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## Bruce Springsteen

### Under Review-1978-82: Tale of the Working Man [DVD]

(Sexy Intellectual)

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by Jon Langmead

The Under Review series, as a rule, tends to hew fairly closely to the creation myths that surround the artists and works they profile. So close, in fact, that the individual episodes tend to succeed or fail based on the depths that the artists and critics interviewed can add to the baseline that the series creates. Here, the producer's choices are mostly excellent.

This installment of the series traces the arc of Bruce Springsteen records (*Darkness on the Edge of Town* through *Nebraska*) that, in retrospect, make perfect sense but which still stand out as the dramatic left turn that have helped to solidify his artistic credibility as much as any of his other albums. It's a good choice to combine these records into one thread as it prevents things from lingering too long on any one work. And while the subtitle, "Tales of the Workingman", is hopelessly cliché, the DVD mostly dodges the expected pitfalls of the Springsteen story.

The admirers, as opposed to full-blown fans, fare best and bring the most useful insights to the table, but even the most tedious of critics reveal more interesting detail by the disc's end. Robert Christgau is as authoritative as is to be expected, but still comes off like he's having an unexpectedly great time talking about The Boss ("There is none of that sense of, 'You're tragic but you're a hero on [Nebraska]. None of that at all. No, 'In your defeat you have achieved transcendence...stuff. It's, 'You're defeated and that sucks.' And to my way of thinkin', that's better").

Anthony DeCurtis is almost moved to tears over his love for *Born to Run*, an album that resonates in younger generations, or at least the younger indie-rock set, often in cursory ways (DeCurtis: "For younger musicians, particularly indie-musicians, getting through the scale of what the Bruce idea has become requires a certain amount of work, whereas *Nebraska* is just there for them"). Chris Sandford is pleasantly measured throughout and willing to throw out the cutting sound-bite (On "Hungry Heart": "I'm sure Jon Landau loved it but I don't think it stands the test of time very well. If you want to listen to those 50's songs, those almost doo-wop-like songs, there's a lot of original artists who did it a bit better, I think").

Larry David Smith is far from measured and his misfires, sometimes grating ("To unpack *Nebraska* you have to sort of rearrange things, and when you do that, it's really coherent"), sometimes unintentionally hilarious (*Darkness On The Edge of Town* is as systematic an expression as any record you'll ever see from any artist"), almost build to a overblown crescendo. And while there is more than enough hyperbole, the more interesting insights tend to win out. "That's the thing about Bruce," begins Eric Alterman, "he delivers the goods. No matter how ridiculous the promise seems to be he seems to be able to deliver on it. Even today, even 30 years later, it's a different promise; it's less heroic, it's less superhuman, but it's still pretty damn hard to find in real life".

The producers do an equally fine job of collecting telling articles and reviews from the time around each record's release, and sprinkle them appropriately throughout. They also include choice interview clips and bits of live monologues (Bruce on the song "Nebraska": "You can put together a lot of detail but unless you pull something up out of yourself, it's just going to lie flat on the page"). It's hard with each clip, particularly those from the late 70's, not to be struck by Bruce's almost desperate struggle to communicate. It's easy to see why he labored so compulsively on his work from this era and why it still connects.

To its credit, the disc avoids retelling the most well worn aspects of the story behind these records and by doing so, allows more interesting truths to emerge. They focus just enough on the legal troubles that colored much of the tone of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, without making them the whole of the story. The lost albums that ultimately led to *The River* and *Nebraska* are touched on, but the conversation doesn't grind down, allowing DeCurtis and Christgau's perceptions on the songwriting to take the lead.

The word "existential" is thrown around enough to make you uneasy, but even the most coherent of critics can be easily turned around when rummaging about in Springsteen's world. It can be a knotty place, but the ones most willing to address his work head-on, with all of the positives and

negatives in tact, fare best. When Springsteen's live shows draw comparisons to Chuck Berry, Sam Moore, and James Brown, the narrative undermines itself when the film cuts from Chuck Berry's version of "Sweet Sixteen" from *Hail, Hail, Rock n Roll*, with a rhythm section made-up of Keith Richards, Steve Jordan, and Joey Spampinato, to Springsteen covering the song with the E-Street Band.

Berry looks impossibly cool and the band sounds impossibly right; Springsteen looks like he's working. This is fine and the E-Street Band sounds great, but despite their grandest intentions they've never been able to play soul music. Christgau goes further when discussing comparisons between Springsteen and Woody Guthrie when he says, "The fact of the matter is there's a sprightliness about the way [Guthrie] delivers a song; Springsteen can't do it."

By dipping into the mythology just deeply enough, and while still retaining a critical eye, "Tales of the Working Man" makes for a mostly interesting watch, sometimes in spite of itself. The series seeks to strike the precarious balance of engaging both casual and more informed fans, and it engages smart critics and frames their observations into a well-researched presentation.

RATING: 

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