

# 'Born in the U.S.A.'—powerful new album

*Born In the U.S.A.* is Bruce Springsteen's first album since 1982's desolate *Nebraska*, an acoustic meditation on America's darker side. The new album, a retreat from the cynicism of *Nebraska*, must suffer in comparison to 1980's majestic *The River*, but the distancing mechanism provided by *Nebraska* allows *Born in the U.S.A.* to stand on its own merits.

As a songwriter, Bruce Springsteen is now virtually in a class by himself. His songs are always exciting and forceful. The themes of his songs are in part extensions of Creedence Clearwater Revival's working-class ethic and in part vitally new explorations of adult themes. The characters in his songs are middle-class Americans faced with the bleak prospect of growing old, trapped in small-town America.

"I'm ready to grow young again," Bruce cries in "No Surrender," the album's most powerful cut, "and hear your sister's voice calling us home across the open yards/ Well, maybe we could cut someplace of our own with these drums and these guitars." The power of rock 'n' roll as both a means of escape and as a means for establishing one's own limits has fueled Springsteen's music from the beginning. "No Sur-

## Review

Eddie Huffman

render" uses a no-holds barred mid-1960s rock approach to describe his vision of the music's promise. The rest of *Born in the U.S.A.* follows suit.

As always, the support of the E Street Band is impeccable. Max Weinberg's tense, controlled drumming is balanced by Springsteen's driving guitar and vocals, and Roy Bittan and Danny Federici's keyboards add vital emotional color. There are no important musical breakthroughs here on the order of a *Sgt. Pepper's* or a *Who's Next*, but such breakthroughs have never been the point of Springsteen's music. The E Street Band is exciting and innovative, filling out Bruce's lyrical and emotional sagas, from the synthesized dance beat of "Dancing in the Dark" to the stark, subdued "I'm On Fire."

Lyrical, Springsteen continues to tell stories of characters trying to find their niche within the constraints of small-town America. The

characters who first discovered those limits on *Darkness On the Edge of Town* are now approaching middle-age.

"My Hometown," which cuts across three generations, begins with an appealing picture of a father and his son: "He'd touse my hair and say; son take a/ good look around, this is your hometown." The song continues by exploring mid-1960s racial violence and the town's gradual decay in the 70s and 80s. In the end the boy is grown but still trapped:

*Last night me and Kate we  
laid in bed  
talking about getting out  
Packing up our bags maybe  
heading south  
I'm 35, we got a boy of our  
own now  
Last night I sat him up, be-  
hind the wheel  
and said son take a good look  
around,  
this is your hometown.*

The lyrics of all of *Born in the U.S.A.*'s 12 songs tell a sad story, but a backdrop of killer rock 'n' roll overwhelms the cynicism. The lonesome sound of *Nebraska's* music drove the depression deeper; the ex-

plosive power of *Born in the U.S.A.* kicks cynicism out of the way. The title track, "No Surrender," and "Glory Days" are as exciting as anything Springsteen has ever done, even if they lack the impact "Born to Run" had when first heard in 1975.

*Born in the U.S.A.* will probably receive most of its criticism for being too ordinary. There are no songs as grand as "Jungleland" or "The River," and "Born in the U.S.A." and "Darlington County" are basically musical rehashes of "Cadillac Ranch" and "You Can Look (But You Better Not Touch)." The mix, as on *The River*, is a bit too dense, and some songs have an unnatural surface sheen that obstructs the clarity of his song's need. But, these problems are, at worst, minor. Springsteen's prolific songwriting skills (rumor has it that more than 100 new songs have been

recorded since *The River*) have left America with another fine album.

From the album's title *Born in the U.S.A.* to the Patton-like flag used as a backdrop, the cover shows Bruce Springsteen as a quintessential American. A baseball cap sticks out of the back pocket of his blue jeans, and the sleeves of his white t-shirt are rolled up. His face is hidden — he could be a greaser ready for a rumble, a gas station attendant at a country store, or a rock 'n' roller about to strap on a guitar and try to save the world with his music.

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