

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN IS NOT GOD AND DOESN'T WANT TO BE

By Robert Duncan

Understand. New Jersey has no baseball or football teams and half of it stinks. It used to be that if you were from Jersey and you came over to New York—by that I mean Manhattan, naturally; Queens certainly doesn't count—you didn't admit you were from Jersey. No, if there was one thing we New Yorkers could get together on it was Jersey: not a one of us would've given a second thought to blowing the joint off the face of the universe like the infected pimple that it was...Was, I say. My God, how times change. I mean, I stopped going to the Academy of Music on 14th Street because the average patron there was a Jerseyite—you know, loud or nodded out or smelly or in any way obnoxious. But now, just like the guys down the hall from me who pretend that they're *black* and jive and shuffle about the building all day, I—a New York chauvinist if ever there was one—wonder why my mother wasn't considerate enough to have gone to Jersey to borne me. And when folks ask, these days, if I have any interest in impressing them, I say: "Me? Hey, I'm from Jersey, man!" Because—may Fiorello LaGuardia rest in peace—it's finally and unmistakably hip to be from the "armpit of the nation," that newly-venerable State of New Jersey...

But, of course, I don't try to fool these guys, these authentic specimens, and besides, they probably have ways of checking . . .

"I was born in Sheboygan," I tell Bruce Springsteen, Miami Steve Van Zandt and company, who unanimously fall over in their seats laughing, having just discussed the drag scene that had gone down in Wisconsin—they think it was "some place like Sheboygan probably." And they're still laughing while this chick journalist who is accompanying the band and who lives in England "but originally came from Jersey"—I bet, *bitch!*—asks me with a singular ridiculing distaste, "Exactly how do you spell that...She-boy-gan?"

Well, all I know is God wasn't shittin'! The last shall be first, *indeed!* And I begin to counterattack.

"Sure, I know," Springsteen readily admits. "When I was 18 and playing in this place in California in this bar band these people would come up to us and say, 'Hey, I really dig you guys! Where do ya come from?' And I'd say, 'New Jersey,' And they'd just go 'Yecch! Ecch!'" So he knows, huh. I suggest to Springsteen that he probably should get some sort of public service citation from the Governor (if this one's not in jail yet) for finally making Jersey—I chose my next word carefully so as not to flatter my uppity tormentors—"tolerable." But Bruce doesn't detect my thinly-veiled sarcasm, mulls the point over for a moment, stroking his grizzly chin, and says, "I ain't got nothin' from nobody in Jersey. I mean, when I'm home I walk up and down the boardwalk all day and not one person—well, sometimes one—stops and says, 'Hi!' or

'Hey, I know you!'" Then the lights go on behind this Jersey punk's eyes—which he averts from mine, shyly, because we've just recently met—and he tells me whimsically, but only half jokingly, "What I think I'm gonna do is get on all the clothes I'm wearing on the album, you know, and get it just right. And hold my guitar out here, this way, just so...And maybe I'll even get ol' Clarence and lean on him just so...Do the whole cover thing... Maybe *then* people'll notice." And for the first time since the show several hours earlier Springsteen laughs in his wheezing kind of chortle-through-the-nose way and looks directly at me. The ice is broken.

As the waitress passes, my new buddy (Can a guy from New York really call a guy from Jersey his "buddy"? I am drunk.) and I decide that more beer is in order. While it's only Springsteen's second of the evening, the record company man asks protectively of his Next Big Thing, "You sure you should have another, Bruce?" In mortal fear that I may lose a drinking partner, I insist that Springsteen try the famous local brand. Over the protestations of the company man, Springsteen instructs the waitress "OK, yeah. Give me one of them." He points to my empty. "But I won't know the difference," he says to me. "I don't really drink beer." Doesn't drink beer? I remark to myself suspiciously. And when he confirms the stories that he doesn't take drugs either...well, frankly, it *bothers* me. Somehow, in terms of the tradition which he is carrying on, it makes Springsteen, the would-be new Rock 'n' Roll Rebel King, somewhat inauthentic.

I must deal with this contradiction. Sitting across from him in this sleazy downtown Detroit jock bar, once owned by ex-football star turned TV personality Alex Karras, this place that is absolutely a drinker's hangout. I assess the Phenomenon's offstage persona, seeking the flaws. The clothing immediately stands out. In place of the studded black leather jacket, which Springsteen expropriated from James Dean for stage use, is a much more stylish, tapered sport coat of reddish leather. In place of the sneakers, which the record company has established as some sort of trademark, is a pair of brand new shiny high-heeled boots. Aha! This street kid stuff is just so much showmanship as I had suspected! Beside me, Miami Steve, who has a much more recognizably Jersey accent as well, looks more the part than Springsteen (or "Da Boss," as he calls him), having shed his onstage pimp costume to deck himself out entirely in black leather. Disillusionment is setting in. Then I listen to the conversation.

Springsteen is speaking in what appears to be his natural voice, breathy, gritty with a black cadence. He and Miami are talking about their old buddies on E Street (Yes, there is such a place) and if those guys could see them now. As Bruce has been warming up with the beer which he so rarely indulges in, Steve has been warming up with these miniature bottles of rose. Now they're talking quite seriously about the boardwalk at Asbury Park and the pinball machines. Miami Steve has made the seemingly logical proposal to Bruce that if the pinball people can make an "Elton John-Pinball Wizard" table, why shouldn't there be a "Bruce Springsteen-Born To Run" table as well. Bruce explains to him with a similar forthrightness and logic, "Ya see, these guys wanna make *bucks*...*You* gotta be famous." (Little did the two kids quietly turning over their dream world, determining what is and what will be, realize that

around the next corner lurked Time and Newsweek covers. Little did they dream of Springsteen's unprecedented ascension to nationwide fame.) Then they started to tease their record company guys, New York City rats both, about a recent trip to Asbury Park. Bruce mockingly relates the incident wherein one of the guys joined him on Asbury Park's infamous "Rock 'n' Roll Ride." "It goes around and round," he explains. "And up and down, in and out"—he accelerates with the ride—"and this and that way and all-over-the-place! Wow!" he laughs. The company guy owns up, "Yeah, I was screwed up for two whole days afterwards." Tapered red leather sports coat? That's just the way they dress up in Jersey for a Saturday night. Listening to Springsteen, it becomes readily apparent that he's for real, that if he's no longer one of them, at least he's from them, those kids he writes about, and deeply rooted in the steamy, frenetic landscape of Asbury Park, New Jersey. And while the Next Big Punk/Street Poet/Rock 'n' Roller hype may have put his current album at the top of the charts, it certainly isn't disseminated by him and seems to have caused Springsteen enough pain with the pleasure.

We're talking about the recording of *Born to Run*. Abruptly. Bruce shifts gears and stomps on the pedal. He leans across the table willfully to within inches of my face. Everyone else at the table is shut out. His eyes are ablaze. "That was the most horrible period of my life...the most *horrible* period of my *life*," he states, shaking his head slowly back and forth and sweeping his hand unequivocally across everything. And when I ask him why, he grabs the Columbia press packet from in front of his publicist and holds it up beside his face. Across the top is Jon Landau's famous quote, "I saw the rock 'n' roll future and its name is Springsteen." Bugging eyes rivet me. Then impulsively, frustratedly, Springsteen bites the packet and rips it with his teeth, finally tearing it in half with his hands and throwing it to the floor. "THAT!" he barks savagely in answer to my question.

"Let me tell ya," he continues more quietly, but no less intensely. "I had this *horrible* pressure in the studio and for the whole last part of the record I was living in this certain Inn in New York over west. The place is, in fact, notorious and has been raided more than once for gambling and prostitution.] And the room there had this..." He sizes something up. "It had this crooked mirror. And everyday, before I'd go over to the studio I'd straighten out this crooked mirror...And everyday when I'd come home, that mirror was crooked again. Every time. That crooked mirror...it just couldn't stay straight...So I'm in there with this crooked mirror and after about a week the room started to look like Nagasaki anyway..." He pauses suspended in his gesture that indicates the room and *then* launches in again. "...junk all over the place. And then one day this chick I was with one night in Texas calls up and says she's in Jersey and she doesn't have any place to stay and she's *freakin'* out! And so finally I say, 'OK. You can stay here.' So every day I'd go into the studio and there was that and then I'd come home and there'd be this crooked mirror and...this crazy chick, you see." And he has to laugh as each Chinese box of his story gives way to another absurd package.

But as Springsteen goes on, elaborating on how every day of recording was supposed to be the last, brief sessions stretching on into weeks, and how everybody was "getting crazy," he gets serious again. "One night," he tells me, "towards the end of

the record, I was sittin' there at the piano in the studio, tryin' to get down the last cut, 'She's the One,' and Landau's in the booth and we've been at it for hours and hours. I just lean my head down on the piano. It just won't come. And everybody's tryin' to tell me how to do it—they were all there to *help* me and they were really tryin'—and Landau's sayin' this and that and freakin' out...and then, all of a sudden, everyone looks around and Landau has just disappeared, just walked off into the night— night, it was like six a.m.—couldn't take it. He was smart to go home and get some sleep. The whole thing was like that. And when I got home around 10 in the morning to the room with the crooked mirror, this chick she says to me—she says it every night when I come home—"and Springsteen's voice softens, " 'Is it finished?' and I say, 'No.' And I could've cried...I almost cried..." Springsteen goes further away for a moment. "...Well, maybe I did cry a little..." And then snaps back. "...I almost cried."

The "crazy chick" is now his nearlongtime girlfriend, Karen Darvin. And the record? "After it was finished? I hated it! I couldn't stand to listen to it. I thought it was the worst piece of garbage I'd ever heard. I told Columbia I wouldn't release it. I told 'em I'd just go down to the Bottom Line gig and do all the new songs and make it a live album." Of course, Columbia prevailed upon him to release the record, and while it did rise to the top of the charts and while Bruce can now laugh and say of the album these several months later, "I like it," he also assures firmly: "Never again!"

But you mustn't believe him. First of all, he's from Jersey. Second: just listen to the care that went into *Born To Run* and you try and figure out how he can retreat from that. Third: he has this limitless energy and is driven by a sincere desire to give an audience everything that they could have hoped for in a performance because "You cannot take the audience lightly." Unless he gets thoroughly corrupted by corporate economic policy and/or his own publicity, this guy will never just put out "product"—live or in the studio—he's too honest.

Miami Steve is making sure that the barmaid tells Alex Karras that "Miami says hello," as we're all swept out of the bar. One record company guy has gone ahead to get the car, and, as we emerge onto the street, he pulls up. Everybody is piling in when Springsteen announces, "Nahh, I don't want to drive. I'm gonna walk back." And he expands his chest to take in a lungful of the dubiously nutritional Detroit air. In drunken mimicry, I do the same...and damned if it don't feel good! I tap on my chest and shout to Springsteen, "H2O! H2O!" And he responds at first with a sheepish grin, unsure of my comic intentions, but a little drunk himself, echoes "Right! H2O!" And despite the protests of the company chaperones, the Next Big Thing and I set off into the murky Motown night, oblivious to danger and also oblivious to the fact that I'm not at all sure of the direction of the hotel, though I'm a certifiably good guesser.

Springsteen has his harp out and is stepping jauntily in time to his own unaccompanied version of "Not Fade Away," singing between his honks in a quiet sinuous wheeze. (If they ain't downed out, Jersey cats can get hopelessly corny.) A block into our perilous journey, Springsteen realizes that the company guys are following slowly behind us in the car. He motions them on. When they stay put, he steps up to the car and good-naturedly tells them to "Get outta here!" We walk on.

Another block. The car remains on our trail. Suddenly, Springsteen pivots and races head-on at the slow-moving car, bounding solidly onto the hood in his high-heeled boots, and then stomping and skidding his way onto the roof where in mock-frenzy attack he jumps up and down repeatedly. "Hey! You're gonna wreck the goddamned rented car, Bruce!" some Nervous Nellie within shouts out. "Nahhh!" Springsteen countermands as he finishes his assault and leaps back to the pavement. The car scoots off.

I laugh. It's the kind of wanton nonsense that I expect from Rock 'n' Roll Kings. He chortles in his nose and withdraws back into the harp and "I'll Not Fade Away." But fade away he does. Back at the hotel (amazingly enough) he makes a gracious, if perfunctory, gesture to invite us all in, but when we get off the elevator at the sixth floor it's clear that he's heading towards his room—swaying, actually—and sleep and that everyone else should go elsewhere. Aww! Those Jersey punks could never take it! I think as I careen off to whatever I can find. But in a more rational moment, I realize that mere mortals must sleep.