

# FEVER

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How Rock 'n' Roll  
Transformed Gender  
in America

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**TIM RILEY**

Picador  
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New York

the openly gay rocker Melissa Etheridge married a woman who carried David Crosby's baby by artificial insemination, got divorced, and sustained her career more on gay politics than on good songs.

If rock's men were still more powerful, more domineering, more popular than rock's women, at least the most powerful and controlling of men struggled with his views of women openly. The man who disliked being referred to as the Boss found his truest voice in a divorce album released before his own marriage fell apart, and crusaded for the type of male sensibility that became the only rational response to antimale feminism: someone whose jock physique belied an artistic temperament, whose musical style was as retro as his vision of manhood was progressive. Finally, here was a rock man who took on injustice and inequality as he steered his working-class ethic toward worldwide success. As somebody once wrote, if Bruce Springsteen hadn't come along, some rock critic would have had to invent him (and some went ahead and invented him just the same). Springsteen envied Elvis Presley as much as he feared his fate, and turned such regard into themes that transfigured rock manhood yet again.

## CHAPTER 6

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### Walk Like a Man

**B**ruce Springsteen is Elvis Presley's closest rock relative: the irreducible American rock icon, the giant talent who came out of nowhere (Freehold, New Jersey) to map a whole new world for men in rock. Along with being rock's next great man, the next leap in its evolving ideas about manhood, he's also the only American rock star worthy of comparison to the original Elvis, and the only one to take on gender themes with a writer's zeal. Through his coming-of-age stories, shadowboxing an overbearing father whose class fatalism threatened his intoxicating boyhood ideals, Springsteen staged the soaring energy it takes to grapple with manhood in our era.

As his writing capacity grew, Springsteen self-consciously gathered and summarized all of rock history. And he bet everything he had on

his live show, which was literally a way of life even after his third recording, *Born to Run*, hit big in 1975. Onstage, Springsteen became a living metaphor for how rock culture can help make sense of all the bewildering signals surrounding manhood. Part of this process was his evolution as bandleader: his E Street Band was comprised of old chums (guitarist Miami Steve Van Zandt, bassist Gary Tallent, organist Danny Federici) and Broadway pit pros (pianist Roy Bittan and drummer Max Weinberg, who replaced Ernest "Boom" Carter in 1974). Before he became a rock icon, Springsteen's sprawling ambition consumed the singer, songwriter, guitarist, and bandleader in him, to the point where half the excitement of a given show was hearing perfectly competent musicians transcend themselves in order to keep up with their leader. His weaknesses were a prolific muse that led to wordiness, and production, where he regularly leaned on his longtime manager and former *Rolling Stone* editor, Jon Landau.

Springsteen gathered his pop forefathers around him deliberately: from Presley to Phil Spector, girl groups to Dylan, R&B covers to frat rock, his appetite for rock history was at least as big as his ambition. His marathon concerts, lasting upwards of four and half hours, demanded the physical stamina of Tina Turner (finally, a white guy to rival Tina) and earned him the nickname previously reserved for James Brown: "the Hardest-Working Man in Show Business." He shuffled his song sets constantly, so that even if you were hearing familiar material, every night had a different emotional tone. And he loved pulling out surprises—unreleased material, odd-ball covers, new arrangements of songs everybody thought they knew. Through this ongoing process of re-creating his material night after night, he built an empire, and it was an empire of participation: at any given concert, audiences felt as though they were helping celebrate everything rock could be.

Drenched in sweat and sporting a grin that summed up and goaded the crowd's rapture even further, Springsteen stretched out his original material way past expectations, then piled on the encores, diagrams of rock history that visited the Motor City (the Mitch Ryder medley with "Devil with a Blue Dress On"/"Good Golly Miss Molly"), Buddy Holly ("Rave On" and "Oh Boy"), Bob Dylan ("I Want You," "Chimes of Freedom"), the Rolling Stones ("Street Fighting Man"), Eddie Cochran ("Summertime Blues"), the Bobby Fuller Four ("I Fought the Law"), and, later on, his own stuff, reconfigured (acoustic renditions of "Adam Raised a Cain," "Born in the U.S.A.," "Murder Incorporated," "Born to Run," and "No Surrender"). Other references were hidden in plain sight: "She's the One" raided Bo Diddley's "Mona" beat for new meaning (and onstage often quoted directly from its source), the drums-only last verse to "Prove It All Night" reworked the rhythmic spine of the Ronettes' "Be My Baby"; "Downbound Train" and "Promised Land" borrowed titles from Chuck Berry; and numbers like "Give the Girl a Kiss," "Rendezvous," "Ricky Wants a Man of Her Own," "Out on the Street," and "Two Hearts" had bona fide girl-group magnetism.

Springsteen's covers were legion, generous, and the few he released boasted great taste: Jimmy Cliff's "Trapped," Eddie Floyd's "Raise Your Hand," Tom Waits's "Jersey Girl," and, onstage during his 1984–85 world-tour leap to mega-platinum status, Presley himself ("Follow That Dream" and "Can't Help Falling in Love," which he sang to his audience, his band, and the larger rock tradition all at once). When compared to Presley's, Springsteen's manhood makes sense as the redeemed celebrity—the kid who worshiped the King from afar, imagined himself a similar mainstream audience, and fashioned a far-sighted career that Presley himself might have admired.

In his early days, other models subsumed this Presley identifica-

tion. Springsteen was one of thousands of young songwriters dubbed "the new Dylan," which he didn't live down until *Born to Run*. But the nickname followed him, and his writing bears an enlightening contrast to Dylan's. Both are prolific, often to a fault; both are "pure" performers, at their best in front of an audience; and both conceive and interpret their material as organic, songs that evolve new meanings through time.

Springsteen is more of a romantic than Dylan, has a lot more fun with his girlfriends, and pitches woo in classic fashion. Yet unlike Dylan, Springsteen has no large-canvas portraits of women (no "Visions of Johanna" or "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," no "Sarah") and counts few female characters among his stable of street hoods, corner Joes, loners, grifters, serial killers, and hard-luck dreamers. This may be why Springsteen is perceived as more sympathetic to women, whereas the men in Dylan's songs seem to be protecting themselves from powerful, all-consuming women.

Early on, it was easy to categorize Dylan as a folksinger, until he started making rock albums and taunted the Newport Folk Festival with his electric guitar in 1965. Seven years later, Springsteen's audition for Columbia's John Hammond, the man who discovered Dylan, was completely acoustic, and his first album was a compromise between Hammond's received notions about Springsteen's "acoustic" sensibility and the shows Springsteen was putting on in Asbury Park with a full band. On his 1973 debut, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, he sounded like a street busker miscast as a blues shouter. Several songs from this record became emblematic ("Growin' Up," "Spirits in the Night," and "Blinded by the Light," which became an unlikely hit for the Manfred Mann Earth Band), but only after he had worked on the arrangements. For all its reach, it was a thin-sounding debut.

By later that same year, on *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, Springsteen had gained authority in the studio, and projected far more confidence as a personality. Suddenly, he was the Jersey scruff as rock's aesthetic Trojan horse, and that blues influence rang out as one of his most promising assets. Side 1 had trademark aw-shucks Jersey humor and shaggy-dog understatement (the boardwalk accordion in "Sandy," the tuba in "Wild Billy's Circus Story"), but side 2 displayed a songwriter-conceptualist worthy of his unlikely pretensions: "Rosalita" became a prophetic closing number, an ambitious climax that worked like a center of whoop-it-up gravity to all his other songs in concert, and "New York City Serenade," *Shuffle's* finale, had a resignation that belied his then twenty-four years. Between the cut-loose freedom of the former and the twilight soul of the latter, Springsteen's ambition had both sweep and drive, the kind that gave credibility to his growing live reputation. This was not the new Dylan, but a new *kind* of Dylan, one with different formal pretensions who delighted in his audience.

And like Dylan, Springsteen figured himself a song stylist, at ease mentioning Roy Orbison in the opening stanza of "Thunder Road," copping song titles from Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons ("Walk Like a Man"), Martha and the Vandellas ("Racing in the Street," after "Dancing in the Street"), the Shangri-Las ("Out in the Street" echoes "Out in the Streets"), even Cole Porter ("Dancing in the Dark"). Only Springsteen was good enough at inveigling guitar licks ("Cadillac Ranch," "Ramrod," "You Can Look (But You Better Not Touch)," "Darlington County," and "Glory Days") to finish off Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" saga with "Bye Bye Johnny." But not many reviewers noticed how male-oriented Springsteen's themes were, even though by 1984's breakout *Born in the U.S.A.*, when he wrote female-name songs ("Sandy," "Rosalita," "Candy's Room," "Bobby Jean," and

"Kitty's Back"), they were less about women and more about the men who worshiped them. By comparison, Bob Dylan wrote songs about women that actually detailed feminine qualities, like "She Belongs to Me," "Love Minus Zero (No Limit)," or "Just Like a Woman," which rubbed putdown up against reverence.

Even with this strong Dylan identification, the Presley overtones in Springsteen's sound were unmistakable. Springsteen and Presley shared humble beginnings, enormous ambition, and a belief rooted in common sense that there was more to life than what their fathers held out for them. To Elvis, Vernon Presley came second to his mother, Gladys, and the father-son conflict seemed sublimated, overshadowed by his intense desire to please his mother's expectations. Of course, Gladys died when Presley was twenty-three, on sabbatical from his singing career, serving in the army. This misguided sense of duty during peacetime was a key reason fans like John Lennon lost faith in Presley's rebelliousness. Listening to Springsteen's "The Promise" or "Independence Day," it's intriguing to imagine what a subject Vernon, Gladys's bumbling husband, would have made for Elvis.

In Presley's persona, the father figure was large by omission. If Elvis was rock's original teenager on the loose, hungry for experience, wildly expressive in ways his father never dreamt of, Springsteen wrote about father-son tension with convulsive energy. His coming-of-age songs conveyed unusual specificity and ardor, from how love can deliver a believer from small-town worldviews to big-time freedoms ("Thunder Road"), then on to middle-age limitations and compromise ("Glory Days"), to making peace with life's limits ("My Hometown").

Where Presley's explosive early persona was steeped in the throes

of adolescence, Springsteen's characters went more explicitly from boy to man. Presley the truck driver mowed down John Wayne's stoic cowboy with sexual panache; Springsteen was the rock 'n' roll low-rider who turned his humble Jersey-coast bar-band lifestyle into a mindset, a way of growing up, of finding "the key to the universe in the engine of an old parked car." One critic hooted that Springsteen had done the impossible by "making New Jersey fashionable." Springsteen himself went from outsized, radical talent with a gift for winning the mainstream to tireless performer, Rock 'n' Roll Mensch, and champion of thankless causes: the outraged son who became a proud father, the 4-F exemption who championed Vietnam vets, the working-class scruff who got famous enough to write \$10,000 checks to local food banks as his show swung through town.

Early on, Springsteen's father-son quarrel was an all-consuming theme; his identification and conflict with his father was like a rip-tide that challenged even his considerable force of personality. In many ways, Presley became emblematic of what Springsteen's characters' struggled with in his songs: as a musical father figure, Presley represented everything and nothing Springsteen wanted to be. Like his songs' characters, Springsteen was passionate about his hero worship, and his illusions fell hard when his hard-fought success delivered him untold wealth. He was as determined to live up to the promise of Presley's fame as he was to avoid the Fat Elvis booby trap.

By the time Springsteen released *Born to Run* in 1975, Presley was a fading icon, a hollow Las Vegas version of himself, stripped of his own power and celebrated for what he once was, not what he had become. So every time Springsteen sang a Presley tribute, the under song was "I refuse to turn out like Elvis." Even his "Viva Las Vegas," on a Presley tribute called *The Last Temptation of Elvis* from 1990, has

a wariness about it—as though he just can't put himself comfortably in his hero's shoes.

On one hand, Springsteen's fondness for Elvis was linked to his overvaulting ambition, the courage and stamina it took to tour your pants off, push your band to its limits, and win over an audience that was skeptical of critical hype one venue at a time, without a string of Top 40 hits to keep your label happy. And since Springsteen viewed rock 'n' roll as nothing less than a path to salvation, perhaps he, like Presley, could find a way out of himself and the world he had grown up in if he believed enough in the music's promises. For Springsteen, and a lot of his listeners, rock became a way to conquer the world at least figuratively—if you heeded your father's mistakes.

Throughout the first part of his career, Springsteen wrestled publicly with his father's ghost, writing songs about the arguments, the broken promises, the passionate detachment; he composed and acted out the first rock catalog of "separation anxiety" songs in "The Promise," "Adam Raised a Cain," "The River," "My Father's House," and "Independence Day," among many others. Two of these numbers are emblematic: "Born to Run" was his early anthem of cutting loose; "Walk Like a Man" became his own answer song, addressed to his father as he walked down the aisle ("I remember how rough your hand felt on mine/On my wedding day . . .").

The other figures in Springsteen's pantheon of heroes help explain why his critics groped for superlatives. "Born to Run" was a high-torque production, a wide-eyed tribute to Phil Spector's baroque soundscapes; it's still a classic-sounding record about the renewal of classic ideas. "It sounded like a '57 Chevy running on melted-down Crystals records," wrote Greil Marcus. And his epic live shows gave off a girl-group joy even though he never specialized in girl-group

material. His affection for girl-group sounds dramatized that genre's appeal beyond female listeners—men were not only writing and producing a lot of those records, they were buying them, and buying into girl-group fantasies about what kind of men they could be. Phil Spector's girl-group records had toughness, a female directness about sexuality that men found instantly appealing, and it's not hard to imagine Springsteen producing a great Ronnie Spector track himself. He brought her onstage to sing "Be My Baby" during the 1978 *Darkness* tour; the E Street Band backed her up on Billy Joel's "Say Goodbye to Hollywood" in 1978 on a compilation called *Cleveland Rocks*, and you could hear them thinking "Be My Baby" along with Joel. Springsteen's most famous female song encore was "When You Walk in the Room," Jackie DeShannon's 1964 track.

By the time Springsteen's epic shows began to dominate rock's live experience in the mid-seventies, the rock stage had become a place where men acted out everything about maleness, from Jagger on down, almost because there was no other medium where such contradictions could be convincingly portrayed. Rock's most heroic men (Springsteen, John Lennon, Neil Young, Pete Townshend, Van Morrison, Lou Reed, Iggy Pop) did something far more embracing than strut a peacock's walk with phallic guitars. The fact that Springsteen and Townshend fronted two of the best live acts in rock history tells you how male camaraderie found its voice onstage, and perhaps how the Beatles' retirement from performing seemed to undo their early esprit de corps. Intriguingly, amidst Springsteen's vast array of covers, he's done Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl" and Young's "Down by the River," but has yet to do a Townshend number.

Aesthetically, Springsteen crested as rock's conquering hero by burrowing down into a classic garage-rock sound to re-create rock's cen-

ter in the midst of the trend-driven fragments he grew up with (metal, arena rock, singer-songwriters, laid-back folk-rock, and, as he developed, the dreaded disco). By 1978, during disco's chart triumph with the Bee Gees' helium-voiced *Saturday Night Fever*, and rock demigods like Led Zeppelin bloating the sound up to match their all-consuming "heaviness," the communal covenant surrounding sixties rock was all but smothered by seventies commercialism and Fleetwood Mac's soft-core acquiescence. The grass-roots reaction was punk, which punctured grandiosity with do-it-yourself rampage. Punk songs were terse, three-chord manifestos; melodies were buried in the onslaught, and tempos stampeded ahead like gangbusters. Sex was passé, politics swamped harmonies and fashion, and traditional aesthetic quality (or production values) was not just frowned upon but despised. Ironically, this produced a lot of great music.

Although his rise paralleled punk's, Springsteen took his stand apart from it and, in many ways, acted like punk wasn't even happening all around him. He actually wrote 1980's "Hungry Heart" for the Ramones, but, ironically, it became his first top-ten single. While one huge segment of the pop field preoccupied itself with Britain's Sex Pistols, the Clash, and Elvis Costello, and American new-wave acts such as Blondie, Television, and Talking Heads, Springsteen worked a completely different crowd. Although his larger mission resembled punk's—to save rock from its own success, to save Mick Jagger's irony from all Andy Warhol's and Truman Capote's celebrity parties, and to save the music's cultural significance from show-biz irrelevance—he acted as if the stylistic ground wasn't shifting beneath him. He took to the stage night after night, building his audience show by exhausting show, inspiring his crowds as though making great rock constituted a higher calling.

Although he was a man of different stature, Springsteen was as much a revolutionary presence during the punk era as Johnny Rotten was: both took gigantic leaps backward in their music to infuse the style with heraldic energy, Rotten from the outside, Springsteen from within. Where Rotten was political, Springsteen was personal. Rotten would never have sung about something as intimate as his relationship with his father; Springsteen had no interest in taunting an easy target like the Queen. Springsteen couldn't separate his feelings about the world from his feelings about the daily grind his father had bought into, and what such a life meant for his family and son. Ironically, punk's influence worked its way into his writing when he broached more political than romantic subjects on 1982's *Nebraska*.

Some argue that Springsteen's slow, steady rise to prominence in the early eighties paled in comparison to the sudden impact of cultural energy unleashed by Presley or the Beatles. But this had more to do with culture's timetable than Springsteen's aura; his old-fashioned dues upstaged some of his poetry. Word of mouth was his best hype, and it flourished long before Jon Landau wrote, "I saw rock and roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen," after seeing him in 1974 at the Harvard Square Theater. His *Time* and *Newsweek* cover profiles in 1975, as he toured supporting *Born to Run*, reveal a rock figure inspired more by cars than by Pac-Man, and more committed to "classic" ideas than "reactionary" hubris. Like Rotten, Springsteen was of his era yet looked beyond it; while Springsteen's music has the lasting importance of Presley's or the Beatles,' the fact that his early impact created less of an all-consuming explosion says more about his times than about his sensibility.

In some ways, punk outrage helped give Springsteen's mission acceptability. While the imagery from his first four records was classic (cars, romance, driving around—real guy stuff), his political

themes, while covert, were intimate ("Stolen Car," "Atlantic City") and in many ways more ominous—patricide ("Ties That Bind"), economic impotence ("The Price You Pay"), and working-class self-destructiveness ("Racing in the Street")—precisely because they weren't dressed up in punk safety pins. Beneath his roof-raising exuberance sulked a brooding mama's boy, perplexed by his own moods, convinced that music could save him from an ordinary life, but confounded at where it might deliver him, and where that left everybody else.

Taking in the great range of his writing, his subject matter, and the epic proportions his songs acquired in concert, Springsteen's sensibility is as colossal and unwieldy as the performer himself, and riddled with contradictions: his exuberance is inseparable from his working-class dread; his fraternal eros inseparable from the trouble he has with women; his drug-free aura (he lived for the music) a glaring anomaly in the rock business, yet inseparable from his lingering anxiety.

Springsteen sings more songs to his father than any other rock writer. In fact, Springsteen's anger may be some of the most potent and righteous anger in rock simply because it's fueled by this universal father-son tension. His men are fiercely resentful fathers' sons, angry about the disappointment reflected in their fathers' eyes, and exasperated at how such feelings reveal even deeper contradictions, and more complex binds from which to disentangle ("You're born into this life paying for the sins of somebody else's past," he sings in "Adam Raised a Cain").

Instead of revealing in teen freedoms like Chuck Berry's more innocent teens, Springsteen's adolescents try to act like adults, overreaching with charm only to fall hard on their defeats.

Romance comes to symbolize several key values: independence, freedom, fantasy, and an alternative world of affection that cushions day-to-day dread. When Springsteen sings "It's a town full of losers, I'm pulling out of here to win" at the end of "Thunder Road," it rings out on several levels: sure, he's serenaded one Mary "from the front porch to [his] front seat," but he exacts revenge on the whole town, not just the two souls who find redemption through confiding in one another. If earlier rock 'n' roll touted sexual bravado (in the Stones' "Satisfaction"), Springsteen added world-class pride, the kind that gives kids the bluster to leave home and take on the world. There's a way to find a better life than your parents', his music promised, and hitting the road is the first step.

As a boy, he both admired and felt ashamed for his father ("I ain't gonna let them do to me what I watched them do to you," he sings in "Independence Day"). Springsteen's fictional father is a lonely, dependent figure, a man whose best days are long past, who's been made hard by the world, yet still clings to basic values and familial ties as a measure of self-worth. Springsteen watches him meander through songs like "Factory," "Darkness on the Edge of Town," and chases his ghost in *Nebraska's* "My Father's House." This Springsteen father is usually a victim of the corporation he gave his life to, and yet an iron resolve keeps him intact, if only to his son; Dad is both a disappointment and an iron pillar to rebel against. Typically, some Company has usurped this father's professional power (Springsteen has surprisingly few songs about unions), yet he remains all-powerful in the family; he contracted low self-esteem from his economic status and can't fathom his son's escapist flights. Onstage, the key Springsteen father quote usually had him scolding Bruce to "turn down that goddamn guitar." In song, Springsteen is torn between seething resentment for his father and embittered respect. "Adam Raised a



Cain" distills every angry adolescent's fantasy of rebellion, a way of saying, "I'm your son—and I refuse to follow your example!" This anger is fueled by the loss of what the son hoped the father would be, and the terrifying gap between that hope and the reality. The unstated friction is twofold: between how much the son identifies with his father's compromises and the knowledge that this father-son bond would be passionless unless both sides shared enormous affection for one another beneath the surface.

There was no peace between father and son in the Springsteen home, and escape—flight toward romance—became his great early theme. Springsteen blew romance up in so many ways, into such a powerful symbol of freedom, that he makes odd sense of Elvis's tireless romantic smarm in retrospect—as if smooth talk could be just another form of rebelling against your father. In the early songs, like "Rosalita," it's almost a tie as to which is pitched higher: his yen to break free or how he idealizes the women who make freedom possible. Fathers not only get in the way of freedom, they symbolize everything but freedom. And his own dad is such a mule that defying other dads is a breeze (from "Rosalita"):

*Now I know your Daddy he don't like me  
'Cos I play in a rock 'n' roll band  
And I know your Momma she never dug me  
But she never did understand.  
Your papa lowered the boom—locked you in your room  
I'm coming to lend a hand  
I'm coming to liberate you, confiscate you  
I want to be your man  
Someday we'll look back on this and it will all seem funny . . .*

In early Springsteen songs, breaking free is all, more important even than finding an ideal partner (there always seemed to be plenty of options). His first three records are about all kinds of escape, from work, family, home, industrial small-town life (Springsteen visits school only once: "We learned more from a three-minute record baby than we ever learned in school," he sings in "Bobby Jean" on his sixth recording, *Born in the U.S.A.*). Those early records promised plenty from this new rock "savior": they were liberated as much in theme as they were in structure. *Greetings from Asbury Park* was so verbose that Lester Bangs simply hailed it a triumph of words and let the rest slide. *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* featured three songs stitched together on side 2, a street opera about romantic corner types and their fatalistic lives. Yet it was done with such affection that he romanticized his characters beyond what even they might have recognized.

This ambition played into his early song structures, too: "Born to Run" plays multiple sections off of one another as they expand and enlarge the typical ABABCAB pop-song diagram, and the harmonic adventurousness coils back on itself in the song's return to the final verse, pounding its way down a gigantic chromatic scale with defiant gusto before a *grand pause* (the kind of in-joke only a musician's musician could pull off). Suddenly, rock romance was rugged and promising again in a way it hadn't been since perhaps *Layla*, which was a downer, and full of new musical possibilities.

With his fourth album, *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), Springsteen abruptly broke from this musical ambition and shifted into lower gear. This lurch, while dramatic, was actually a more ambitious gambit. As his protracted legal battle with his first manager, Mike Appel, prevented more recording, Springsteen discarded adolescent

themes and run-on narrative to adopt a rootsier approach. Appel had been Springsteen's first champion in the early 1970s, and saw himself quite literally as a John the Baptist figure in bringing Springsteen's talent to the world. But Springsteen had outgrown Appel's management and took him to court after *Born to Run* to sever the relationship. So Springsteen had unwittingly replicated his family life in his professional life by hooking his wagon to a strong-willed manager whom he then rebelled against. *Darkness on the Edge of Town* had the aroma of a costly battle, won but hard fought; it's easily the angriest of Springsteen's records.

*Darkness* brought a toned-down, lean-and-hungry rock style to the working-class worldview (an overhaul that would continue through 1980's *The River* and 1982's *Nebraska*). It's sung in the voice of his father as a younger man; the son imagines his own life rutted and empty, and confronts his father's emotional traits by discovering them in himself. In "Racing in the Street," the album's centerpiece, a man pores over his lifeless relationship, his passion for cars, and the addictive thrill he still chases with the boys at night—cruising, distracting one another through illicit sport, competing for thrills on the edge of what their girlfriends thought safe (what Hollywood used to call "testing their manhood"). By echoing Martha and the Vandellas' "Dancing in the Street," Springsteen is doing more than paying homage: his song is a negative image of all the heights of feeling that Motown original inspired in him (if dancing equals community, racing equals alienation). Also during this period, Springsteen wrote his own "Fever" with "The Fever," much the same way he reworked Chuck Berry stories (in "Johnny Bye Bye" or "Promised Land"). You get the feeling Little Willie John whispered it into his ear one night, and coaxed him into saving the Romeo and Juliet verse for "Fire."

On the streets of *Darkness*, escape is only temporary: the system

simply eats you up and there's little to be done about it. He's not known for his irony, but "Badlands," the opening song, is irrefutably optimistic while mapping out the moil of working-class life ("Poor man wanna be rich, rich man wanna be king/And the king ain't satisfied until he rules everything . . ."). The dull plodding of "Factory," the least of the songs here, makes the drudgery plain enough: "Factory gives him life . . . It's the working, the working, just the working life . . ." And the early Springsteen hilarity is present in energy but not in tone: "Badlands" is a tirade about the impossibility of escape, a grinding down into the muck of working-class life as a way of distraction; "Promised Land" is the most hopeful song on the record (at the beginning of side 2, it's an antidote to side 1's "Badlands"), about how the best things in this life are worth dreaming about even if they're out of reach ("Mister I ain't no boy, no I'm a man/And I believe in a Promised Land").

"Adam Raised a Cain" portrays the guilt-ridden son as victim and hero, and his guitar pounds away in the track's center like a jackhammer of dread. "Daddy worked his whole life for nothing but the pain/Now he walks these empty rooms looking for something to blame . . ." The flame-throwing guitar solo that Springsteen sets loose in the middle of it all, leaping up and down his fret board, repeating his licks in vitriolic octaves, blueprints a father-son squabble. In concert, the demons Springsteen exorcised in this number were inexplicably complicated, touching on the certainty of his respect for a father who would fight tooth and nail with his son, combined with a fear of turning into a father who disappointed him in some essential way.

As Springsteen's writing developed and his audience grew, his portraits of men became less typified by class and locale, and more rat-

ted by universal complexities: love's disappointments, middle age's compromises, and the uneasy victory of realizing your dreams only to find more interior challenges.

In 1980, if it took enormous ambition to release a double album, it took superhuman ambition to do so as your fifth release, as Springsteen did. But it was clear from his previous tour, where he debuted songs like "Independence Day" and "The Promise," that Springsteen may have been as prolific as Dylan (although a good deal more consistent). And the court battle with Appel had eaten up a lot of recording time; there was a backlog of songs in the can, and Springsteen was ready to make good on his early promise.

*The River* cloaks *Darkness* themes in the heroic spirit of *Born to Run*. A larger picture emerges, as though his stories all link up in a chain of self-understanding. "I'm a Rocker," "Cadillac Ranch," "The Ties That Bind," "Two Hearts Are Better Than One," and "You Can Look (But You Better Not Touch)" all fork over exhilaration with a forgiving tone that makes the *Darkness* songs seem less all-consuming, less final. The yammer juxtaposes the death-sentence pregnancy of "The River" ("The judge put it all to rest . . ."), but finally all the cars and partying become fraught with mortality. "Cadillac Ranch" fuses these two: it's a chicken race with death built on a thundering Chuck Berry riff. Even self-respecting people sometimes find themselves driving a "Stolen Car," and the twilight finale, "Wreck on the Highway," presents a body coughed up from a merciless joyride.

True to form, the politics on *Nebraska* (1982) are all built around characters and their situations, their short fuses confronting pitiless judges, to the point where almost any intimate act is fraught with political consequence. The men in these songs walk through mayhem as though it's just a condition of having an X chromosome; they don't ask for any explanations, and they don't expect any. Being

born a man is curse enough; explanation would only coarsen the effect. In the title song, the first-person narrator sets off on a killing spree with his girlfriend, his beloved shotgun at the ready. But after he's explained himself ("Sir I guess there's just a meanness in this world . . ."), he insists on having his girl on his lap for his electrocution, as if she could make even death sweeter. In "My Father's House," a man dreams that he searches through a forest of fog to find the source of his pain, which turns out to be his father's house. When he finally gets to the porch, a "woman I didn't recognize" tells him: "I'm sorry, son, but no one by that that name lives here anymore." Onstage, Springsteen explained its troublesome precept: it's as if he thought by returning to the house, the source of his anxiety, he could correct something terrible that had once happened inside.

A decent highway cop's bond with his black sheep of a brother in "Highway Patrolman" becomes a rubric, something beyond understanding. "I got a brother named Frankie, and Frankie ain't no good," Joe tells us, as he reminisces about dancing with his wife and his brother; "I catch him when he's drifting/Like any brother would/Man turns his back on his family, and he just ain't no good." The final act of mercy—the patrolman watching his brother, a killer, flee to Canada—has poetry in it: Joe turns his back on his brother to let him cross the border. If good men flee toward death in these cars, crooked men flee towards freedom. Springsteen lets these characters have their own loose ends, without imposing any artificial morals on them. Structurally, he's working within a very small frame, but the echoes of American style are enormous: many of these songs sound like they could have been written at any time during the past fifty or sixty years; these *Nebraska* characters sound one part Guthrie, one part Hank Williams, and one part curse—the booby prize to the American game show they're all contestants on.

