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## Bruce Springsteen

### Bruce Springsteen Road Trip: 40 Years of the Boss [DVD]

(Music Video Dist.)

US release date: 19 May 2009

By Stephen Snart

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I like to fancy myself a member of the pantheon of Bruce Springsteen fandom. While I wasn't yet born to experience him first-hand through the early stages of his career and haven't had the resources or timing to see him in concert as many times as I'd like, I revere the man in a fashion that is borderline unhealthy. I'm known to engage in a number of Bruce Springsteen geekdom activities from time to time, for example my friends and I often play "Name that Springsteen Tune" by rattling off a set of lyrics from memory and forcing the other players to identify the song out of context.

Having come of age as a Springsteen fan in the 21st century, I consider my generation to be the luckiest set of Bruce fans. We may have missed out on his glorious ascension from local hero to global superstar, but such absence saved us from all the "selling out" or "overrated" or "I was there first" debates. We were also fortunate enough to more or less sidestep some of Bruce's spotty periods during the '90s, and then we approached the age of musical enlightenment (roughly age 16-19) just in time to appreciate *The Rising*.

Now, as we reach the end of the first decade of the 21st century, we sit in the blessed position of being able to witness a musician, whose historical relevance is already cemented, experiencing his second prime. The mythology of the Boss is perpetuated every day through the proliferation of his media appearances and his penchant for giving three-and-a-half-hour concerts, even as he approaches 60 years of age.

With my fanboy impulse firmly in check, I leapt at the opportunity to see the new DVD release, *Bruce Springsteen Road Trip: 40 Years of the Boss*. I had heard nothing of the DVD beforehand and a cursory Google search had revealed next to nothing about the content of the two-disc set or the nature of its release. The packaging proved to be just as mysterious, offering vague terminology, a few familiar images and the troubling disclaimer: "This DVD is not authorized by Bruce Springsteen."



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Uncertain what to expect, I inserted disc one of the two-disc set and was met with an even more disconcerting greeting: "This biography contains no original music by Bruce Springsteen. It is not authorized by Springsteen, his record company or his management." Nothing like putting your cards on the table, huh? True to its promise, the 90-minute feature opens with a karaoke quality instrumental interpretation of "Born in the USA" over a graphic transition title that might have been created in Microsoft Power Point.

Things don't get any better from as the 'biography' proceeds to recount a basic narrative of Bruce's childhood up to his entrance into the music business using lots of still images and interviews with people that seem to have been grabbed from Asbury Park bars and construction sites. At times it even feels like a spoof: one interviewee – dressed in painter-stained jeans that beg for the classification of blue collar worker – reminisces about Bruce dodging snowballs as a kid and wonders if his wintertime agility is what helped him become such a skilled performer.

With steely-eyed determination I waded through all 90-minutes of the program before retiring for the evening. The next night, with flagging determination, I inserted disc two. Nothing could have prepared me for what I encountered. To my utter shock, what unfolded over the next 90-minutes was some of the most enthusiastic and engaging critical analysis of Springsteen's music that I've ever seen.

On the feature is a series of interviews with a number of journalists and writers who may not be leaders in their respective fields but are unquestionably Bruce aficionados with a lot of interesting things to say. The feature focuses on the five albums Bruce released between 1975 and 1984: *Born to Run*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *The River*, *Nebraska*, and *Born in the USA*.

In particular, independent writer Larry David Smith (whose appearance and occasional gonzo theory makes him offbeat to say the least), gives a fascinating analysis of *Darkness* and *Nebraska*. Smith takes into consideration track order, character arcs and melodic composition while analyzing the albums as a whole and then isolating specific lyrics and their purpose within individual songs.

The critical inquiry – while undeniably positive – isn't an entire love fest. The filmmakers wisely juxtapose a scathing critique of "Hungry Heart" against a glowing report, followed by a middle-ground commentator who asserts that the song isn't Springsteen's proudest artistic achievement but it manages to attract new audiences while retaining elements of his core beliefs. The subjects are also game to discuss the troubling tonal disconnect between "triumphal melody" and "wretched scenario" that often surfaces in Bruce's music (for more on this subject, see Sean Murphy's brilliant analysis of "[Born in the USA](#)" on *PopMatters*).

Former *Village Voice* music editor Robert Christgau also makes the brilliant observation (one I'd been entirely blind to beforehand) that Bruce's music always lacks a sense of humor. "While humor comes easily to him on stage, it doesn't come easily in the music writing."

At this point, I should also note that unlike the first feature, this one actually has permission to play Springsteen's music and clips from his concerts. I can't stress enough the importance of getting to hear his music in relation to their analyses. As Laurie Anderson says in *Home of the Brave*, "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture."

So, *Bruce Springsteen On the Road: 40 Years with the Boss* is the definition of a mixed bag; and also a misnomer – these two discs neither show tour



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