

“Walk tall or don’t walk at all”

By Dave Marsh

I've seen Bruce Springsteen twice in the last few months. He is better than anything on the radio, and he has a new single, "Born To Run," which, if we are at all fortunate, will be played across the land by now. Given the current paucity of interesting subject matter, he's the subject of this column.

When I first saw him, last April in Boston, it was in a sweaty little bar in Harvard Square, packed to the walls with street kids and college students, rock writers and general hangers-on, drunks and know-it-alls. I expected nothing; I got everything.

When I saw him again at the Bottom Line in New York, I expected everything, and he didn't let me down. Springsteen is the perfect AM performer. His songs don't have all the obvious hooks that wear out after you've heard them for a couple of weeks. Instead, they grow on you, and soon, you're fascinated not only by the Latin-inflected soul and rock he's playing, not only by Clarence Clemons's magic saxophone, not only by Springsteen's voice—which embodies the mystique of James Dean and (yes) Bob Dylan—but by the tales he's telling, and the characters he creates.

There is a passion here, for the mythical girl friend, Puerto Rican Jane (known in Springsteen's greatest songs as Rosalita), and for everyone else who pops up: the fish-wife in "New York City Serenade" is enough to make you weep.

The magic of Springsteen harks back to a tradition at least as old as "Jailhouse Rock," and "Maybelline." What you discover in the hundredth listening is not only music that compels you to listen that often, but a tale that deserves telling. It's not so far different from trash epics like the cannibalistic "Timothy," or even a nice little suicide saga like "Without You." But Springsteen does it every time out; if he cleans up his production, there is no reason why the key line of "Born To Run"—"Tramps like us, we were born to run"—won't become the rallying cry of the decade.

But "Born To Run" is not Springsteen's greatest song. His best is "Rosalita," the tale of a love affair at least the equal of Romeo and Juliet's, or Catherine the Great and Secretariat's. It begins with a guitar and saxophone swoop into utter ecstasy that I'm listening to as compulsively as ever I did to the song closest to its music, Van Morrison's "Wild Night."

Bruce loves Rosie, but Rosie's parents don't love him; he's nothing but rock 'n' roll trash as far as they're concerned. "Now I know your mama don't like me 'cause I play in a rock 'n' roll band, and I know your daddy don't like me, but he never did understand...And your papa says he knows I don't have any money," he taunts, mocking eternal parental misgivings, just the way Chuck Berry did in "You Never Can Tell." But Springsteen has it in him to make the story even more magical, certainly

more contemporary. "Tell your daddy this is his last chance," he exclaims, pulling his best lines from nowhere, "To get his daughter in a fine romance. 'Cause the record company, osie, just gave me a big advance." And proceeds to crack up his car in a Jersey swamp.

There's no tale anywhere in rock. at the moment and certainly nothing on the radio today, which can come close to matching it. There's hardly a performer anywhere who can make you so joyous when he comes out with the gestures that belong to a movie star and the voice that belongs to an amalgam of Wilson Pickett and Morrison. "This is music," a friend of mine said at the Bottom Line, "that can make you care again."

Which is what I want to do, and what Springsteen offers that no one else does. Elliott Murphy and the Dolls, as much as I love them, are doomsayers; Springsteen just comes out and acts like nothing's changed, or if it has, he doesn't care very much, anyway. Wouldn't it be a pleasure to hear this stuff on the highway? Might up the accident rate, of course, but then, that is what the best music has always done: it is a little like drowning. If your entire life does not flash before your eyes, all the best parts of it do, or all the most special ones.

And whether Springsteen is joking about being "Born To Lose," which he wasn't, or celebrating Manhattan in "New York City Serenade," with a passion that can bring tears to your eyes, or blasting onto the stage with "Then I Kissed Her," or doing his "E Street Shuffle," those moments are so special, you know that next time they'll be part of the drowning experiences that total immersion in great music brings.

"Walk tall," he demands, "or don't walk at all." Springsteen struts, because he knows, as if he were 6'6" instead of as short as me, that he's as big as anybody who ever took a stage. I'd trade everything else I've heard this year for the evenings I spent with him. He has everything, the past, the present and the future. For once in your life, do touch that dial— Springsteen will touch you back. And when you're rockin' your baby, that's just what you need, just like it is when there ain't no baby to rock. The music on the radio is like Springsteen's "Spirit In The Night," and you grab that spirit every chance you get. This is the best chance of all.