

The Magazine

SPECIAL REPORT
THE LAST DAYS OF STAN LEE

A Shocking Tale of Superheroes, Love and Abuse
Page 54

MONEY BOOSTERS!

- 6 Signs of Financial Health
 - How to Downsize Right
 - Tap Your Home for Cash
 - Why Fraud Is *Everywhere*
- Page 23

BLACK VOICES THAT CHANGED AMERICA

Page 36

New Medical Breakthroughs!

Lives Saved From Diabetes, Cancer, Heart Disease and More
Page 40

Life Lessons From Queen Elizabeth

Page 46

Bruce Springsteen



The Boss Talks About Family, Creativity, Love and Loss in Our Exclusive In-Depth Interview

Page 30

National Parks Without the Crowds or Hassle

Page 48



A Letter to Us

Bruce Springsteen's new album gets right to the heart of the matter

I WILL LET YOU IN on an old interviewer's secret. Start slow and easy, to let your subject clear his throat and settle in, and to get the two of you talking. Most interviews take flight from there, sounding more like conversations than interrogations. (And always ask the hard questions last.) When I went to visit Bruce Springsteen at his home for this issue's cover story, I opened with this technique, fairly confident. Then, this happened:

Me: *So, do you work out in the morning? Every morning?*

Springsteen: "Yeah."

Treadmill and weights?

"Uh, yeah."

I've read that you're a vegetarian....

"No."

No?

"That's incorrect."

And so it went. My warm-up questions kept yielding one- and two-word answers. And, to my growing alarm, things proceeded this way for the next few awkward minutes. All the while, I was scrambling to recover my wits. But next, in response to a stumbling question about "sort of the idea behind this record"—his new album, *Letter to You*—Springsteen locked eyes with me and delivered 11 thoughtful paragraphs about the songwriter's creative process, his self-doubts, his approach to writing: how it has changed over time and how it hasn't. And from there, liftoff!

Springsteen was funny, deep and thoroughly engaging for the better part of an hour. He talked honestly about aging and loss, about his many lives and how even seemingly mundane

moments like "hearing Ben E. King over the stereo at the end of the night" can bring you into the presence of the divine. The story begins on page 30. I think it's a revealing portrait of a rock star at 71. You can tell me if that's right.

Longtime readers may know that this isn't the first time Bruce Springsteen has been on the cover of AARP THE MAGAZINE, but it's the first time he has granted us an interview. He felt that *Letter to You*, with its long view of life, its sorrows and joys—and presented with the full thunder of the E Street Band—would be something you, our readers and members, would like to hear about. I just had to ask the right question.

On a sadder note ... just as our August-September issue finished printing, we learned that author Gail Sheehy had passed away from complications of pneumonia. Gail was an insightful and highly influential writer, and we were honored to include her essay "Travels with Chollie" in that issue. Our thoughts are with Gail's family and friends and, of course, her dog, Chollie.

Bob



Stan Lee signing autographs at MegaCon Tampa Bay in 2017

A LEGEND'S LAST DAYS

When Marvel Comics mastermind Stan Lee died at 95 amid accusations of elder abuse, our writer David Hochman decided to find out what had happened. Did this icon face mistreatment in the twilight of his life? Could his own wealth not protect him? Find out in the gripping read that starts on page 54.



Springsteen shot for
AARP at home with
his Harley on
August 4, 2020

Bruce Springsteen

A HOMECOMING

The Boss sums up 50 years of his work—“in ink and blood”—with a powerful return to rock ‘n’ roll that grapples with aging and loss and revels in the richness of a long life.

By Robert Love

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY CLINCH

PART 1 ★ THE GIFT ★

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, looking fit, tan and perfectly at ease in jeans and a T-shirt, greets me with an elbow bump as we sit down to talk on the porch of his New Jersey farmhouse. The view from here, a rolling vista of 378 acres of beautiful horse country, is perhaps the most visible reward for his lifetime of hard work and outsize success as a rock musician and writer. But it’s still a working farm. The busy recording studio is just down the hill, and the 100-year-old barn is a multipurpose venue—the ground floor, home to his family’s six horses; the hayloft, a place for local gatherings and even a bit of filmmaking.

Springsteen turned 71 in September, a freaky mile marker for many of us who have grown up with him. Though it shouldn’t be close to shocking. We have been along for the ride through his many and varied lives: the ’70s soul rocker and Boss of the mighty E Street Band, the pumped-up stadium showstopper, the writer of iconic, decade-defining songs like “Born to Run,” “Hungry Heart” and “The Rising.” And more recently, the author of a critically acclaimed memoir, which he transmuted into a one-man show called *Springsteen on Broadway*. His directorial debut, a concert film for his 2019 album, *Western Stars*, whetted his appetite to direct again. Oh, and during this pandemic spring and summer, he seized the airwaves to try to raise our spirits and preach mask-wearing and patience (“stay strong, and stay home, and stay together”) on his fortnightly radio

show, *From My Home to Yours*, on Sirius XM.

But I am here to talk to him about something quite remarkable for a musical artist of his vintage. His new record, *Letter to You*, an album of powerful, moving and elegiac rock music, takes up the great mysteries of life and death as only an earnest pilgrim of three-score-and-ten-plus-one could hope to pull off. With the full E Street Band—big drums, bass, lead guitars and keys—the record rocks, and it is age appropriate.

Letter to You is an album about carrying on in the face of loss. The loss of old friends such as George Theiss, who sang and played with a teenage Springsteen in his first band, the Castiles. The loss of two beloved E Street bandmates—organist Danny Federici and saxophonist Clarence Clemons; the passing of Springsteen's father; the slow decline of his mother due to Alzheimer's disease. The shedding of lives past, the passage of time itself—the preoccupations of all art that aims for greatness—is at the center of this work. It's a summing up, too, an offering from an old friend. But to whom is it addressed?

"Is it a letter to your younger self?" I ask. "Is it to your children? Your wife? Your fans? To me?"

Springsteen chuckles at the question: "It's to you! It's a letter to *you*! Whoever is listening. And, yeah, it is a summing up of what I've tried to do over the course of my 45, 50 years now, working."



New Music
The Boss's latest album touches on themes of death, life, past, future.

The project began with a measure of self-doubt. "I hadn't written rock music for the E Street Band in about seven years," he says. "I was thinking, *Well, maybe I don't have any more rock music in me.*"

True, rock was in the Boss's rearview mirror for a while, as he embraced other musical styles, covered other writers' songs, traveled wherever his muse set the GPS. For his previous record, *Western Stars*, the project was a visit to 1960s-era Los Angeles, to the days of Glen Campbell—style folk-pop with lush orchestration. Before that, he recorded and toured with a modern jug band of 17 or more musicians and a repertoire of traditional folk standards and spirituals made popular by Pete Seeger. And whoosh, just like that, seven years had passed, leaving Springsteen with nagging uncertainty: Could he still write great rock 'n' roll?

"You never really know," he says. "It's part of the anxiety and mystery of the job that I do—which is a magic trick, because you take something out of the air that isn't there. There is no existence of it whatsoever, and you make it physical—literally. You can go for long periods without picking up anything significant. Or you'll just pick up different things. It's like you're in a mine and one vein has gone dry, so you tap into another. A pop vein or a folk vein, and so you start working there, and you discover a whole new rich vein of gold that you can draw from. It's not

Top: Courtesy Columbia Records; opposite: from left: Neal Preston; Pictorial Press Ltd./Alamy

"I hadn't written rock music for the E Street Band in about seven years. I was thinking, *Well, maybe I don't have any more rock music in me.*"



rock 'n' roll; it's just something else.

"But because I am primarily a rock 'n' roll musician when I'm operating sort of at my peak—in other words, in front of my largest audience with my favorite band—I like to ... every once in a while, come up with some rock songs."

Come up with some rock songs.... Ho ho ho. Just so you know, that last line, spun out to its understated to-do-list punch line by a virtuoso storyteller, was also delivered with a self-deprecating chuckle. Springsteen is funny in person. He's also fully present, generous with his attention and, to my surprise, as still as an Easter Island statue when he's not talking. I ask if we can avoid politics today. "Fine with me," he says from the opposite end of a family-size table in front of this pretty fieldstone house. The day has brightened after a morning storm, and Bruce's wife of 29 years, Patti Scialfa, a tall, redheaded singer-songwriter of considerable gifts herself, comes out to check on us—offering drinks and monitoring the social distance protocols at her home. Then the screen door closes, and she disappears back into the house.

Springsteen is the great empath of the rock world. He shows up for causes, big and small: hunger, poverty, Vietnam vets, 9/11 first responders, hurricane relief and many more, right down to Asbury Park local. But since our time today is not unlimited, I am very curious about how, after 50 years on the job, Springsteen still finds inspiration for his songwriting. He answers not as a rock star but as a member of a tribe, the humble representative of anyone who makes art for a living.

"You have your antenna out," he says. "You're just walking through the world and you're picking up these signals of emotions and spirit and history and events, today's events and past remembrances. These things you divine from the air are all intangible elements: spirit, emotion, history. These are the tools of the songwriter's trade before he even picks up the pen.

"People who are very attuned to that atmosphere usually end up being artists of some sort. Because they're so attuned to it, they have a desire to record it. If that desire to record it is strong enough, you learn a language to do so. Whether it's paintings, films, songs, poetry ...

"My antenna is picking up so much information, I need to find a way to disperse it. So, I needed to learn a language that does that. And the languages of art, film, records, whatever you want to call it—all those languages do that. And you get to pass it on to your listeners or fans. That's how it begins."

Springsteen and the E Street Band on their 1985 North American tour



PART 2

★ WHAT ARE SONGS BUT DREAMS? ★

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN'S famous New Jersey beginnings came full circle long ago. After the breakthrough success of his 1975 album *Born to Run*, he traveled the world, married actress Julianne Phillips, got divorced four years later, started a family with Scialfa and married her in Los Angeles. In 1998, the family came home to New Jersey and stayed. Being tethered to his old stomping grounds has been good for Springsteen, boosted his creative output. Although in his Broadway show, he points out the irony that he, Mr. Born to Run—"It's a death trap! It's a suicide rap!"—now lives happily just 10 minutes from his place of birth, Freehold, New Jersey.

That means he is still physically tied to the landmarks of his youth and young manhood—his family home, church, the places where he played as a young musician, the Knights of Columbus hall, the VFW hall, the beach bars, even the ShopRite on Route 79 in Freehold, where he and the Castiles set up their amps to play in the parking lot in 1965 for a "Midnight Madness" opening ceremony. During the summer months of the current pandemic, he would take long drives ("to get me out of Patti's hair"), noting with despair the emptiness of his boyhood towns, beaches and boardwalks. But when he drove by the ShopRite, he says, "where I was 55 years ago at midnight.... It was the only parking lot that was full of cars, and it almost brought me to tears."

And it was the 2018 death of the handsome, charismatic

“I heard something of mine from 1975 on a record the other day, and I said, ‘That was about seven or eight lives ago.’”

Theiss, who was there with Springsteen, singing and playing in the parking lot 55 years ago, that sparked this new record into being. When Theiss died after a long struggle with cancer, Springsteen says, “this left me as the last living member of my first band—this very significant and meaningful group of young men with whom I had this enormous experience as a teenager.”

Shortly after Theiss’ death, something quite extraordinary happened. Springsteen explains: “I was coming out of my play on Broadway. There was an Italian kid there. He hands me a guitar. ‘Hey, Bruce, this is for you. We had this built for you. It’s very special.’ An acoustic guitar ... no case. I just put it in the car and take off. You know [I told him], ‘Thanks. Appreciate it.’”

Slowly, the power of that gift revealed itself. “When I went to write, I picked it up and ‘Last Man Standing’ came out, along with most of the rest of the record. Sometimes instruments have some magic in them. The songs for the album were in the guitar that the kid gave me,” he says, still marveling at it. “You try for seven years and you write an album in a week.”

The recording happened fast, too, he adds. “We spent one week in the studio—five days—and cut the entire record. It was all live, no overdub vocals and just a few overdub instruments. It’s the first truly live, in-the-studio record of the band we’ve ever made.” Fans will get to see how it all came together in a Springsteen-directed companion documentary.

He loosely based all the album’s songs on the themes of “Last Man Standing,” he says: “of death, life, past, future.” Covering all that ground are a dozen songs, all original, including three written in the early 1970s that are released here for the first time (and on which you can hear Springsteen’s early influences, especially Bob Dylan). *Letter to You* begins with a song titled “One Minute You’re Here” and closes with “I’ll See You in My Dreams,” a quiet folk elegy of hope in the face of mortality. It contains the lines: “Death is not the end / I’ll see you in my dreams.”

“Yeah, well, I’m 70, so it’s what you write about,” Springsteen says. “These things—the mysteries of life—become more interesting. Life goes by quickly but slowly. I heard something of mine from 1975 on a record the other day, and I said, ‘That was about seven or eight lives ago. It was a full and entire life of its own.’ And I lived that one, and it was a great one, and now I’m living another one.

“I lived a life where we raised our children. That life is gone now. [Evan, Jessica and Sam Springsteen are 30, 28



In Philadelphia in 2016, inset, the Boss played his longest U.S. show: four hours, four minutes. Then, outside Boston, he nearly topped it.

and 26, respectively.] Now Patti and I are living another life. So, you live a lot of lives over the course of your one life. And ‘One Minute You’re Here’ uses metaphors for that experience. Whether it’s the train whooshing by you in an instant or the end of a summer ... whether it’s a carnival that comes through town for a week and then it’s gone. Whether it’s the sound of your feet on a gravel road and you look up and the stars are there, and then they’ve disappeared. About the swiftness of death, I suppose, but also the richness of living.

“I wrote a song called ‘Death Is Not the End’ a couple of years ago, and I never finished it. But I liked the idea, because I guess I don’t believe that it is the end. I carry so many ancestors with me on a daily basis. I experience my father regularly. I experience Clarence. I experience my old assistant, Terry Magovern. They visit me in my dreams quite often—I may see them, you know, several times a year.

“So, this idea is you don’t lose everything when someone dies. You do lose their physical presence, but their physical presence is not all of them, and it never was all of them, even when they were alive. Spirit is very strong. Emotion is very strong. Their energy is very strong. And a lot of this, particularly for people who are very powerful, really carries over after death.

“It’s like my friend George passes away and leaves me with all of these songs. Clarence passes away and leaves me with these songs. Danny passes away, leaves me with these songs. And what are songs but dreams, at the end of the day? It really is all my dreams that I put down on paper and on tape.”

So, I say, it must be nice when your dreams connect with so many other human beings on the planet.

“It is.”

Do you feel more at peace now than in decades past?

Springsteen: Oh, yes. My children are grown up. They’re citizens. Patti and I are just at some wonderful, wonderful place in our life together, and things are very, very good. I just got all of this brand-new and very lively and exciting music. The film [of *Letter to You*] is very good. So, it’s all of these wonderful things creatively. Personally, things are great. It couldn’t be any better.

Do you still see a therapist?

A: Once in a while, yeah—the talking cure—it works. But you’ve got to commit yourself to a process. And I was pretty good at doing that. I enjoyed the investigative examination of issues in my life that I didn’t understand. I learned a lot and therefore was able to exploit what I had learned and turn it into a real life.

Do you think our dreams are the forerunner of life on the other side, when we will be reunited with those we knew here?

A: It’s a nice idea. I wouldn’t count on it.

Is the new record part of an ongoing memory project that is related to the memoir and the Broadway show and *Western Stars* and also looking forward to the future?

A: I’ve never thought of it like that, but that is how it appears. I reach 70 and I want to include sort of looking back. It’s natural as a springboard and a way to look forward—to look into the future and to experience the time you have left. I wanted to richly experience my past, contextualize it, and then it would contextualize the time that I have left and what I want to do with it.... So, all of these projects have been ways of making

PART 3

★ 10 PERSONAL QUESTIONS ★

sense of my own life, my own identity, what I want to do, where I want to go, how I want to spend my time.

You seem to have extremely good recall of your younger years. So, you’re not running out of material, it seems.

A: A writer has got to have a pretty good—a reasonably attuned—memory of his past. And the stuff that I can’t remember, I just make up. [Laughs.]

Do you feel that you’ve been able to create the family that you longed for as a boy and young man?

A: Yeah, I do. But it doesn’t come out the way you dream. It comes out much richer than you dreamed as a young man. You know, there’s much more richness in the experience and in the lives of the people that you’ve gotten involved with than you could have ever imagined, pre-family. I can’t tell someone what it’s like to have a child. I can try. But that’s an experience you have to have yourself.

What is it like living with a fellow artist—a wife who is in the family business?

A: We just drift around each other and create as it happens. I mean, because I wrote some of the songs [for the new album] in the family room here where Patti’s lying on a couch and just reading, and I’m over there just strumming the guitar and writing little notes down. I wrote some

in the bedroom. I wrote some in the studio. I’ll drift around the house and write in different rooms at different times. And Patti will do the same. I’ll go up to get into bed at night, and she’s humming, you know, writing a song. It’s a part of how we live. It’s not separate from our daily life. The process of creating is a part of and is completely integrated with how we live.

You’ve spoken so lovingly about your mom, who is still suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. And you’ve written very sweetly of your memories of her in your book *Born to Run*. And how she loves music and loves to dance. How is your family coping during the COVID-19 crisis?

A: We do the best we can. I’m very lucky that my mother remains in very, very good spirits. She can’t really speak, but you know when you see her, she still moves to rhythm if you create rhythm or put music on, and she’s happy. She’s always got a smile. Always got a kiss or a hug. She can’t name you now or anything, but she can recognize you and is excited when you come over. And it’s been 10 years, so it’s been a long time. And her progress was very slow, so I consider us quite lucky with the disease.

What music do you play for her?

A: Generally, 1940s swing band, but she also likes rock ‘n’ roll, and I’ll play her some of mine because she knows some of my music. She likes ‘50s music, too—Bill Haley, “Rock Around the Clock,” stuff she remembers from when she had the radio on in the ‘50s, and she was only 30 years old herself.

In your book you talked a bit about having had no interest in burning out quickly or dying young. AARP’s founder called growing older a privilege. Is it even truer for artists?

A: I’ve found it to be so. I’ve continued to make some exciting and interesting work. And I continue to take my story and move it along further. And you don’t know when wonderful things are going to happen ... that I would write this record at this late date for the E Street Band. And that the band would be at the top of their performing powers—which is why it is frustrating not to be able to perform at this moment—but it’ll come around when it comes around.

AGE HAS BESTOWED

patience on Springsteen. And the pandemic, which he has called “frightening and heartbreaking,” has taught him to value the most simple pleasures. “When this is over,” he says, “I want to get an ice cream cone at the Jersey Freeze—to walk inside, step up to the counter and say, ‘Soft vanilla dipped in chocolate, please.’” When that day comes, the singer has even bigger plans: “All I can tell you is, when this experience is over, I am going to throw the wildest party you’ve ever seen. And you, my friends, are all invited.” ■

From left: Keith Bedford/Boston Globe via Getty Images; Elizabeth Robertson/Philadelphia Inquirer/AP. Opposite, from top: Jeffrey Mayer/WireImage; Jersey 4 Jersey/Getty Images for ABA