

'The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle'



BY ARIEL SWARTLEY

I'm going to be a sucker for someone who takes rock and roll as a religion, and romanticizes the hell out of mundane details. For someone who says "Sparks fly on E Street when the boy-prophets walk it handsome and hot." Bruce Springsteen wins my heart with the first line of *The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle*, wins it over and over again. Used to be only rock critics took lyrics that seriously and turned the romance of the streets so explicitly into myth. But while Springsteen's making his pronouncements the horns are waggling their hips and sassing him. And just when you think the song's going to collapse under the weight of its verses, the party-time chorus shouts the immortal instruction: "Everybody form a line." Then the only thing left on anybody's mind is the latest step—the E Street Shuffle or the Bristol Stomp. James Joyce meets the Dovells? Creation myths from *The Land of a Thousand Dances*? Yes, I say. Yes. Yes.... (p. 50)

Smack dab in the visionary tradition of Dylan and Van Morrison, Springsteen's got the former's faith that words, stretched and piled on fast enough, are music; the latter's feel for the grinning warmth and greased motions of R&B.... But it's not the knee-jerk nostalgia of teen-scene verité he's after in his authentic dialogue and his blasts from a past that never seems so bright except in retrospect. He treats rock and roll history as our common language, our shared mythology, and thereby reinforces rock and roll's promise of community. Spectoral echo, (James) Brownian motion, Dion-ysian brawl—he triggers memories like you were a jukebox and he was the man with all the quarters; plays it like a slot machine and wins. Hell yes, he exploits rock and roll's past, just like he exploits the language itself—turning it inside out, digging for the metaphors under the surface of conversation.

The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle is Springsteen's most extravagant and most easygoing album. He insists you can have rock and roll both ways—even the title makes it clear. Two value judgments and a dance step—what's going on here is synthesis. But Springsteen's double vision doesn't have an ironist's cruel double edge. Sure, characters in his dramatic monologues reveal themselves. The narrator of "Sandy" is an adolescent loser, the kid whose shirt gets stuck in the fun-fair ride, leaving him stranded and looking like a fool.... Oh, there'll always be another girl; adolescence is something you grow out of. But that's cold comfort and Springsteen's offering something warmer and more immediate: the moon is rising, the organ notes twinkle like stars, the "sha la las" are triumphant and irresistible. The chorus promises romance despite the odds. (pp. 51-2)

Sprawling, methodical, impassioned, and manipulative, *The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle* teeters on the edge of melodrama and slips into rapture. "Ooh, ooh, ooh, it's all right"; "Good night, it's all tight, Jane." Springsteen's final choruses are incantations. Benedictions. Acts of surrender. He's caught up in his own spells.

If Springsteen is a storyteller, so are his characters. In some sense hustlers, both he and they live by their lines, by their powers of persuasion (and self-persuasion), by their ability to transform prosaic material into something shining. His stories are set in a self-absorbed, circumscribed world of adolescents, small towns, closed communities, where appearances count and reputations are as unshakable as a nickname. No one travels Springsteen's streets incognito. He identifies them all: Spanish Johnny, Lover Boy, Jazz Man. Even nouns. They aren't modified, they're christened: fire trails, rude boys, bruised arms, blond girls. More than descriptions, the adjectives, like nicknames, have the force of characterizations. Say "the girls were blond" and you're talking about the color of their hair. Say "blond girls" and they're something special, blond all through, a race apart. It's the old rosy-fingered dawn trick: the epicmaker's device for turning ordinary words symbolic and loading details down with implication. But it's not like the songs lay out in neatly knitted metaphors (or plots)—one tug and they're unraveled. They come at a rush and you grab what you can. Still, the implications are felt. The omnipresent compounds in "The E Street Shuffle"—doubleshot, sweet-sixteen—drag at the verses like heels scuffing the pavement. Each stretched-out line ambles on, coolly oblivious to the insistent jab of the horns, the frenetic blather of wah-wah and percussion: "But the boys are still on the corner loose doin' that lazy E-Street shuffle." The rhythm of the words is as nonchalant as the boys, and it's only when Springsteen finishes "shuffle" with a wheeze and a gasp for breath, that there's any suggestion that that cool costs an effort to maintain. Sometimes the implications are felt in the sheer weight of words: "with bruised arms and broken rhythm and a beat-up old Buick—" ("Incident on 57th Street"). They beat up on the line till it's punchdrunk, so that the phrase that steps out clear when the dust settles seems all the more defiant—"but dressed just like dynamite." (pp. 53-4)

The corner is "The E Street Shuffle," the boardwalk in "Sandy," the hometown alleys of "Kitty's Back," even the traveling midway of "Wild Bill's Circus Story," the tenement neighborhood of "Incident on 57th Street," the back roads and parent-and-school-dominated world of "Rosalita"—Springsteen's settings are territories in limbo. Satellites of the metropolis, overshadowed, robbed and ruined; resort towns begging to be invaded, dependent on other people's leisure and mobility; home turf staked out and fought for but never owned. And adolescence itself. Like the "man-child" or the "boy-prophet," neither one thing or the other. All of Springsteen's characters live on islands close enough to shore to see the mainland, too far away to make the crossing light or easy.

But isolation is chosen as well as imposed. Caught in the middle, challenged from the outside, each community is self-protective, fiercely partisan. When Kitty comes back, it's almost too good to be true, for her departure was a double betrayal, forsaking the hometown and the kids in the alley for marriage and the big city, power, prestige, and opportunity. Her return not only vindicates her small-town admirer, but all of those who've never left.... Yet her defection raised doubts and questions that still hang like the sax's final whistling high note. As envied and disdained as a resort visitor, as threatening and tempting as the city, adulthood glimmers just over the horizon too. And like the Corner or the Street, it has to be claimed. The final song on the album confronts growing up and the metropolis head-on: "New York City Serenade" is a rite of passage.... In [the

city's] hostile, garishly-lit embrace, manhood becomes a matter of self-assertion—"I'm a young man walking real proud for you"—and self-respect: "Sometimes you just have to walk on." (pp. 54-5)

Dangers over the horizon, oppression at home—what's a poor boy to do? One solution is obvious, and Springsteen concedes the point so fast you trip over it in the album's most explicitly autobiographical cut. In "Rosalita" he's no street fighting man, and no more under the thumb of circumstances, adults, and authorities than any other kid. When he comes to the door he may be a truant, a hot-rod, and what your mother would call a bad influence, but rock and roll is his guarantee of respectability.... He's found the perfect escape: work that's fun, rebellion that's legitimate, eternal youth, a name that's known not just on the corner but on the global street, all that stuff. But however much he romanticizes rock and roll as an ideal or a code, he only plays the star in fun.... Sometimes it seems like he ... [has] never left the corner at all. (p. 55)

[The] settings feel almost like characters themselves. Springsteen is a compulsive recorder of detail—the sheets "damp with sweat," the girl "bopping down the beach with a radio." But it's not like you'd call him a realist. Sometimes it seems as though he's looking back at the corner through a rearview mirror—the streets turned shimmery and the action blurred by the speed at which he's traveling. It's not just that the language slips out of the colloquial into the high-flown. It's as though he's caught up in the rhythm and led on by his own words to more and more audacious leaps. From neat tricks like putting hard girls on easy street, to metaphors that are high wire acts: "Let the black boys in to light the soul flame."... And finally he skips beyond probability and any tidy interpretation to visions: Of "golden-heeled fairies" fighting with .38s.... Of "barefoot street boys" throwing down their switchblades and kissing each other goodbye. Visions of the natural order he's been at pains to record turned on its head. But then, calling the kids on E Street "boy-prophets" was a leap as well. Springsteen's double vision, seeing the what-is beside, on top of, through the what-could-be, is consistent enough to take on a moral force. Like a hardboiled detective, he observes as though his life depended on it, on recognizing the shift in stance that tells you the other guy's about to go for his gun. And like the detective, once he's established the facts, they're not enough. His characters aren't presented as free agents: they're shown, if not as victims, at least as products of an environment. And still, they're held accountable for their actions. They can walk on or not. The choice may be only a gesture, but the space between courage and bravado, between a hustle and a good story, is also the place where appearances become truth. (p. 56)

Knowing the score is how you survive; knowing, for instance, that midnight in Manhattan is not the time to get cute. Faith, on the other hand, is how you manage—well—whatever it is that's more than survival. Yeah, it sounds hokey, but faith in these songs isn't just some smarmy, self-help est-uary. It's nothing more or less than an act of imagination (like the songs themselves). Envisioning a junkman dressed in satin is as absurd as falling in love. The facts don't justify the faith; no loved one ever lives up to a lover's dream; still, no love ever survived on facts alone. So buy the vision. Believe the lady's sawed in half. Be willing to be made a fool. Listen to the junkman. If only every act of faith were just as easy.

Still, held in any kind of limbo, trapped in stupid circumstances, it's nice to hear him singing. Singing something about the towns I grew up in and the boys I loved. And why I left and why I care about them still.... Something then, about growing up. (pp. 56-7)

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