My home is here in the Meadowlands... the blood is spilled, the arena’s filled, and Giants play the games”) and an energy in the band that is consistent with a happy homecoming. And on a perfect summer night (a vast improvement over his September 22/23 concert in 2012 in which a two-hour rain delay led to it being his effective “birthday concert”), Bruce came ready to celebrate summer with such songs as “Spirit in the Night” and “Something in the Night,” and joking with a fan’s sign request of “Santa Clause is Coming to Town” that it was “a good summer song.”

Perhaps because of Bruce’s upcoming autobiography release, he has return this tour to more storytelling. Before launching into a heart-wrenching performance of “Independence Day,” he

shared stories of his father's virtual non-responsiveness to his music, a central theme of which is his strained relationship with his father and his struggle to connect with him. Indeed, Bruce shared, absent the ability to have a real conversation with him, he sent his father his records, which his mother forced him to listen to but which provoked from him no commentary until shortly before his death. As with so much of his work, the show was deeply personal.

Something noted widely in the aftermath of First Lady Michelle Obama's speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention was the power of her commentary on Donald Trump without ever invoking his name. The audience got a similar experience with Springsteen, whose progressive politics are well-known (many love him for that, and others such as New Jersey Governor Chris Christie love his music *despite* his politics). The audience got a three-song sequence of "Mansion on the Hill," "Jack of all Trades," and "My Hometown" – all powerful songs that carry with them messages tied to economic inequality and a call to support the working class. Then after a stunning performance of "The River," Bruce launched into "American Skin (41 Shots)," which was written in the aftermath of the fatal shooting of the unarmed young man Amadou Diallo in the Bronx and which remains immensely relevant amid extensive dialogue of racial profiling in policing as well as gun violence more broadly. The intensity of this election season is not lost on him (and a larger-than-usual number of signs read "Bruce for President"), but on stage he let the music speak for itself, and the message rang loud and clear.

To be sure, Bruce played a number of the usual crowd favorites (for example, "Badlands," "Out in the Streets," "Because the Night," "She's the One," and "Rosalita"). Among the songs from *The River* that were played (he no longer performs the album start to finish) were "The Ties that Bind," a rocking "Sherry Darling," and "You Can Look (But You Better Not Touch)," which is admittedly an ironic song for a musician notoriously flirtatious and known to crowd surf still. But Bruce also broke out some less common ones thanks in part to his taking song request from the audience. One person had a "Growin' Up" sign because it was his thirteenth birthday, leading Bruce to play the song but not before joking that he wouldn't get into what he was up to at that age. "Brilliant Disguise" was another rarity that was a real highlight from the generally underrated *Tunnel of Love*.

Jake Clemons had big shoes to fill, both literally and metaphorically, and he has done a stupendous job on the saxophone and in joining Bruce to ham it up on stage as only Bruce can do. Jake's sax finesse is showcased no better than in "Jungleland," which for some period had made the loss of Clarence feel all-too-acute and which now is a stunning example of how the E-Street Band can itself find redemption in a member of the Clemons clan who is truly one of them now.

There are a number of classic rock artists who to be sure have withstood the test of time. Peter Dinklage, Tom Petty, The Rolling Stones, The Who, and Billy Joel, among others, are notably excellent performers. But watching this nearly 67 year-old rocker on stage, in better physical shape than most of his fans young and old, putting on four hours of singing, dancing and fist-pumping without intermission, one cannot help but be reminded that there is no other artist

who gives so much too – and indeed demands so much in return from – his audience, some of whom arrived for the general admission lottery at 10am. Bruce is known for long concerts and for never *really* wanting to leave, such that one can often leave a venue with the trepidation of “That was the end, right? He didn’t go back on, right?” Because until the house lights come on, it’s fair game for an encore. Despite going through his traditional closing songs – “Dancing in the Dark,” “Rosalita,” “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out,” and “Shout” – he splashed water on his face, Steve threw around his shoulders a mini-cape reading “The Boss” on the back,” and Bruce did a faux-shy dance up and down the stairs “deciding” whether to stay on stage for more. Next came a spectacular “Bobby Jean” and in response to another birthday request and oh-so-fitting for a summer night in New Jersey, “Jersey Girl” to close out the night at the midnight hour.

No doubt, a large share of that crowd looks forward to being serenaded again by the “heart-stopping earth-shocking earth-quaking heartbreaking, air conditioner-shaking, love making, Viagra taking, history-making, legendary E-Street Band” tomorrow night.

SETLIST:

1. New York City Serenade
2. Wrecking Ball
3. Badlands
4. Something in the Night
5. The Ties that Bind
6. Sherry Darling
7. Spirit in the Night
8. Santa Clause is Coming to Town
9. Independence Day
10. Hungry Heart
11. Out in the Street
12. Growin’ Up
13. You Can Look (But You Better Not Touch)
14. Death to My Hometown
15. Mansion on the Hill
16. Jack of All Trades
17. My Hometown
18. The River
19. American Skin (41 Shots)
20. The Promised Land
21. Working on the Highway
22. Darlington County
23. Because the Night
24. She’s the One
25. Brilliant Disguise
26. The Rising

27. Land of Hope and Dreams
28. Jungleland
29. Dancing in the Dark
30. Rosalita (Come Out Tonight)
31. Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out
32. Shout
33. Bobby Jean
34. Jersey Girl