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LIFE ITSELF

Bruce Springsteen's *Working On A Dream*

I am a 40 year-old American from a bedroom community in northeastern New Jersey now residing in Cyprus. I want to declare, today and for all time, that I love Bruce Springsteen so much I can barely describe it, and I've felt this way since I first heard him at the tender age of 12, when I tried to learn "Sandy" on an acoustic guitar. Most of the people now alive on Earth, and perhaps half of the people I know, haven't been alive for as long as I've been a Springsteen fan. His work is one of the intrinsic components of my personal mythology and one of the intrinsic components of my day-to-day reality; it rides beside me, and it always buys the smokes. I write this sitting at my desk in my apartment just outside Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, and above me, to my right, is the empty space that's already been designated for the soon-to-be-framed poster of Springsteen that Borders gave away with every purchase of Magic when it was released in October 2007. I have everything he's ever done on vinyl and CD, laminated posters from the mid-Eighties in my parents' attic somewhere, a stack of bootlegs, on vinyl, procured in the Eighties from Village record stores like Venus and It's Only Rock n' Roll.

Like most of Springsteen's fans from New Jersey, particularly those of my generation, I was fortunate enough to grow up in a landscape Springsteen made mythic. Before Springsteen, my home state was a tangle of fetid highways, moribund cities and gritty beaches, and Springsteen took it and made it beautiful. Much like the photographers William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, Springsteen took a bland and sometimes broken and embittered geography and imbued it with a lyric and cinematic beauty; like Newark native Philip Roth, he made New Jersey a place worth writing about.

When I listen to Springsteen, I can see New York through the windshield, off in the distance, across the river, as I drive from the 14C tollbooths on the Turnpike toward the Holland Tunnel, the sky behind me a chemical sherbet of pinks and oranges. I am, fortunately or unfortunately, a surfer from New Jersey, as is Springsteen, and when I hear him today, I can still feel the hot sun as I walk down the boardwalk from my parents' place on McCabe Avenue in Bradley Beach, my board under my arm, the smell of suntan lotion rising from the baking sand. I started countless bands, wanting to create something as incredible as "Rosalita" or "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out"; convinced rock stardom was not in my cards, I continued writing, hoping to craft something as beautiful as "Thunder Road," as perfect as "The River".

Growing up, Springsteen was our Che Guevara. My hometown of Millburn is a wealthy suburb of New York just 15 miles due west, down Route 78, from the Holland Tunnel, and it shares a school district, a town hall and police and fire services with Short Hills, an even leafier and greener enclave and home of the infamous Short Hills Mall. Springsteen's characters – and even Springsteen himself – were the kind of guys who pumped gas and fixed cars and cut grass in my town, but that never gave me and my friends even the slightest pause in the pursuit of our obsession. *Born In The U.S.A.* held us all in thrall, but we were a sophisticated congregation and had been in the chapel for years – at sweet sixteen parties throughout 1984, usually held at local country clubs, we surrounded the DJ and demanded he play Springsteen. We would form a circle and take turns dancing across its center to “Working on the Highway,” but it was “Thunder Road”, perhaps an odd choice for a sweet sixteen, that made our night – we would again stand in a circle, this time singing to each other as loud as we could for the entire song. It was exuberant and ecstatic, and I look back on those moments as some of the finest I experienced during high school; I'm still proud my friends and I, in 1984, when the world was set ablaze by *Born In The U.S.A.*, had already memorized the lyrics to most of Born to Run. We also loved Elvis Costello, Bob Marley, the Police, the Smiths, Talking Heads, U2...we were pop music sophisticates, but our fanaticism for the Boss marked us as kids who grew up in Jersey, which meant Springsteen was ours, and we of course belonged to him. I took him with me to college, to the University of Rochester, where on a few occasions I waited until my roommates departed, then hung this weird combination detergent packet and dryer sheet thing my mom had sent me from a bungee cord I had attached to the broken light fixture on our ceiling – once I had fixed up my make shift air-recording studio, I put on side one of *The River*, picked up a battered racquetball racquet and started bashing along to “The Ties That Bind,” the weird combination detergent and dryer sheet thing serving as a microphone, absorbing my shout-along vocals: “You been hurt and you're all cried out, you say!!/you walk down the street pushing people out of your way!!!/you packed your bags and all alone you wanna ride!!!” I spent the summer of 1990 in Boulder, Colorado, leaving town reluctantly that August to return home to finish school at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey (I had dropped out of Rochester). My dad came out to Boulder to travel back to Jersey with me, and as we drove out of town he popped in a cassette copy of *Born In The U.S.A.* he had purchased just for our journey. We were going home.

Of course it's a cliché to wonder where 25 years have gone, to declare that you never even imagined being 25 years-old, let alone 40. There are ways that Springsteen songs made me feel in the past to which I'll never again have access. But while I can no longer avail myself of the romantic hope that “Born to Run” evoked in me, the song itself doesn't mean any less to me, and new songs keep arriving, “I'll Work for Your Love,” from *Magic*, and “Life Itself”, from *Working On A Dream*, that speak to what I feel now – which is my age, of course, and the sense that many of my dreams have come true, in spades, but that I have so many more in the queue and that I might not have time to get to all of them, that I will die unfinished. This is irrational, of course, but this makes it no less omnipresent. At some point we must confront our mortality – the lucky among us don't do it until soon before it arrives, but we neurotics happen upon this confrontation earlier in our lives than perhaps we should, and we spend the rest of our lives shadow-boxing. So here I am, throwing punches.

As is Springsteen, at 59, but his punches always seem thrown in the context of title bouts, and in a world where individual albums, as currency, have lost much of their value, his records remain events, monuments and mile-markers. The kids are downloading MP3s the way we used to pop quarters into arcade games, and folks my age with similar tastes probably expect to see upcoming Springsteen releases on the counter at Starbucks. But even at 40 I am still my inviolable adolescent self, except instead of racing off to the record store when Springsteen releases a new album I'm instead running over to Borders or logging in at Amazon to order it.

Listening to *Magic*, one heard the bitter whispers of everything that had gone wrong since September 11th, the despair and rage we all felt as the drive toward the Gulf War succeeded, when we learned of the torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, after we learned how the Bush administration treated our returning war veterans...the record spoke to its times in much the same way *The Rising* spoke to us in 2002. With *Working On A Dream*, Springsteen has returned to the terrain of albums such as *Tunnel Of Love*, *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, albums that chart romantic relationships. This record is closer to *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, with its celebration of marriage, than it is to the elegiac *Tunnel of Love*, which, released during Springsteen's brief marriage to Julianne Phillips, bristled with doubt and longing.

Reduced to its simplest themes, *Working On A Dream* is the 59 year-old Springsteen's celebration of his marriage as he approaches the final quarter of his life. The chorus of "This Life" sums this up: "this life/this life and then the next/with you I have been blessed/what more can you expect." Much of the record is a profession of love, particularly in the context of a lengthy marriage between two people reaching the end of middle age. "And I count my blessings that you're mine for always/We laugh beneath the covers and count the wrinkles and the grays...my darling we'll sing away," Springsteen sings in the somewhat majestic "Kingdom of Days"; toward the end of "Life Itself", he confesses, "life itself in your heart and in your eyes/I can't make it without you".

It's a lovely record, both in its sentiment and its melodiousness, but the temptation with *Working On A Dream* is to compare it to the superior *Magic*. The album expands on the Sixties pop that found its way to *Magic*, but that album worked so well because it was a return to fundamentals, a hard-rocking Springsteen record more similar to *The River* than to *The Rising*, heavy on guitar and suffused with the E Street Band's classic Jersey Shore bar band sound. *Magic* featured plenty of Clarence Clemons's sax, which isn't as prominent on *Working On A Dream*.

The Beach Boys, the Beatles, the Byrds, CCR and the Left Banke are of course core Springsteen influences. They are secondary elements on *Magic*, however, whereas they overwhelm much of *Working On A Dream*; the Sixties pop sensibility which forms much of the album's architecture feels forced – it's a lightness that doesn't come easy to the E Street band, and at times it sounds like they've been handcuffed. This is particularly true of the album's rhythm – the E Street Band has always found a way to swing, from "Spirit in the Night" to "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out" to "The Ties That Bind" to "Mary's Place" to "Livin' In the Future", but bassist Gary Tallent and

drummer Max Weinberg seem as if they've been hamstrung, permitted to cut loose only on "Let Me Show You What Love Can Do."

"Girls in Their Summer Clothes", from *Magic*, wasn't the strongest song on the record, but it was Springsteen's version of "God Only Knows" and a unique moment on a very strong record, much like "Worlds Apart" on *The Rising*. "Your Own Worst Enemy" was also a tribute to the Beach Boys, but Springsteen's application of Brian Wilson's intricate pop sweetness never impedes the song's propulsion nor brightens its darkness. On *Working On A Dream*, Springsteen's pure pop aspirations overwhelm the album – with the exception of "Life Itself", "Good Eye", "Outlaw Pete" and "What Love Can Do", Springsteen's chamber pop ambitions drain the record of real vigor and render it soft, rather than haunting – it seems the sleigh bells of *Born to Run* have been traded for triangles. It's a bit like asking Philip Roth to write a collection of love poems; if you wield a mighty hammer, why reach for a knitting needle?

There are many brilliant moments here, particularly "Life Itself", which references the Byrds and a few Stephen Stills guitar solos circa Crosby, Still & Nash. "Tomorrow Never Knows" is the album's Woody Guthrie number, while "The Last Carnival", which references "Wild Billy's Circus Story" from *The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle*, sounds like "Buckets of Rain" from *Blood on the Tracks*, but with backing vocals lifted from a Cat Stevens record. "Good Eye" is a honking blues track that sounds like a harder version of "The Big Muddy" and "Souls of the Departed" from *Lucky Town*, while "Working on a Dream" is a Roy Orbison tribute, mining Orbison's "You Got It," from the Jeff Lynne-produced *Mystery Girl*, right down to Springsteen's Orbison vocal and the chiming acoustic guitars. "Outlaw Pete" is a charming Western rocker that tells the story of the "legendary" Outlaw Pete: "He was born a little baby on the Appalachian Trail/At six months old he'd done three months in jail/He robbed a bank in his diapers and little bare baby feet/All he said was 'Folks my name is Outlaw Pete'" - it's Springsteen's "The Devil Went Down to Georgia". The two darkest songs on *Working On A Dream*, "What Love Can Do" and "Life Itself", are also the album's strongest, recalling "Last to Die" and "Gypsy Biker" from *Magic*, while "Lucky Day" is a rollicking pop song in the vein of Seventies-era Stones.

Yet, ultimately, *Working On A Dream* sounds like the after-effect of *Magic*, and it lacks that album's mix of force and nimbleness. "Queen of the Supermarket" sounds like a syrupy, poorly crafted version of "I'll Work For Your Love" – one of the best songs on *Magic* – or a discard from *Human Touch*. "I'll Work For Your Love" begins with the piano from "Thunder Road" and blasts into a classic Springsteen devotional: "And I'll watch the bones in your back like the stations of the cross...I watch you slip that comb through your hair and this I'll promise you/I'll work for your love, dear/I'll work for your love..." Compare this to "The Queen of the Supermarket", a piano-driven ballad built on Beatlesque background harmonies and Springsteen singing urgently near his higher registers, but perhaps the most flaccid song he's ever written: "With my shopping cart I move through the heart/Of a sea of fools so blissfully unaware/That they're in the presence of something wonderful and rare/The way she moves behind the counter/Beneath her white aprons her secrets remain hers/As she bags the groceries, her eyes so bored/And sure she is unobserved..." "I'll Work For Your Love" is a

roaring declaration of love, while “Queen of the Supermarket” is its voyeuristic weak sister. Toward the end of the song Springsteen sings, “And I’m lifted up, lifted up...” as if trying to bring the song to the sort of crescendos that so effortlessly arrived throughout much of *The Rising*.

“Queen of the Supermarket,” and “Outlaw Pete” suffer from the poor phrasing that marred *The Ghost of Tom Joad* – the lines are too long for the music, the meter is off, there’s something forced...every song is a mouthful. While *Greetings From Asbury Park, The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle* and *Born to Run* demonstrated the kind of phrasing which Sinatra must have envied, there have been occasions since *Lucky Town* where we’ve seen Springsteen battle to hammer his themes into cumbersome lyrics that betray the phrasing which seemed effortless on his earlier albums – think of the wordplay throughout *Greetings From Asbury Park* – and even as recently as *The Rising* and *Magic*.

Working On A Dream is another of these occasions. While the lyrics on *Magic* were taut and often chilling, they tend to sprawl on *Working On A Dream*, particularly on “Kingdom of Days” (“the wet grass on our backs as the autumn breeze drifts through the trees”) and “The Last Carnival” (“a million stars shining above us like every soul living and dead/has been gathered together by a God to sing a hymn over your bones”). “The Wrestler”, which Springsteen wrote for Darren Aronofsky’s 2008 film, is one of his most moving songs, particularly when Springsteen sings, “then you’ve seen me/I come and stand at every door/then you’ve seen me/I always leave with less than I’ve had before”. It’s an anthem for the beaten, but from the opening line it’s evident we’re not in the company of the same lyricist who wrote *Greetings From Asbury Park, The River* and *The Rising*: “have you ever seen a one-legged dog makin’ his way down the street/if you’ve ever seen a one-legged dog then you’ve seen me...” How does a one-legged dog make his way down the street? Did Springsteen mean a three-legged dog? How did the author of such lyrics as, “the screen door slams/Mary’s dress waves/like a vision she dances across the porch as a radio plays” (“Thunder Road”) and “well I was young and I didn’t know what to do/when I saw your best steps stolen away from you” (“Walk Like A Man”) and “...kids asleep in the backseat/we’re just counting the miles, you and me/we don’t measure the blood we’ve drawn anymore/we just stack the bodies outside the door...who’ll be the last to die for a mistake” (“Last to Die”) stumble into such carelessness?

Beginning with *Tunnel of Love*, Springsteen began to build his lyrics with symbolic images of a more universal nature, such as those taken from the American West, carnivals and gypsies, Christianity and gambling (as a simple representation of chance and luck). While many fans consider *Nebraska* Springsteen’s first foray into Country, it was *Tunnel of Love* that actually blended Springsteen’s love of Country with his pop sensibility, and the more he leans toward Country & Western, the more prominent these images become, the more they form the flesh and bones of his lyrics. For example, the narrator of the beautiful “Valentine’s Day” from *Tunnel Of Love* tells us, “a friend of mine became a father last night/when we spoke in his voice I could hear the light/of the skies and the rivers/the timber wolf in the pines/and that great jukebox out on Route 39...”, This change in Springsteen’s lyrics reached its apex on his two Southern California albums, *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, which are peppered with lines like “I’ll be

your gypsy joker” (“Soul Driver”); “now my ass was draggin’ when from a passin’ gypsy wagon/your heart like a diamond shone/tonight I’m layin’ in your arms carvin’ lucky charms/out of these hard luck bones (“Better Days”); “and if we turn the right cards up/they make us boss/the devil pays off” (“Local Hero”); “now there’s a beautiful river/in the valley ahead/there ‘neath the oak’s bow/soon we will be wed” (“If I Should Fall Behind”); “...your body was the holy land...now you were the Red Sea, I was Moses...” (“Leap of Faith”); and “I went down into the desert city/just tryin’ so hard to shed my skin...” (“Living Proof”). In 1995 Springsteen released his first hits compilation, *Greatest Hits*, which included “This Hard Land” and the following verse: “...I can hear a tape deck blastin’ ‘Home on the Range’/I can see them Bar-M choppers/Sweepin’ low across the plains/It’s me and you, Frank, we’re lookin’ for lost cattle/Our hooves twistin’ and churnin’ up the sand/we’re ridin’ in the whirlwind searchin’ for lost treasure/Way down south of the Rio Grande...” *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, also released in 1995, is largely set in a Recession-era American West, home to “little desert motels” (“Highway 29”) Fresno methamphetamine labs (“Sinaloa Cowboys”) and an Appaloosa “kickin’ in the corral” (“Dry Lightning”).

Of course these images have been present in Springsteen’s work since *The Wild*, *The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle* – during “Rosalita”, the narrator tells Rosalita he knows “a pretty little place in Southern California down San Diego way...”; “Wild Billy’s Circus Story” also appears on *The Wild*, *The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle*, and “The Promised Land” from *Darkness On The Edge Of Town* begins, “on a rattlesnake speedway in the Utah desert...” But it is the images Springsteen draws from his life in New Jersey, in the early Seventies, that make *Greetings From Asbury Park*, *The Wild*, *The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle*, *Born to Run* and *Darkness On The Edge Of Town* so literate, so specific and so thrilling. On these early albums, “Spanish Johnny” drives in from the underworld (“Incident on 57th Street”), “sparks fly on E Street when the boy prophets walk it handsome and hot” (The E Street Shuffle”) and “Mary Lou she found out how to cope/she rides to heaven on a gyroscope/the Daily News asks her for the dope...” (“Does This Bus Stop at 82nd Street?”). These early songs are living, twitching, exuberant things and, wedded to the operatic arrangements of *Born to Run*, they became something that still shimmers in its perfection: “there were ghosts in the eyes of all the boys you sent away/they haunt this dusty beach road in the skeleton frames of burned-out Chevrolets” (“Thunder Road”); “from a tenement window a transistor blares/turn around the corner things got real quiet real fast/I walked into a Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out” (“Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out”), and, of course, “sprung from cages on Highway 9/chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected and steppin’ out over the line/baby this town rips the bones from your back...” (“Born to Run”). What does “south of the Rio Grande” mean to someone from New Jersey who’s actually driven along Highway 9, which passes through Freehold, Springsteen’s hometown? While I’m not opposed to the desert vistas and gypsy wagons with which Springsteen tells his stories, it was astonishing and thrilling when the mythology was less universal and more specific, such as it is in these lines from “Jungleland”: “they’ll meet ‘neath that giant Exxon sign/that brings this fair city light/man there’s an opera out on the Turnpike/there’s a ballet being fought out in the alley”. No one, not even Dylan, has ever written anything like it.

Springsteen has reinvented himself and his sound throughout his career, much like contemporaries Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Prince, Paul Simon and Neil Young; his attempts have been far less drastic than those of Mitchell, Simon and Young, however, and his body of work seems unified, sonically and thematically, which brings him closer to Dylan and Prince, in terms of a cohesive body of work. Pioneering, however, has been crucial to Springsteen's development as an artist and icon, and most of his albums have been outright surprises, particularly *Born to Run*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *Nebraska*, *Tunnel of Love*, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, *The Rising* and *We Shall Overcome*: each seems a measured and sometimes extraordinary step away from its predecessor.

Nebraska was stark and startling, arriving after *The River*, a double album that mixed cautionary, mournful, somber ballads with raucous Jersey Shore rave-ups. *Nebraska*, not *The River*, is the album that follows the nostalgia and desperation of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* – *Nebraska* stripped the hard rock from *Darkness* but mined that album's terrain of bitter nostalgia, desperation, and regret. *Nebraska* was successful as a folk or country album because it was a Springsteen album, one simply gutted of Springsteen's trademark hard rock and bar band soul.

The failure of albums such as *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, *Devils & Dust* and, to a lesser extent, *Working On A Dream*, is that they seem driven toward ideas, rather than by them: this is a folk record about American desperation in the Southwest circa 1995 inspired by the film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, this is an album loosely built around the occupation and devastation of Iraq...*The Rising* and *Magic* work so well, and are so immediate, because although the former is steeped in the aftermath of September 11th and the latter in the corruption, deception and rapacity endemic to the presidency of George W. Bush, each album is a collection of magnificent songs that boil up to the surface, rather than a collection of songs shoehorned into an overriding concept. These albums also work because they are E Street Band albums punctuated by or painted with elements selected from outside the band's bar band milieu and blended with it, and because the songs on these albums sound like classic Springsteen. There's no "Mary's Place" on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, nor does a song like "Last to Die" emerge from *Devils & Dust*.

I've spent some time recently watching *Hammersmith Odeon, London '75*, which is included in the *Born to Run 30th Anniversary Edition* box – it feels like watching a soul revue as staged by a scrappy, scruffy kid from the Jersey Shore with the ability to channel Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison and Little Richard. Springsteen took the screaming exuberance and youthful hope of everything rock n'roll set out to do in the Fifties and Sixties – and everything it did, accidentally or inadvertently – and made it his personal journey, his cross to bear, his sword and his shield, and ours. During *Wings for Wheels, The Making of Born to Run*, Springsteen talks about B movies, *Thunder Road* (the Robert Mitchum film, from 1958), of missed chances and crucibles, of varied experiences of light and darkness. This makes perfect sense, as he has created the most cinematic oeuvre in popular music. *Born to Run* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, especially, feel like films, as do *Greetings From Asbury Park* and *The Wild, The Innocent & The E*

Street Shuffle – even *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, initially inspired by the film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, achieves this unique effect.

What's funny and sad about Springsteen – with albums such as *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, *Devils & Dust*, *We Shall Overcome*, and a number of songs from *Working On A Dream* – is it seems he's trying to secure his place in American music as a latter day Woody Guthrie or Pete Seeger or Hank Williams, that he's trying to stitch his songs into some great American folk tradition, to write songs that ultimately become part of our collective memory, part of our vernacular, much like Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land". What's ironic is, he's already done it, time and time again, and songs such as "Atlantic City", "Born to Run", "Hungry Heart", "Lonesome Day", "My City of Ruins", "The River", "Spirit in the Night", "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out" are just a few examples. The segment of the great American songbook for which Springsteen is responsible is a monolithic tower on our land, and this has little to do with the dustbowl ballads and folk anthems he's written since the commercial and critical failure of *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*. Springsteen has become one of the pillars of American popular music. He is rock n' roll.

How is it that Springsteen's songs manage to incite and quell my homesickness simultaneously? "Spirit in the Night" still makes me want to drink, smoke and dance, even though I no longer partake in the first two and rarely in the third, and "Darkness on the Edge of Town" still makes me feel unbeatable, even though I've been beaten so many times. Springsteen's exuberance has never failed me; his empathy has comforted me for a quarter-century: "I said, I'm hurt, she said, honey, let me heal it." Some of these songs are four-minute parties, some of them are four-minute elegies, and I would venture that all of them are almost as deeply felt by Springsteen's fans as they are by Springsteen.

I've often wondered if, as I grow older, my fever for Springsteen – and my fever for music itself – might break. That certain songs might lose the intensity of their meaning for me. What use should I have, at 40, for "Growin' Up" or "Night" or "Prove It All Night" or "No Surrender"? The truth is I find I need them more than ever. These songs remain the secret rooms in which I have lived since boyhood, the secret rooms where I am still my inviolable adolescent self. The secret rooms where I am still consoled and galvanized by Springsteen's voice. Where I remain, as always, transfixed by his cinema.