

A full-page photograph of Bruce Springsteen standing on a large, weathered tree stump in a grassy field. He is wearing a brown leather jacket over a dark shirt and jeans. The background features a red barn, a chain-link fence, and lush green trees under a blue sky with scattered clouds.

Ghosts, Guitars, and the E Street Shuffle

How Bruce Springsteen confronted death, saw Clarence in his dreams, and knocked out a raw and rocking new album with the world's greatest bar band

By Brian Hiatt

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY CLINCH

LAND OF HOPE AND DREAMS
Springsteen on his Colts Neck, New Jersey, farm in August

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UCE SPRINGSTEEN IS standing on a gravel driveway outside his house, squinting up at the sky. This morning, an early-August thunderstorm straight out of one of his own metaphors rumbled through New Jersey’s Monmouth County, soaking Asbury Park, buffeting Freehold, leaving muddy ground here in the horsey acres of Colts Neck. It’s afternoon now, and above Springsteen’s farm, the clouds are scattering, with sunshine breaking through. “It ended up being a half-way decent day,” he says, with real gratitude. (The more time he spends in semi-isolation here, the more he ends up focusing on the weather: “What else is there?”)

His hair is silver and black, cropped short, and on his still-lean torso is a thin white undershirt not unlike the one he wore on the cover of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, with a low, ribbed neck and a tiny hole on the side. On his sockless feet – incredibly! – are a pair of leather sandals. He’s in jeans, needless to say, but they’re light blue, in a loose carpenter cut. We are six months deep into a global pandemic, and even Bruce Springsteen has been working from home for a long while.

It is, as always, mildly jarring to be standing next to him, as though one of the heads from Mount Rushmore peeled itself off the cliff to hang out. When you’ve hardly spoken with anyone else face-to-face for months, it’s even odder. I grew up around here, too, so as we head to a covered porch, there’s some local small talk – we mourn a mutually beloved Carvel store that’s morphed into a Dunkin’ Donuts. We settle into wicker chairs, six feet apart, across a table of white stone that overlooks a tree-lined field, where leaves are swaying in what’s left of the morning’s wind. For a man who’s born to run but more or less stuck in place, there are worse spots to be.

So, how’s he doing? “Hangin’ in there, like everybody else,” Springsteen says, sinking further into his chair. “As far as my own plans, you know, I think you’re concerned about ever playing again.” (He says this lightly enough, and later takes pains to clarify that he’s far more concerned about “working musicians who go week to week, and all your back-line people in the crew.”) “So

Senior writer BRIAN HIATT profiled *Grimes in March*. His book, “Bruce Springsteen: The Stories Behind the Songs,” was published in 2019.

that weighs on your mind a little bit because, well, it was fun. Some of the uncertainty that the virus has brought with it is something everybody’s got to live with. But in general, I’m OK.”

It doesn’t hurt that Springsteen, who has been open about his struggles with depression, is still taking meds. “I’m on drugs!” he says later. “So my mood is good!”

On a snowy day last November, just a few yards from where we’re sitting, in the light-splashed, blond-wood studio he shares with his wife, Patti Scialfa, Springsteen gathered the E Street Band for five days of recording. They managed to lay down an entire album. “We were doing a song every three hours,” says Steve Van Zandt, who compares the pace to the Beatles’ early sessions. “We basically cut the album in four days. We booked five days and on the fifth day we had nothin’ to do, so we just listened to it.”

In the studio, they all toasted to the tour they were sure would follow. Now, there’s “no touring in sight,” as Springsteen puts it, but *Letter to You* is still coming out October 23rd. There was no point, he decided, in holding it back. “When I make music,” he says, “I’m going to put it out.”

Were it not for the intervention of a once-in-a-century global catastrophe, Springsteen – who turned 71 on September 23rd – would right now be preparing for that world tour with the E Street Band. It was supposed to start, he reveals, in the spring of 2021. Instead, he says, “My antenna tells me, at best, 2022. And I would consider the concert industry lucky if it happens then. . . . I’m going to consider myself lucky if I lose just a year

“Once you hit 70, there’s a finite amount of tours and a finite amount of years left. To lose one or two, that’s not so great.”

of touring life. Once you hit 70, there’s a finite amount of tours and a finite amount of years that you have. And so you lose one or two, that’s not so great. Particularly because I feel the band is capable of playing at the very, very, very top, or better than, of its game right now. And I feel as vital as I’ve ever felt in my life. . . . It’s not being able to do something that is a fundamental life force, something I’ve lived for since I was 16 years old.”

And livestreamed sets? For a guy who crowd-surfed into his seventh decade, who would no doubt leap into any available sweaty mass of concertgoers at this very moment if he could, it’s just not the same. He did an acoustic set with Scialfa from their studio for a Jersey Covid-19 benefit, and jammed remotely with the Dropkick Murphys in May, beaming onto a screen in Boston’s Fenway Park. But he found it deeply weird to work himself into an approximation of his usual performance frenzy for two songs, only to land back in an empty room. “Those are some of my

favorite guys,” says Springsteen. “It’s always fun. But it was very strange to put yourself in a room with a band and then stop. So it’s not something I’d want to make a career out of.”

There may be no bringing together the E Street Band right now, a group almost big enough to constitute a mass gathering in its own right. But *Letter to You* sounds live enough to make you feel a little guilty listening to it, as if you’re violating quarantine. That makes the album feel all the more precious, and the lack of a tour all the more painful. *Letter to You* is the first time since *Born in the U.S.A.* that Springsteen and the E Street Band recorded live in the studio to this extent, and possibly the rawest album they’ve ever made, with close to zero overdubs.

“It was really like the old days,” says drummer Max Weinberg. “Just pure musical energy, with the hard-earned musical and professional wisdom of guys in their 70s, or close to 70.” It also happens to be the most classically, unabashedly E Street-sounding album since at least *The River*. It’s a late-period rebirth of sorts, and it started with thoughts of death.

IN THE EARLY DAYS of Springsteen’s first real band, an assemblage of teenage central-Jersey greasers called the Castiles, there was one member marked for success. He had a smooth, pure tenor. He was the group’s designated heart-throb. His name was George Theiss, and he invited Springsteen into the band as lead guitarist in the first place. “We were the only five freaks in Monmouth County,” Theiss once told ROLLING

STONE – though Van Zandt, over in Middletown with his band the Shadows, would beg to differ. Theiss and Springsteen clashed as time went on, especially as Springsteen began singing more, and the Castiles broke up in 1968. In the end, one of those two kids became Bruce Springsteen, and the other did not. Theiss married at 20, worked as a carpenter, kept playing music on the side.

It can’t have always been easy for Theiss to watch his former bandmate leap from one unimaginable success to another. “It’s just different paths,” says Springsteen. “I don’t know how to make much more sense of it than that.” They never fully fell out of touch, but Springsteen and Theiss reconnected in the past few years. When Springsteen learned in July 2018 that Theiss was terminally ill, he flew down to North Carolina to sit with him “on his last two days of his life.” Springsteen was, at that point, performing on Broadway five nights a week, talking about his past again and again. He realized he was the last

surviving member of the Castiles, a revelation he sat with for a while. “Most of the guys in the band died young for one reason or another,” says Springsteen. “You can’t think about it without thinking of your own mortality.”

Before 2019, Springsteen hadn’t written a song he thought would work for the E Street Band “in about six or seven years. I’ve written a lot of other kinds of music.” He had a particularly fruitful burst of songwriting at the start of the decade, which led to 2012’s *Wrecking Ball* (fiery populist-protest lyrics, experimental-for-Bruce production), last year’s belatedly released *Western Stars* (melodically surprising, slyly autobiographical orchestral pop), and a third album that’s “in the can,” he says, declining to elaborate. He’s vague about any other songwriting last decade, but there also was an acclaimed 500-page autobiography; the Tony-winning *Springsteen on Broadway*; and 2014’s *High Hopes*, a collection of covers and older songs, most written in the 2000s.

DANNY CLINCH



WESTERN STAR

Springsteen in the stables of his Colts Neck farm. On this property, he and the E Street Band recorded *Letter to You* in just five days.

“You’re down in the mines,” he says, “and you’re searching for different veins of creativity. Sometimes you burn through one, so you have to search for something else. That vein can burn out for years or weeks at a time. . . . You’re also at the mercy of events.” For Springsteen, few events were more life-shaking than the 2011 death of one of his closest friends, E Street saxophonist and force of nature Clarence Clemons, especially on the heels of the loss of organist Danny Federici in 2008. Though Springsteen doesn’t make the connection himself, it’s hard not to notice that his E Street songwriting dry spell started around then.

It took the death of Theiss, a friend he’d known even longer, to push him out of it. “We were very close at a very intense period in our lives,” says Springsteen. “And I learned almost the entirety of my craft in that group.” Springsteen had far more success with a subsequent prefame band, the hard-boogieing Steel Mill, who jammed through his winding original songs of the era to massive hippie crowds. But the Castiles burrowed into the day-to-day lives of their audience. They’d cover Sam and Dave, the Beatles, Bo Diddley, Jimi Hendrix – whatever it took to set kids in motion in a beach club or church basement or roller rink. That was a framework Springsteen would return to after he scored his record deal in 1972. “I still have a deep emotional thread that links me with the Castiles,” Springsteen says. “It was a really good local band that provided a fundamental service to a local audience. And that idea is not that far from the idea that I had of what the E Street Band can be – the world’s biggest bar band.”

Sometime before Theiss’ passing, a fan – from Italy, he thinks – gave Springsteen an acoustic guitar at his Broadway stage door. “I said, ‘Geez, you know, thanks,’” Springsteen recalls. “And I just took a quick glance at it and it looked like a nice guitar, so I jumped in the car with it.” The guitar, made by a company he’s never heard of, sat in his living room for months, until Springsteen picked it up around April of last year.

Without warning, “all the songs from the album came out of it,” he says, full of wonder. “In perhaps less than 10 days. I just wandered around the house in different rooms, and I wrote a song each day. I wrote a song in the bedroom. I wrote a song in our bar. I wrote a song in the living room.” The first to emerge was “Last Man Standing,” one of the most directly autobiographical songs in Springsteen’s catalog, tracing the Castiles’ gigs (“Knights of Columbus and the Fireman’s Ball/ Friday night at the Union Hall/The black-leather clubs all along Route 9”) before jumping to a future haunted by loss: “You count the names of the missing as you count off time.”

Springsteen had begun to create his first set of songs about what it felt like to be in a band. He was also writing about being haunted, not unpleasantly, by the dead, most directly on the rousing “Ghosts” (“I turn up the volume and let the spirits be my guide/Meet you, brother and sister, on the other side,” he howls) and the closing track, “I’ll See You in My Dreams.”

“The loss of Clarence and Danny still echoes every day in my life,” says Springsteen. “I still don’t believe it. I’m like, ‘I’m not gonna see Clarence again? That doesn’t sound quite possible!’ I live with the dead every day at this point in my life. Whether it’s my father or Clarence or Danny, all those people sort of walk alongside you. Their spirit, their energy, their echo continues to resonate in the physical world.... A beautiful part of living is what we’re left by the dead.”

And he really does see his friends in his dreams. Terry Magovern, his friend and longtime assistant, who died in 2007, stops by “a couple times a year.” “I see Clarence every once in a while,” he says. “I’ll see the houses I lived in as a child. I’ll walk through their halls. We see all those folks in our dreams until we become a dream ourselves.”

Clarence’s nephew, Jake Clemons, replaced him in the band, and Charlie Giordano, an organist with similar musical roots, took over for Federici. But the departed are still along for the ride. “It’s a little chilling,” says Roy Bittan, E Street’s keyboardist since 1974 and a linchpin of the band’s sound. “You’re playing, and I guess you could say that the ghosts of Danny and Clarence are there.... We miss them dearly, but they’re standing right next to us.”

SOON AFTER SPRINGSTEEN wrote the new songs, he had lunch with Bittan, and told him about the material. The musician had one suggestion: “I said, ‘Hey, man, y’know, don’t demo anything,’” Bittan recalls. “‘Let’s do it the way we used to, which is play us the song and let us record it.’” It was a

perceptive piece of advice, with deep implications for the album. It echoed what Van Zandt had been telling Springsteen for years.

“I knew he was right,” says Springsteen. One of the most pivotal moments in his career came in 1981, when he sent a roadie out to buy what became his first home-studio setup, a Tascam cassette four-track that would end up on display in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. On *Nebraska*, released the next year, what were meant to be demos for the E Street Band became his first solo album, kicking off an entire career apart from the band. 1987’s *Tunnel of Love* was essentially home-made, bedroom pop, and the line between demos and released recordings blurred from there – take the one-man sparseness and aching solitude of “Streets of Philadelphia.”

In the 2000s, the echoes of Springsteen’s work with the E Street Band were easy to find, as acts from Arcade Fire to the Killers aimed for bombast. Lately, though, it’s his solo material that seems more influential, from the hermetic churn of the War on Drugs to avowed superfan Jack Antonoff’s synth-y production for Taylor Swift, Lorde, and Lana Del Rey. (Springsteen played the War on Drugs on his excellent radio show, *From My Home to Yours*, and is fond of Del Rey: “Patti and I are both big fans,” he says. “*Norman Fucking Rockwell!* Just the detail of the writing. It’s really novelistic and cinematic and quite lovely.”)

Springsteen kept making demos even after he resumed recording with the E Street Band on *The Rising* (which, somehow, is now 18 years old, a fact Springsteen finds “mind-boggling,” since

“**Letter to You” is decidedly not an album of fiery anti-Trump anthems: “That would be the most boring album in the world.”**

“that’s one of my *new* albums!”). But last year, he finally saw a reason to stop. “When I demo, I start putting things on to see if it works,” says Springsteen. “And suddenly, I’m locked into an arrangement. And then the band has to fit themselves into an arrangement. And suddenly, we don’t have an E Street Band album. So I intentionally did not demo anything.” Bypassing his studio, he captured the songs only on his iPhone, in quick solo-acoustic renditions, to make sure he remembered them.

No one was happier about this decision than Van Zandt, who thrived in the freewheeling early days, when he could jump in with his formidable arranging skills. For Van Zandt, the entire Brendan O’Brien period of (oft-superb) E Street albums – *The Rising*, *Magic*, and *Working on a Dream* – were “kind of transitional,” with Springsteen slowly moving away from thinking of himself as a “solo artist.” “We finally made it back to the band sensibility,” says Van Zandt, “where

Bruce is comfortable trusting the band again, thinking like a band member again.”

It only took 37 years, I point out. Van Zandt laughs. “He’s a little slow,” he says. “Let’s call it... deliberate.”

Letter to You is also full of the signature stylistic flourishes that Springsteen has largely avoided for decades: glockenspiel, lyrical piano intros, swelling organ chords, Jake’s uncanny evocation of Clarence’s call-to-arms solos. At one point in the sessions, Springsteen actually told Bittan to play more “E Street.” “It makes me chuckle,” says Bittan, “because there were times when he said, ‘Don’t play it like E Street!’ ”

“I wanted to revisit that sound with my current material,” says Springsteen. “I think the audience always wants two things – they want to feel at home, and they want to be surprised.” As early as 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, he was already pushing away from the sound he’d established on *Born to Run*. “Your first records, you’re just making music,” he says. “Then when you have a hit, you slip into a reactionary and self-protective mode. And from that record onward, I didn’t have anybody play that fundamental ‘E Street’ style. I didn’t want to repeat myself.”

But at this stage of his career, he’s just not worried anymore. “You’re less self-conscious,” he says. “And you’re less rigid. So it’s just like, ‘Hey, what would be creative? What would be fun for the fans? What would we enjoy doing?’ It’s sort of your own set of rules be damned.”

In that spirit, he went as far as to lead the band through muscled-up rearrangements of three

often-bootlegged, never-released songs from 1972 or 1973. “Song to Orphans,” “Janey Needs a Shooter” (which the band rehearsed as late as 1979, leading Warren Zevon to half-borrow its title for his own “Jeannie Needs a Shooter”), and the gleefully sacrilegious “If I Was the Priest” all made the new album. Last year, Springsteen was working through his archives for a follow-up to his 1998 outtakes box set, *Tracks*, when he “sort of came across these songs.” There’s no particular message in their inclusion. He simply wanted to hear the band play them now, he says, “to be able to go back and sing in your adult voice but with ideas of your youth.... It was kind of insane fun, because the lyrics for all those songs were so completely crazy.”

DESPITE A RELEASE close to Election Day, *Letter to You* is decidedly not an album of fiery anti-Trump anthems. “That would be the most boring album in the world,” Springsteen says, a wrinkle of an-



FROM TOP, ROB DEMARTIN; BILL SMITH COLLECTION; RICK DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES

noyance appearing between his eyebrows. He took on 9/11 with *The Rising* and George W. Bush’s failures with *Magic*, but those state-of-the-union reports are exceptions. With its focus on poverty, dispossession, and the plight of immigrants from Mexico, 1995’s *The Ghost of Tom Joad* was his most prescient album, but he released it in the heart of the Clinton boom years.

The song that seems to most directly address the Trump era on *Letter to You* is a fearsome rocker called “Rainmaker,” in which a conman offers false hope to drought-stricken farmers. Springsteen acknowledges the relevance – “it’s about a demagogue” – but he wrote it a few years before Trump took office. “That was sort of the one that stood in for the album I didn’t make,” Springsteen says.

The album’s only actual reference to current events is in one line, a glancing reference to a “criminal clown” who “has stolen the throne” in a song that otherwise transcends politics, the



THE WILD AND THE INNOCENT

[**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP**] Springsteen in his Colts Neck studio last fall; in 1965 with his first band, the Castiles, including singer-guitarist George Theiss (center); onstage, Springsteen would frequently kiss Clarence Clemons on the lips. “We were just close,” he says.

sweeping anthem “House of a Thousand Guitars.” That song, which paints a beguiling picture of a rock & roll heaven on Earth, a place “where the music never ends” and fellowship reigns, is important enough to him that he dashes into the house and grabs his MacBook so he can listen to it again before we discuss it.

Once he’s back at the table, he plays the song over the computer speakers, eyes shut, head nodding to Weinberg’s beat. “It’s about this entire spiritual world that I wanted to build for myself,” he says, “and give to my audience and experience with my band. It’s like that gospel song ‘I’m Working on a Building.’ That’s the building we’ve been working on all these years. It also speaks somewhat to the spiritual life of the nation. It may be one of my favorite songs I’ve ever written. It draws in everything I’ve been trying to do for the past 50 years.”

There’s a reference in there to churches and jails, and I ask if it’s a nod to a similar line in “Jun-

gleland.” Springsteen laughs. “That line has been tickling my brain since we recorded the record,” he says. “And I wasn’t sure where I heard it! You just reminded me where I heard that line before.”

Even if it’s not the current focus of his songwriting, Springsteen is still willing to dive directly into politics, as his approval of – and brief appearance in – a Democratic National Convention video using “The Rising” in August made clear. He’s found the past few years to be a “very disturbing time.” “Overall, as somebody who was a born populist,” he says, “I’ve got a little less faith in my neighbors than I had four years ago.”

Many on the left – including his friend Tom Morello – see Trump as more of a symptom of larger problems, I point out. “I’m probably not as left as Tom,” says Springsteen. “But look, if we want to have the America that we envision, it’s going to need some pretty serious systemic changes moving leftward.” As for the leading politician on the left: “I like Bernie Sanders a lot,” Springsteen says. “I don’t know if he was my main choice, my first choice. I like Elizabeth Warren, I like Bernie.” For the moment, though, he is fully on board with the centrist Democratic nominee. “The power of the American idea has been abandoned,” Springsteen says. “It’s a terrible shame, and we need somebody who can bring that to life again.... I think if we get Joe Biden, it’s gonna go a long way towards helping us regain our status around the world. The country as the shining light of democracy has been trashed by the administration. We abandoned friends, we befriended dictators, we denied climate science.”

His review of the Republican convention? “Horrific. Just seeded with constant lies and total distortion of the American idea. It’s heartbreaking and terrible. The first thing is to get the Trump administration out of office and start again.”

For Springsteen, the Black Lives Matter movement has unearthed truths he hadn’t quite grasped, even when he became the rare white rock star to take on police violence against black Americans with “American Skin (41 Shots),” back in 2000. “White supremacy and white privilege have gone much deeper than I thought they did,” he says. “I think my feeling previously to the past three or four years was that racism and white supremacy and white privilege were veins in our extremities, rather than an aorta that cuts through the very heart of the nation, which I feel it is now. So that was eye-opening, whether I was previously stupidly innocent to that or not.”

He’s proud that his 30-year-old son, Evan, has been marching in New York City. “There’s not going to be any post-racial society,” Springsteen says. “That’s never gonna happen. But I think that a society where people really see one another as full men and women, as Americans, is possible. It’s a movement of tremendous hope, and it’s a tremendously diverse group of young people that are out on the street. And it’s a movement that history is demanding right now.”

Springsteen flips through a looseleaf notebook he grabbed from the house, where he’s been doing some writing about [*Cont. on 97*]

➔ BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

[Cont. from 37] Clarence Clemons and BLM, among other topics. He finds a page with the letter “C” on top. Part of his audience’s outsize reaction to his and Clemons’ stage antics and palpable brotherhood, he thinks, is that they were seeing “an America they would like to imagine existed. And I think that was not completely unintentional. Our idea was, we wanted to present to our audience a musical version of John Lewis’ ‘beloved community.’” The late congressman and civil rights leader often referenced this phrase of Martin Luther King Jr.’s, which Lewis described as “a society based on simple justice that values the dignity and the worth of every human being.”

Springsteen knows it wasn’t always easy for Clemons, who only briefly experienced life in a half-white, half-black version of the E Street Band, the one that recorded the title track “Born to Run.” The black members encountered racism on the road, but racial tensions weren’t an issue within the group, drummer Ernest “Boom” Carter once told me: “None of that shit ever came into the band. The only time I had problems was outside the band.” When Carter and David Sancious left together in 1974 to start a jazz-fusion group, Clemons was, from then on, the only black member of a white band, often playing to all-white audiences. “We were too close,” says Springsteen, “to pretend that race wasn’t an issue.” (Clemons told author Peter Ames Carlin that he was overjoyed to finally perform for a sea of black faces at the E Street Band’s first show in Africa, in 1988: “It was the first time I ever saw more than one black person at Bruce’s concerts. . . . I was like, ‘Wow! Purple trees and no white people! This must be heaven!’”)

In the old days, Springsteen would, pretty frequently, give Clemons a lingering kiss right on the lips onstage, sometimes sliding all the way across the stage to meet his welcoming arms. For years, this gesture sparked cultural-studies theorizing – queer overtones, racial subversion, etc. – and lately, it’s been inspiring social media photo collages from young music fans charmed by the thought of the seemingly super-straightest of rock stars challenging the squarer elements of his audience. When I bring all this up to Springsteen, he’s as amused as he is dumbfounded. “You’re kidding,” he says. “I gotta be honest with you. I never thought about it. I can honestly tell you, I never felt self-conscious about it or gave it any thought. We were just close.”

Later, he adds: “We’re talking about one of the deepest relationships of my life. I can’t reduce it to an intellectual exercise. I can’t reduce it to a capsule sociological explanation, of 45 years of work and love between me and one of my dearest friends.”

THERE IS, from some angles, an unnerving sense of finality around *Letter to You*. The cover photo shows Springsteen in a wintry landscape, while the title track, he acknowledges, is a sort of summation of his artistic output: It was all a letter he sent out to the world, where he “tried to summon all that my heart finds true.” Even unearthing the three Seventies songs has a full-circle feel to it, as much as Springsteen may insist otherwise.

Could this be the last E Street Band album? “I think what he has come to realize is, it could be,” says Van Zandt. “Confronting one’s mortality is both truthful and realistic, and it can assist people who are in that frame of mind – who may be leaving, or who had someone pass right now that they love. And by

the time this comes out, it could be 200,000 of us. It could be cathartic for those people. It could also be literal. At this point, if you have something to say, you better say it now! Don’t wait too much longer! Because who knows? I don’t think he meant it literally. And if it is the last album, y’know, we went out swinging. And if it’s not, we’re gonna have to come back, and we’re gonna have to beat it!”

Springsteen acknowledges that “no tomorrows are guaranteed,” but that’s as far as he’ll go on the subject. And it’s probably worth noting that the chorus of “Ghosts” finds him practically screaming, “I’m alive!” “I plan,” says Springsteen, “to have a long road in front of me. . . . Some of my recent projects have been kind of summational, but really, for me, it’s summational for *this stage* of my work life. I’ve got a lot left to do, and I plan to carry on.”

He’s got “a lot of projects” in the works, including all of that work on his archives, which include various full “lost albums” along with more scattered outtakes. (Weinberg, for one, has been in the studio to overdub at least 40 old songs “in all different styles” over the past three years. “Any other artist would kill to get these songs,” the drummer says.) Some of these songs will appear on a second volume of *Tracks*, some perhaps in other formats. “There’s a lot of really good music left,” Springsteen says, noting that he enjoys collaborating with his former selves. “You just go back there. It’s not that hard. If I pull out something from 1980, or 1985, or 1970, it’s amazing how you can slip into that voice. It’s just sort of a headspace. All of those voices remain available to me, if I want to go to them.”

It’s been a long afternoon, and Springsteen starts to walk me to my car – trailed by two dogs, a German shepherd named Dusty (Dusty Springsteen!) and a small apparent terrier named Toast – before calling an audible. We head into the studio, where Ron Aniello, his producer since *Wrecking Ball*, and engineer Rob Lebet are at work at whatever the day’s mystery project might be. On a music stand sits a piece of paper listing a set of chords, with an unfamiliar song title on top. “This,” says Springsteen, gesturing at the instruments overflowing from every corner, “is the house of a thousand guitars.” He also shows off the adjoining garage, stuffed with motorcycles and vintage cars, including the Corvette from the cover of his autobiography, which one of his sons recently rebuilt to look precisely as it does in the photo.

He asks Aniello to break out a bottle of ice-cold Cuervo, and we sit down in front of a huge flatscreen to take in Thom Zimny’s movie of the *Letters to You* sessions – his longtime documentarian was there to capture every moment of recording, in evocative black and white, right where we’re sitting. (“There were, like, 20 cameramen there,” Weinberg recalls.) Springsteen’s plan is to show only 10 minutes or so of the movie, which will be out to accompany the album.

Instead, we end up watching the whole thing, for an hour and a half, with Springsteen periodically grabbing a remote control to crank the volume to MetLife Stadium levels. He pours himself a bit more tequila as the film goes on, laughing at the jokes, maybe singing along occasionally. It’s just another afternoon in Jersey, watching Bruce Springsteen watch Bruce Springsteen record an album with the E Street Band.

Before the film starts, Springsteen pours glasses for me and Aniello and offers a toast. “To rock & roll,” he says, pausing for a long beat before the punchline: “What’s left of it.” He laughs, and we all drink. ®