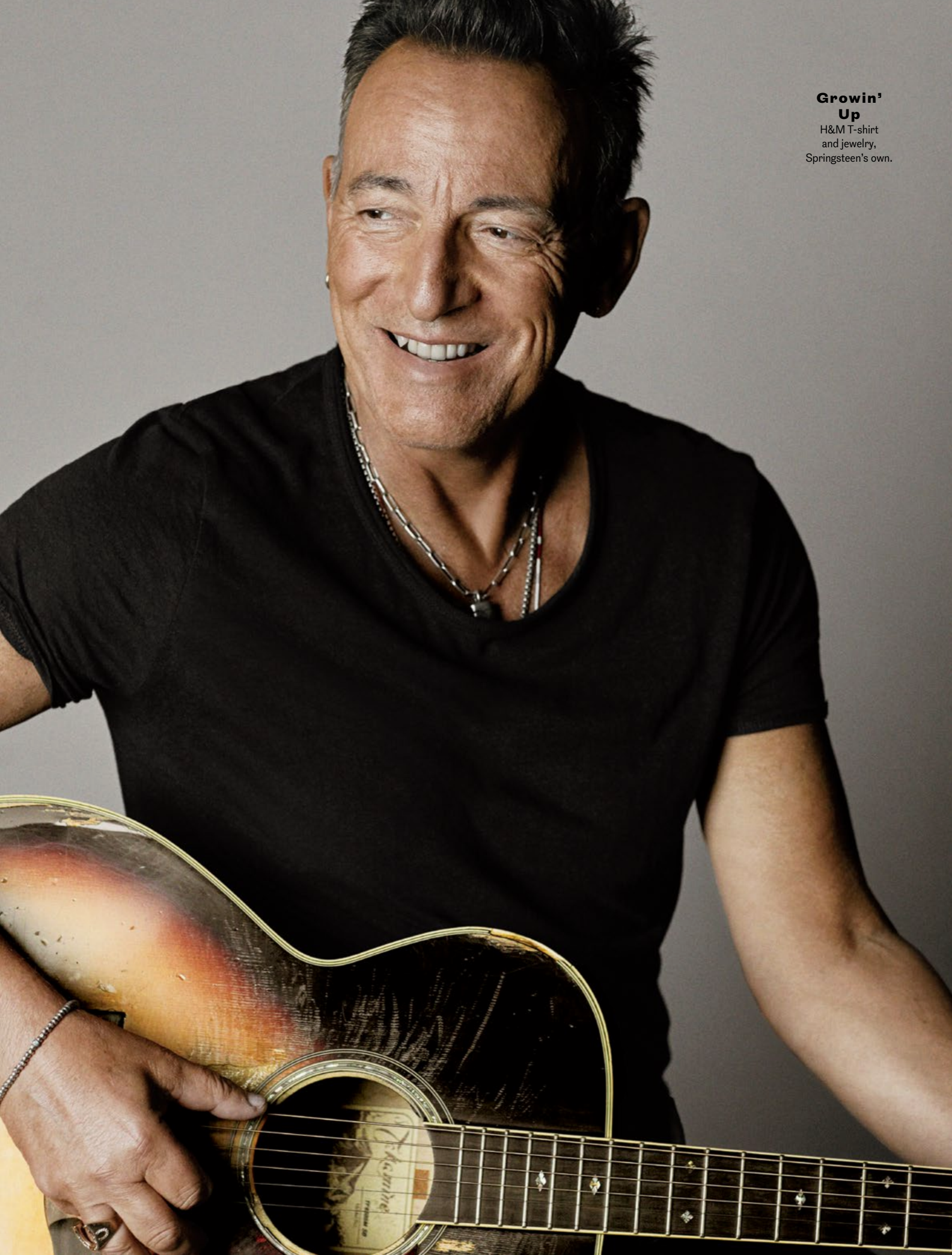


FINAL

SONGS OF HIMSELF

FOR MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS, HE'S TRAVELED DEEP INTO THE HEART OF AMERICA. BUT WITH HIS NEW NETFLIX SPECIAL—A FILM OF HIS INTENSE, POWERFUL ONE-MAN SHOW ON BROADWAY—BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN REVEALS THAT HIS BRAVEST JOURNEY HAS BEEN INTO HIS OWN SOUL. BY MICHAEL HAINEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXI LUBOMIRSKI



**Growin'
Up**

H&M T-shirt
and jewelry,
Springsteen's own.

**Tougher
Than
the Rest**

Bruce Springsteen
backstage at
the Walter Kerr
Theatre, September
2018.

Vintage Golden
Bear biker jacket,
H&M T-shirt,
jeans, boots,
and jewelry,
Springsteen's own.



The first time I meet Bruce Springsteen is backstage at the Walter Kerr Theatre in New York, where he is in the homestretch of performing his one-man show, *Springsteen on Broadway*. It is a few weeks before I am supposed to sit with him for an interview, but his publicist has asked me to come by before this performance so he can, I deduce, check me out. I arrive at 7:00 and am directed to a small couch near the backstage bathroom. Finally, five minutes before curtain, I see, coming down the stairs that lead to his dressing room, a pair of black work boots and black-legged jeans. Springsteen ducks his head beneath a low arch and walks toward me, extending his hand and saying, “I’m Bruce.” We shake hands, and then there is silence. He looks at me and I look at him, not sure what to say. At five-foot-ten, he’s taller than you think he’ll be; somehow, he forever remains the runty-scrawny kid in the leather jacket, possibly dwarfed in our minds due to the years he spent leaning against Clarence Clemons.

That evening, Springsteen is weeks from notching his sixty-ninth birthday. And as we stand there, I find it impossible not to think that the journey he has undertaken in this decade of his life has been nothing short of miraculous. He entered his sixties struggling to survive a crippling depression, and now here he is closing out his sixties in triumph—mostly thanks to the success of this powerful, intimate show, which is not a concert but an epic dramatic monologue, punctuated with his songs. After a year of sold-out shows, he will close it out on December 15—the same night it will debut on Netflix as a film.

He at last breaks the awkward silence by giving a small nod and saying to me—but more to himself, just as we all kind of say it to ourselves as we head out the door each day—“Well, I guess I better go to work.” And with that he ambles toward stage right.

“DNA.”

This is, curiously, the first word that Springsteen says when he takes the stage. An unlikely, unromantic, unpoetic choice for a man who has always been more about the sensory than science.

Yet in many ways, DNA is Springsteen’s unrelenting antagonist, the costar that he battles against. This is the central tension of *Springsteen on Broadway*: the self we feel doomed to be through blood and family versus the self we can—if we have the courage and desire—will into existence. Springsteen, as he reveals here, has spent his entire life wrestling with that question that haunts so many of us: Will I be confined by my DNA, or will I define who I am?

A few minutes later, in the show, he talks about the moment that opened his eyes to what was possible if one believed in the power of self-creation. It’s a Sunday night in 1956, and an almost seven-year-old Springsteen is sitting in front of the TV with his mother, Adele, in the living room of the tiny four-room house in Freehold, New Jersey, that he shares with his parents and sister; the house does not have hot water. This is the night he sees Elvis Presley. In that moment, when he receives that vision, he realizes that there is another way; that he

can create an identity apart from “the lifeless, sucking black hole” that is his childhood.

“All you needed to do,” Springsteen says when he unpacks the lesson Elvis Presley taught him, “was to risk being your true self.”

“Yeah...” Springsteen says when I sit down with him a couple weeks later and tell him it seems the essential question of his show is “Are we bound by what courses through our blood?” He looks off to his left into his dressing-room mirror, the surface of which is checkered with photographs, much as a mirror in a teenage boy’s bedroom might be. Among the many images: John Lennon in his NEW YORK CITY T-shirt. A young Paul McCartney. Patti Smith. Johnny Cash. They are, as Springsteen tells me later, “the ancestors.” It’s into this mirror and toward these talismans that Springsteen often gazes when he is answering my questions. He’s a deep listener and thinker. He has a calm nature and possesses a low, soft voice. He has a tendency to be self-deprecating, preemptively labeling certain thoughts “corny.” He smiles easily and likes to sip ginger ale. Sometimes he lets out a short, nervous laugh before telling you something personal. Above all, he speaks with the unveiledness of a man who has spent more than three decades undergoing analysis—and credits it with saving his life.

His cramped dressing room feels more like the “office” the superintendent of your prewar apartment building carves out for himself in the basement, next to the boiler. Much of it feels scavenged. There’s a brown leather couch and a beat-up coffee table. Nailed up above the couch is a faded, forty-eight-star American flag and a ragged strand of white Christmas-tree lights.

Now Springsteen sits on the couch before me, dressed in black jeans and a deep-cut white V-neck T-shirt that reveals a faint scar at the base of his neck—the scar that remains from a few years ago, when surgeons cut him open to repair deterioration on some cervical discs in his neck that had been causing numbness on the left side of his body. On his right ring finger is a gold ring in the shape of a horseshoe.

Finally, he speaks.

“DNA is a big part of what the show is about: turning yourself into a free agent. Or, as much as you can, into an adult, for lack of a better word. It’s a coming-of-age story, and I want to show how this—one’s coming of age—has to be *earned*. It’s not given to anyone. It takes a certain single-minded purpose. It takes self-awareness, a desire to go there. And a willingness to confront *all* the very fearsome and dangerous elements of your life—your past, your history—that you need to confront to become as much of a free agent as you can. This is what the show is about.... It’s me reciting my ‘Song of Myself.’”

“MY FATHER
WAS MY HERO, AND
MY GREATEST FOE”

But as you learn after spending time with him, there is what is on the surface and then there is what is below. Because the show is also about other tensions: solitude versus love (the ability to give it as well as receive it); the psychological versus the spiritual; the death force versus the life force; and, most of all, the father versus the son. Yes, it is about his struggle to find his true self, his identity. But most of all, it is about his father—and Springsteen’s search to find peace with the man who created him but, in many ways, almost destroyed him. Here’s Springsteen describing in his 2016 autobiography, *Born to Run*, how he saw himself as a young boy, and how his father perceived him:

Weirdo sissy-boy. Outcast. Alienated. Alienating. Shy. Soft-hearted dreamer. A forever-doubting mind. The playground loneliness... “[I had] a gentleness, a timidity, shyness, and a dreamy insecurity. These were all the things I wore on the outside and the reflection of these qualities in his boy repelled [my father]. It made him angry.”

He tells me his father made him ashamed that he was not hard like him, but gentle like his mother. “My mother was kind and compassionate and very considerate of others’ feelings. She trod through the world with purpose, but softly, lightly. All those were the things that aligned with my own spirit. *That* was who I was. They came naturally to me. My father looked at all those things as weaknesses. He was very dismissive of primarily who I was. And that sends you off on a lifelong quest to sort through that.”

Doug Springsteen was a stout man Springsteen remembers as “two hundred and thirty pounds of nickels in Sears slacks” and, at one point, as having the “face of Satan.” He worked a range of blue-collar jobs, from floor boy in a rug mill to bus driver, yet his primary occupation was not outside the house but inside; he dominated the family home, ruling his small kingdom with silence and menace. His throne was a chair at the kitchen table. Night after night, he’d sit in the darkness, drinking and brooding. “It was,” Springsteen writes, “the silent, dormant volcano of the old man’s nightly kitchen vigil, the stillness covering a red misting rage. All of this sat on top of a sea of fear and depression so vast I hadn’t begun to contemplate it.”

When I ask Springsteen about his childhood, he tells me, “There was the house—and then there was what was happening in the kitchen. And when you went into the kitchen, the force of what was going on there was intimidating. But you had to *deal* with it. So the kitchen became freighted with meaning and danger. It was a dark, quiet place. The air was thick. So thick. Like swimming through dark molasses. You had to make your way through, and make your way out—without disturbing, or creating too much attention toward yourself.”

Springsteen pauses. I tell him I find it interesting that he smashed that silence with rock ‘n’ roll. A joyful noise.

“When I was a child, and into my teens,” he says, “I felt like a very, very empty vessel. And it wasn’t until I began to fill it up with music that I began to feel my own personal power and my impact on my friends and the small world that I was in. I began to get some sense of myself. But it came out of a place of real emptiness.” He pauses. “I made music for that kitchen. Go to *Nebraska* and listen to it. But I also made music for my mother’s part of the house, which was quite joyful and bright.” He pauses again. “You have to put together a person from *all* the stuff that you’ve been handed.”

It was his father’s distance and silence that Springsteen rebelled against, yet his father’s identity is what he embraced. Because when Springsteen decided to adopt a rock ‘n’ roll identity, what did he do? He stole his father’s work clothes and his persona—if Doug Springsteen wouldn’t love his true son, maybe at least he’d love a reflection of his son as himself.

One of the rawest stretches of the show comes when he sings “My Father’s House,” from his sixth album, *Nebraska*. After, he speaks of still, forever, being a boy who yearns for his father’s love: “Those whose love we wanted but didn’t get, we emulate them. It is our only way to get it. So when it came time, I chose my father’s voice because there was something sacred in it to me.” He pauses. “All we



know about manhood is what we have learned from our fathers. And my father was my hero. And my greatest foe.”

Like too many of us, however, by choosing to mirror the identity of someone whose absent love he longed for, Springsteen ended up not knowing who he was. And he spent much of his life afraid to love or be anything more than an observer. It’s not surprising that he eventually spun out.

Springsteen’s first breakdown came upon him at age thirty-two, shortly after he released *Nebraska*. It is 1982, and he and his buddy Matt Delia are driving from New Jersey to Los Angeles in a 1969 Ford XL. On a warm, late-summer evening, in remote Texas, they come across a small town where a fair is happening. A band plays. Men and women hold each other and dance lazily, happily, beneath the stars. Children run and laugh. Springsteen and his buddy stop the car but don’t get out. From the distance of the car, he gazes at all the living and joy. And then: Something in him cracks open. As he writes, in this moment his lifetime as “an observer... away from the normal messiness of living and loving, reveals its cost to me.” All these years later, he still doesn’t



(Clockwise from top right) With his bandmates from Steel Mill, one of his early groups; jamming at a friend's place, age twenty; his mother and father in a New Jersey diner, and on their wedding day; a close-up of one of his guitars.



exactly know why he fell into an abyss that night. “All I *do* know is as we age the weight of our unsorted baggage becomes heavier . . . much heavier. With each passing year, the price of our refusal to do that sorting rises higher and higher. . . . Long ago, the defenses I built to withstand the stress of my childhood, to save what I had of myself, outlived their usefulness, and I’ve become an abuser of their once lifesaving powers. I relied on them wrongly to isolate myself, seal my alienation, cut me off from life, control others and contain my emotions to a damaging degree. Now the bill collector is knocking and his payment’ll be in tears.”

That breakdown sent him on a thirty-plus-year journey into analysis. It—and the work he did on himself—saved his life, and transformed his life. He became the man he yearned to be but hadn’t known how to become. Springsteen’s desire to share his demons, and argue for the need he believes all of us have to confront our own—this is one of the show’s great powers. We ignore our demons, he says, at our peril. The show is, as he calls it, “a magic trick.” But in other ways, as I tell Springsteen, it is a revival show—not just him energizing the audience through the power of his life-affirming, raucous songs; it is also a self-revival show. This is the work of a man revealing his flaws so that he can inspire us to redeem ourselves.

Nearly a decade after that night in Texas, Springsteen is at his home in Los Angeles. He’s living with Patti Scialfa, and they are days away from welcoming their first child, Evan. It is early morning, and there is a knock on the door: his father. Springsteen invites him in, and he and his father sit at the table. It is here, in his home, that his father tells him, “You’ve been very good to us.” Springsteen has no words. He can only nod. Then his father says, “And I wasn’t very good to you.”

“It was,” Springsteen says in the show, “the greatest moment in my life, with my dad. And it was all that I needed. Here in the last days before I was to become a father, my own father was visiting me, to warn me of the mistakes that he had made, and to warn me not to make them with my own children. To release them from the chain of our sins, my father’s and mine, that they may be free to make their own choices and to live their own lives.”

It was some years later, when his father was in his sixties, that Springsteen received an answer that gave him even deeper insight. He learned that all those nights Doug Springsteen sat alone, brooding, silent, in the dark of that kitchen, he was a man lost. A man who would be diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. The diagnosis gave Springsteen context to his boyhood. But it also gave him a new fear.

As Springsteen confesses to me, “I have come close enough to [mental illness] where I know I am not completely well myself. I’ve had to deal with a lot of it over the years, and I’m on a variety of medications that keep me on an even keel; otherwise I can swing rather dramatically and . . . just . . . the wheels can come off a little bit. So we have to watch, in our whole family. I have to watch my kids, and I’ve been lucky there. It ran in my family going way before my dad.”

Twenty years ago this past spring, his father died at age seventy-three. Springsteen watched him go, in hospice, cradled in Adele’s arms. On the day of the funeral, after the priest finished his prayers at the graveside of the family plot in Freehold, Springsteen sent away the mourners and remained behind with only a few close friends and relatives. Then he

took a shovel and moved every last bit of dirt onto his father’s grave. “That’s quite biblical, what you did,” I say to him. “Burying your father’s body with your own hands.”

“I wanted that connection,” he says. “It meant a lot to me.”

I ask him, Will you be buried there, too? In the family plot in St. Rose of Lima Cemetery?

He looks off toward the mirror, pauses. And then comes the short laugh. “That’s a big question,” he says. “And I’ve asked myself that question on a variety of occasions. Will I end up there? I don’t know. I think I’ll just be . . . I think I’ll just spread myself around a little bit. Maybe a little in the ocean. [Laughs] A little in town. Here and there.”

Is there anything your father never said to you that you wish he had said? Were there any words unspoken?

“Well,” Springsteen says, “he never said, ‘I love you.’”

Never?


“Nope. He never got around to it.”

Not even when he lay dying?

“Nope.”

Does that hurt you?

Springsteen pauses again and looks back toward his mirror. Then: “No. Because (a) I know he did. And (b) it just wasn’t in his reper-

A photograph of Bruce Springsteen sitting in a red velvet chair. He is wearing blue denim jeans and worn-in black leather boots. His feet are propped up on the chair. The background is dark with some blurred lights. The text is overlaid on the top left of the image.

**"ONE'S COMING OF
AGE HAS TO
BE EARNED. IT
TAKES A CERTAIN
SINGLE-MINDED PURPOSE."**

**Prove It
All Night**

All Saints T-shirt,
jeans, boots,
and jewelry,
Springsteen's own.



toire. So he showed me he did, on many occasions. And so that was fine. My father was so nonverbal that... he cried whenever he left. When you'd say, 'I gotta go now, Dad'—boom!—tears. Later in his life, the last ten years, he was very visibly emotional."

I tell him that there is a line in the show where he says of his father, "If I had a wish, oh, man, it'd be that he could be here to see this"—and then I ask, Is there something you'd want to hear from him?

Springsteen goes silent. Then: "Honestly, I would have liked him to see who I was. That was what I was always running up against. He couldn't see who I was. I mean, that's what your children want from you—you are the audience. I figured that out really early in my kids' lives. That's the natural role of things. So somewhere inside of me, I still wanted my dad to be my audience. I wanted him to be mine. I wish for further and deeper understanding of who we both were."

Springsteen tells me he has found purpose through his children. He is the father of two sons and a daughter: Evan, twenty-eight, works for SiriusXM; Sam, twenty-four, is a firefighter in New Jersey; and Jessica, twenty-six, is an equestrian. He says he promised himself long ago that he would not lose his children the way his father lost him. Much of his struggle to become a good father had to do with the hurt and anger he had to work through. He was fighting what he calls "the worst of my destructive behavior." His father sent him a message that a woman, a family, weakens a man. As he says, for years the idea of a home filled him "with distrust and a bucketload of grief." He credits Scialfa, his wife of twenty-seven years, with inspiring him to be a better man, with saving him. ("By her intelligence and love she showed me that our family was a sign of strength, that we were formidable and could take on and enjoy much of the world.") It's no wonder that he brings her out in the center of the show and duets with her on "Tougher Than the Rest" as well as "Brilliant Disguise." You read the book and you see the savviness and sensitivity she brought while turning him into someone with a purpose. It's Scialfa who, when the kids are small, goes to Bruce, the lifelong nocturnal creature, and says, "You're going to miss it." What? he asks. "The kids, the morning, it's the best time, it's when they need you the most." Cut to: Bruce, remaking himself as the early-morning-breakfast dad. "Should the whole music thing go south, I will be able to hold a job between the hours of 5:00 and 11:00 A.M. at any diner in America.

Feeding your children is an act of great intimacy, and I received my rewards: the sounds of forks clattering on breakfast plates, toast popping out of the toaster.”

And there it is: Bruce, no longer the son of scarcity but rather the father of abundance, reclaiming the kitchen for his family; transforming it from a fortress of darkness and silence into a land of brightness, filled with the sounds of life.

Sitting here with me now, talking about his brood, the primary emotion is joy. A father, proud of his children, grateful. I ask him, considering the current environment, what kinds of conversations he and his family are having around the kitchen table; what it means to be a man in society right now.

“My kids... we’re lucky. They’re solid citizens.”

But what would you say if you had to give advice to someone raising sons today?

“Be present. Be there. If I have any advice to give, that is it. I mean you have to be *fully* present in mind, spirit, and body. And you don’t have to do anything. [Laughs] I mean, you get a lotta credit just for showing up. Just by being present, you guide them. My children are transitioning into adulthood. But I’ve found my presence still carries a great deal of weight—on that *rare* occasion now when someone actually still asks me a question. [Laughs]”

I ask him to define the qualities that make up a good man today.

“Well, I do have two good men. And I would say their qualities are, they’re sensitive. They’re respectful of others. They are not locked into a 1950s sensibility of manhood, which I had to contend with. They have been freed from that. Consequently, their attitudes toward women and the world at large are free of those archetypes, and that frees them to be who they are and have deeper and more meaningful relationships. They know themselves pretty well, which is something I can’t say for myself when I was that age. They know—and can show—love. And they know how to receive love. They know what to do with their problems. I think they have a sense of process as to how to work on themselves, which is something that I certainly didn’t have at twenty-five. So that’s a great tool for them to make their way through the world. These are the things that I’m proud of my boys for. And I would say that they are modern young men. And *quite* different from my generation.”

And what about your daughter, who is navigating a world now that has had a rebirth of misogyny—do you and Patti talk to her about this?

“Well, she’s learned quite a bit, even through the few serious relationships that she’s had. And what do I notice? It seems to me like women today learn a lot quicker. She came with a set of tools that—and I have to credit most of this to Patti, because Patti was just very in tune with all the kids all the time—allowed her to make her way through the world in a very aware way. Consequently, there’s a lot of bullshit she doesn’t put up with. My daughter—she’s really tough. She’s in a tough sport. She’s physically very brave, very strong, and mentally very, very tough. That came through Patti. Patti was very independent. So she has a roaring independence that has served her very well.”

A “roaring independence.” I like that.

“Yeah.” [Chuckles]

There’s a lot of noise right now about what a man is.

“My kids aren’t confused by that.”

“LET PEOPLE VIEW
THEMSELVES AS
AMERICANS FIRST.
LET PEOPLE GIVE EACH
OTHER A CHANCE.”

If you had to say, “Here are the qualities you should seek to instill in your young man,” what would you say?

“The funny thing is... if you’re present from when they’re young and if you comport yourself even reasonably well, they pick up a lot of healthy habits. And that discussion happens implicitly. By your behavior at home and how you treat your partner and what they see. I by no means have been perfect. But if you give a *reasonable* presentation of yourself, a lot of that occurs implicitly.”

Why do so many men, whether they’re sixty-five or twenty-five, refuse to take responsibility for their actions? For their lives?

Springsteen sighs. “Well, that’s funny. And I would go back

to DNA. If you grow up in a household where people are *refusing* to take responsibility for their lives, chances are you’re gonna refuse. You’re gonna see yourself as a professional victim. And once that’s locked into you, it is very difficult to come out from under. It takes a lotta self-awareness, a lotta work to come out from under it. I’m shocked at the number of people that I know who fall into this category. And it has nothing to do with whether you’re successful or not. It’s just your baggage. So that’s a really important thing to communicate to your children: They’re the captain of their ship, and they have to take responsibility for who they are, their actions, what they do. They’ve got to own their lives.”

Is there, I ask, a code that you live by?

“I’ve never tried to articulate it, to be honest. The qualities that my mother has are ones that I’ve tried to foster in myself. So what do I say? Kindness, a certain kind of gentleness that’s girded by strength. Thoughtfulness, which is very difficult for a narcissist like myself to deliver on a daily basis. I’ve had to get around my own self-involvement, which is one of the natural characteristics of the artist. If I had to say something, I’d say, ‘I’m steadfast, honest, and true.’”

Steadfast, honest, and true. If this is his motto, it also represents the qualities his fans project onto him. These are the values Springsteen seems to embody that create such a bond with his audience. Because of this, they believe he knows them. And gives voice to their heartaches, as well as the better selves they aspire to be. But he has also sought, especially in the second half of his career, to write songs that speak to social and class issues. He’s always revered folkies like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and around the time he released his album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* in 1995, he began to strive to create songs that found the intersection between “The River” and “This Land Is Your Land.” A place where, as he says, “the political and personal came together to spill clear water into the muddy river of history.”

I say to Springsteen, In your book, you write this about America: “Dread—the sense that things might not work out, that the moral high ground had been swept out from underneath us, that the dream we had of ourselves had somehow been tainted and the future would forever be uninsured—was in the air.” I tell him that what’s strange is that this is not you describing the mood of this country in 2018; this is you writing about the country in 1978, forty years earlier, at the time you wrote *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. Yet those words

Land of Hope and Dreams

Springsteen greeting fans outside the Walter Kerr Theatre.

Vintage Golden Bear ~~billboard~~ jacket, All Saints T-shirt, jeans, boots, and jewelry, Springsteen's own.



feel like they are about this country right now. Do you think America is worse or better?

"I don't think it's better."

You mean it's worse? I ask.

"Well, I guess forty years-plus would make it worse. And I do feel that people feel under siege, and sometimes for reasons that I don't agree with and that are unfortunate. Like I say, whether it's the changing face of the nation or... I think those people legitimately feel under siege. Their way of life is somehow threatened—is existentially threatened. And maybe that explains Trump and maybe it doesn't, but...but that's always been a part of the American story. It continues to be a part of it today. At the time when I wrote those songs, I suppose it was a lot of what I was seeing around me."

There comes a moment in the show, before he sings "The Ghost of Tom Joad," which was inspired by John Ford's film adaptation of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, when he gives a beautiful reflection on how sacred he feels democracy is. He speaks of how "these are times when we've also seen folks marching, and in the highest offices of our land, who want to speak to our darkest angels, who want to call up the ugliest and most divisive ghosts of America's past. And they want to destroy the idea of an America for all. That's their intention."

So I ask him: "Who are the 'they'?"

"Well," he says, "I would be talking about our president. Probably number one. [He] has no interest in uniting the country, really. And actually has an interest in doing the opposite and dividing us, which he does on an almost daily basis. So that's simply a crime against humanity, as far as I'm concerned. It's an awful, awful message to send out into the world if you're in that job and in that position. It's just an ugly, awful message. You are intentionally trying to disenfranchise a large portion of Americans. I mean, you are simply... that's unforgivable. And then there's just the rise of—whether it's the alt-right or the folks who were marching in Charlottesville with their tiki torches and all of that coming to the fore again, you know? Which our president was more than happy to play into and to play to. So these are folks who are invested in denying the idea of a united America and an America for all. It's a critical moment. This has come so far to the surface, and it's so toxic. And it appears to have a grip... and to be so powerful... in a lot of people's lives at the moment. It's a scary moment for any conscientious American, I think."

And if you could, I say to him, make one request of citizens in this country right now, what would it be?

A long silence follows. Springsteen turns back to the mirror and, at the same time, draws both of his booted feet up to the edge of the couch. He resembles a man squatting beside a campfire, watching flames. "I think that a lot of what's going on has been a large group of people frightened by the changing face of the nation. There seems to be an awful lot of fear. The Founding Fathers were pretty good at confronting their fears and the fears of the country. And it's the old cliché where geniuses built the system so an idiot could run it. We are completely testing that theory at this very moment. I do believe we'll survive Trump. But I don't know if I see a unifying figure on the horizon. That worries me. Because the partisanship and the country being split down the middle is something that's gravely dangerous. To go back to your question, what would my wish be? [Sighs] It's corny stuff, but: Let people view themselves as Americans first, that the basic founding principles of the country could be adhered to, whether it's equality or social justice. Let people give each other a chance."

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In the show, Springsteen plays many moments for laughs. He's a natural actor, with a gift for landing a line or milking a moment. He's also good at building the intensity of a story—or, if he has to, deflating it, as he does at one point when he shifts gears for an intense stretch and jokes, "I'm going to release you from suicide watch right now." But as I prepare for our final meeting, I find myself thinking he may be hiding in plain sight. I think about his description of his second breakdown, which descended upon him a few years after he turned sixty. It was a darkness that lasted on and off for three years; it was, he writes, "an attack of what was called an 'agitated depression.'" During this period, I was so profoundly uncomfortable in my own skin that I just wanted OUT. It feels dangerous and (continued on page TK)

SONGS OF HIMSELF

(continued from page 81)

brings plenty of unwanted thoughts.... Demise and foreboding were all that awaited.”

It is the writing of a man desperate to escape profound pain. So when I see him, I ask: Have you ever attempted to take your life?

“No, no, no.”

But have you ever contemplated suicide?

“I once felt bad enough to say, ‘I don’t know if I can live like this.’ It was like...” He pauses for a moment. Then: “I once got into some sort of box where I couldn’t figure my way out and where the feelings were so overwhelming-ly uncomfortable.”

Was that during your first breakdown?

“No. This was the ‘agitated depression’ I talk about in the book, where feelings became so overwhelmingly uncomfortable that I simply couldn’t find a twelve-by-twelve piece of the floor to stand on, where I could feel a sense of peace on.” As he tells me this, he brings his hands up to either side of his face, framing it like blinders on a horse, as though trying to conjure that small square of safe space. Trying to see it. Then he says, all the while still holding his blinder hands to the sides of his head: “I had no inner peace whatsoever. And I said, ‘Gee, I really don’t know. I don’t know how long I could...’ It was a manic state, and it was just so profoundly emotionally and spiritually and physically uncomfortable that the only thing I’ve ever said was ‘Gee, I don’t know, man...’ It gave me a little insight into...”

Springsteen’s voice trails off and he slowly lets his hands fall into his lap. For a moment, neither one of us says anything. Then I break the silence and ask: Did you think you should be hospitalized?

“Well, no one was *saying* that I should be...” Springsteen gives me a wry smile. “I had a couple very good doctors. But, unfortunately, it was August. That’s when they all take off.” Springsteen lets out one of his short, raspy laughs. “All I remember was feeling really badly and calling for help. I might have gotten close to that and for brief, brief periods of time. It lasted for—I don’t know. Looking back on it now, I can’t say. Was it a couple weeks? Was it a month? Was it longer? But it was a very bad spell, and it just came.... Once again—DNA. And it came out of the roots that

I came out of, particularly on my father’s side, where I had to cop to the fact that I also had things inside me that could lead me to pretty bad places.”

And when you see someone like Anthony Bourdain, can you understand how that happens?

“Well, I had a very, very close friend who committed suicide. He was like an older son to me. I mentored him. And he got very, very ill. So, ultimately, it always remains a mystery—those last moments. I always say, Well, somebody was in a bad place, and they just got caught out in the rain. Another night, another way, someone else there... it might not have happened.” He pauses. “They were ill, and they got caught out in the rain.... I don’t know anyone who’s ever explained satisfactorily the moments that lead up to someone taking that action. So can I understand how that happens? Yes. I think I felt just enough despair myself to—pain gets too great, confusion gets too great, and that’s your out. But I don’t have any great insight into it, and in truth, I’ve never met someone who has.”

Do you feel you have, at last, found your true self?

“You never get there. Nobody does. You become more of yourself as time passes by.... In the arc of your life, there are so many places where you reach different milestones that add to your authenticity and your presentation of who you really are. But I find myself still struggling just for obvious things that I feel I should’ve had under my belt a long time ago. You know, when I get in those places where I’m not doing so well, I lose track of who I am.... The only thing in life that’s sure is: If you think you’ve got it, you don’t have it!”

I tell him I want to pause for a moment, because some people might say, “What are you talking about? You’re Bruce fucking Springsteen! How do you not know who you are?”

“Ugh.” Springsteen laughs and lets out a sigh. He drops his chin into his chest and then smiles and looks up. “Well, Bruce fucking Springsteen is a *creation*. So it’s somewhat liquid—even though at this point you would imagine I have it pretty nailed down. But sometimes not necessarily. [Laughs] And personally—you’re in search of things like everybody else. Identity is a slippery thing no matter how long you’ve been at it. Parts of yourself can appear—like, whoa, who was *that* guy? Oh, he’s in the car with everybody else, but he doesn’t show his head too often, because he was so threatening to your stability. At the end of the day, identity is a construct we build to make ourselves feel at ease and at peace and reasonably stable in the world. But *being* is not a construct. Being is just being. In being, there’s a whole variety of wild and untamed things that remain in us. You bump into those in the night, and you can scare yourself.”

I ask if he has spent his life trying to love that

boy his father denied.

“Those were big moments that I had through my analysis. I saw myself as a child and experienced my own innocence and realized, Oh my God, I was so fragile. I was so easily broken and dismissed. My father taught me to hate that person. So it took me quite a while to come back around and make my peace with who I was. That was a lot of what I was doing through my playing—trying to come back around to a place where I could just stand myself. [Laughs] It was just developing a self that allowed me to live with myself in a way that a lot of the self-loathing didn’t allow. That’s just a part of my DNA. I do a lot better with it now, but it’s an ongoing struggle.”

“I was well into my forties before I figured this out. I don’t know how to describe [that breakthrough] except you think you’re seeing all of yourself, and then it’s like a finger pokes at this boundary in front of you and suddenly a little brick drops out, and you look through [the wall], and you go, Oh my God—there’s this entire other world in there that I’ve never seen. And a lot of it, you’ve sort of been living in a—I don’t know how to describe it—a cruel universe, and it’s just a little ray of light that allows you to see more of your experience and existence. [Pauses] I mean, what are you doing in analysis? You’re trying to turn things into love. You’re trying to rejigger that balance of misunderstanding and love. So you’re trying to take all this misunderstanding and loathing, and you’re trying to turn it into love—which is the wonderful thing that happens when you’re trying to make music out of the rough, hard, bad things. You’re trying to turn it into love. So along with that effort came the realization, through a lot of studying and analysis, of how rough I’d been on myself and had continued to be on myself until a very late stage in life.”

I tell him I’m thinking about his lines in “The Promised Land”—*Sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode... take a knife and cut this pain from my heart...—and how for years I thought it was about the heartbreak of losing a woman.*

“It’s about existential weakness and trying to the best of your ability to transcend it.”

And the line “the lies that leave you nothing but lost and brokenhearted”?

“Everybody carries those things with them. It’s a line that always penetrates. It still penetrates for me when I sing it each night.”

You’re making me see that “The Ties That Bind” is not a love story but about the DNA-family ties you can’t escape.

“The bonds of your personal family,” he says, “but also the ties you can’t break among your community and your fellow citizens. You can’t forsake those things. It’ll rot your core at the end of the day. If you want to see someone who’s—look at Trump. He has forsaken a lot of these things, and it’s

affected him. He's deeply damaged at his core."

Because he forsook the ties, the bonds?

"Absolutely. That's why he's dangerous. Anyone in that position who doesn't deeply feel those ties that bind is a dangerous man, and it's very pitiful."

And then I tell him I'm thinking about "Born to Run," which contains four words in one line that are the sum of him: *sadness, love, madness, and soul*. "Together, Wendy, we can live with the sadness / I'll love you with all the madness in my soul."

"Those are my lines. 'Born to Run.' That's my epitaph, if you wanna know my epitaph. There it is. It still is probably—I use the song at the end of the show every night as a summary. The idea is that it can contain all that has come before. And I believe that it does."

Sadness, love, madness, soul. I tell him: Those are your four elements.

"The last verse of my greatest song. And that's where it ought to end every night." Springsteen pauses. "Twenty-four when I wrote it. Wow. It's a... holds up pretty well. But I... that was what I was aiming for in those days—that's what I was shooting for."

I tell Springsteen that before I leave, I have one last question. In the book, he talks about how, when he was nineteen, he and his buddies loaded up a truck with all their worldly possessions and kissed Freehold goodbye. Yet a few years later, we learn that Springsteen, while dating a woman with a young daughter, has given the girl the rocking horse he loved as a boy.

"Ah," Springsteen says, a look of happiness rising up in his eyes, "my rocking horse."

Right. But here's the image I can't square—you are a nineteen-year-old badass, ditching your hometown with your buddies. Lying on the back of a flatbed truck with your guitar and your duffel bag. And you're telling me you have your rocking horse with you on that truck?

Springsteen looks at me like nothing is wrong. "Well, it was the only thing I had left from my childhood."

He goes on to tell me that years after giving the girl the rocking horse, he tracked down her mother and asked her to return it. The woman, however, had given it away. He pauses. I ask him if he has carried anything else with him from his childhood, and then he tells me how when he was growing up, there was a merry-go-round on the Asbury Park boardwalk that he rode as a kid. "It had an arm and on the end of it, there was a gold ring. If you caught it, you got a free ride. I used to go nuts because I could never reach these rings. I rode it a thousand times. But then one night before I was about to put my first record out—I can remember the night... I got on the merry-go-round and *bing!* I grabbed the gold one."

Where is it now? I ask.

"I keep it in my writing room, at home. And the rest is history." ■