BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: STILL GOING STRONG AT AGE 60

By Louis P. Masur
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Rock stars about to turn 60 aren't usually seen playing 100 shows around the world, let alone successfully completing two-year tours. Whether it be Elvis, Jimi, Janis, or Michael, most fade out or pass away long before the milestone. Some notable rockers survive past 60, but their most popular and creative days are often behind them. In 1979, Neil Young said it best, penning an apothegm for rock's fatal romantic ideal: "it's better to burn out than fade away."

As Bruce Springsteen approaches 60, he has achieved what few can. He is as visible as he's ever been, and that's saying a lot for a superstar who graced the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* in 1975, whose *Born in the USA* was the second best-selling album of the '80s, who won an Oscar for "Streets of Philadelphia" in 1994, and whose *Rising* in 2002 offered an enduring artistic response to 9/11.

In the past 24 months alone, Springsteen has released two albums, campaigned for Barack Obama, and appeared on a Super Bowl halftime show. Not only do baby-boomers attend his concerts, but so do a growing number of younger fans. Springsteen's influence can even be found in a new generation of bands like the Arcade Fire, the Hold Steady, and the Gaslight Anthem, all of whom pay homage to the rocker nicknamed "the Boss".

How is it that Springsteen has managed to surf the zeitgeist for more than three decades? Part of the answer lies in his devotion to his craft and in the savvy of his management team. Thanks to the clever protection of the Springsteen brand, “Born to Run” can be downloaded as a ringtone, but it will never be used to sell an automobile.

But skill and business sense constitute only part of the story. Neither would matter if it wasn’t for Springsteen’s lifetime commitment to rock ‘n’ roll’s original promise of liberation and redemption.

It’s also true that Springsteen has consistently proved a more dynamic live performer than studio artist, and it is in concert where the electricity crackles. Springsteen screams “is anyone alive out there?!”, and after three hours of blazing guitars and pounding drums we know that we are. Springsteen offers an emotional and physical experience, one based upon songs about finding love and faith, building community, and just having a good time.

The key to his success is that Springsteen believes in what he does, but doesn’t try to live inside the rock ‘n’ roll fantasy that glorifies wealth, fame, and superstardom. These elements are what destroyed Elvis, his hero. By the same token, Springsteen has never abandoned his faith in the saving power of rock ‘n’ roll, because it saved him. It gave him a purpose, an image, and a way out — as it has for so many others.

Springsteen was seven when he first saw Elvis on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Presley’s third and final appearance took place on January 6, 1957. On that Sunday night in 1957, Elvis smiled, smirked and played with the audience. Breaking from his usual attire, Presley came out wearing a bloused shirt and vest, with makeup painted around his eyes. That night Elvis

sang hits like “Don’t Be Cruel”, “Love Me Tender”, and “Hound Dog”, shaking his hips and standing on his toes while girls screamed in the audience. And that guitar: it was a weapon and it was armor. This was the dream.

Watching the show, Springsteen felt mesmerized: “I couldn’t imagine anyone not wanting to be Elvis Presley,” he recalled. His mother eventually bought him a guitar and even set up lessons, but Springsteen’s hands were too small. He didn’t like structured instruction, and he put the instrument aside for sports (“I wanted to be a baseball player”).

Springsteen acquired his work ethic from his mother, Adele, along with his appreciation for working day after day. He especially enjoyed the stability, dignity, and community that comes from the commitment to one’s job. Springsteen’s relationship with his father, Douglas, was more conflicted. His father worked in a factory was something of a loner.

“I remember when I was a kid I always wondered what my old man was so mad about all the time,” Springsteen recalls. Douglas would often get in the car on Sundays and drive, family in tow, with no destination. “We would drive around the whole damned Sunday and come in the evening all exhausted,” Springsteen remembers. And yet, he also noted that the car trips were the only time his father would beam with joy. The memory would inform many of Bruce’s songs about people in cars and people on the move. He observed that “perhaps that kind of action was the only thing he needed after working the whole week at his machine in the plastics plant.”

Douglas Springsteen hated Bruce’s long hair, late hours, and endless guitar playing. It was through examining his father’s life that Bruce came to understand the underside of the American dream: “When I got to be about 16, I started to look around me and…I looked back at, I looked at my friends and tried to see what they were doing and it didn’t seem like anybody was going anyplace or had a chance of getting out of the kind of life they were living.” “When I was real young,” he said in 1981, “I decided that if I was gonna have to live that way, that I was gonna die.”

"My whole life," Springsteen reflected, "was this enormous effort to become visible." In 1975, he told *Time* magazine, "Music saved me. From the beginning, my guitar was something I could go to. If I hadn't found music, I don't know what I would have done." "Music gave me something," he added. "It was never just a hobby. It was a reason to live. The first day I can remember lookin' in the mirror and standin' what I was seein' was the day I had a guitar in my hand," he proclaimed.

Through driving ambition and limitless talent, Bruce got out, but never left his past behind. He wrote songs about place, work and religion. He wrote about the dream of escape and the longing for connection. He wrote about community and camaraderie. Most of all, he offered catharsis. He gave hope—however transitory—to those who couldn't escape. Over time, Springsteen's work became explicitly political, offering a critique of forces used to suppress weakened communities.

Now, after experiencing a long, successful career, Springsteen will celebrate his birthday doing exactly what he loves best—performing live. No two shows will be alike and no two set lists identical. In keeping with his likeness to the nine-to-five population, Springsteen is a working artist, searching each night for what makes the music come alive. It is that authenticity that unites him with his fans.

Springsteen still plays "Born to Run" at every concert, and the performance, most often with house lights on, levitates the arena. "The song," he says, "transcends your age and continues to speak to that part of you that is both exhilarated and frightened about what tomorrow brings. It will always do that—that's how it was built."

When Springsteen was 46, someone asked him how much longer he intended to play. He replied that “at 60, I plan to be still doing it… The older you get the younger you are… It will be 80 in another five years.” Here’s hoping.