



One Salt-Infested Summer

THERE ARE ONLY TWO GREAT PLACES TO TEST DRIVE A NEW album when you're 22. The first is in the car. The second is in a college dorm room or first apartment. If either contained more than empty Del Taco wrappers and an 8-track tape player, you were living large.

Having grown up in Los Angeles, by 1978 the test-drive portion for me consisted of a crappy Pioneer cassette tape deck and a pair of Jensen speakers reeking of too many nail-polish repairs.

But we took what we could in those pre-iPod days. I preferred the car despite the poor acoustics, mostly because I was in it more than my equally small apartment. On July 7, 1978, I spent almost the entire day, and most of the night, in that car. The Jensens, I'm afraid, didn't survive 'till dawn, victims of their own bass-pounding enthusiasm.

You may think that *Darkness on the Edge of Town* is more of a late-night, open-road kind of listen, but I took my first cassette spin at 6 a.m. fighting morning traffic on the 405 freeway heading south. As anyone who has endured it knows, that road-from-hell takes more courage to navigate than even the darkest recesses 'neath Abram's Bridge.

In fact, I loved listening to Springsteen in the car, whether open-road or smog-infused. In a town where driving is what you do, Bruce provided sanctuary and hope. Some Nixon-loving fat guy in a Buick cuts in front of you? No problem. "Mister. I ain't a boy ... no, I'm a MAN! And I believe in the promised land you unenlightened, gas-guzzling jerk." Then you flip him off anyway for good measure. But with Bruce on the cassette deck, you somehow knew you weren't going to ever turn into that guy.

I was up early that Friday because I was taking the day off to go scuba diving with a friend. In Los Angeles you drive everywhere, so of course instead of walking down to the ocean four blocks from my apartment, we drove about two hours south to a different beach. In L.A. even "grabbing a bite to eat" means a 20-plus minute drive or the restaurant isn't deemed worthy. I often wondered if the patrons I saw in the restaurants within walking distance of my apartment had driven 20 minutes to come there.

Lucky for me, I had a brand-new, unopened cassette of *Darkness* I had bought at Tower records on my way back from Glendale to Playa-del-Rey the night before. My best friend Frank had been to the Fabulous Forum to see Bruce on Wednesday, July 5, and phoned me immediately the next day, insisting I both listen to *Darkness* and get myself down to The Roxy nightclub for tickets to an unannounced "secret" Springsteen show that Friday night.

So, why, you might ask, would any real Bruce Springsteen fan go scuba

JULY 7, 1978 THE ROXY LOS ANGELES, CA

diving that morning instead of lining up at The Roxy on Sunset Boulevard, hoping for a ticket to what would become one of the greatest rock and roll shows of all time? Well, being 22 in Los Angeles, you get your facts learned real good. All men want to be movie stars, movie stars want to be rock stars, and rock stars ain't satisfied 'til they're Bruce Springsteen. I knew, as a music-industry outsider, that my chances of snagging a ticket were somewhere between a rattlesnake speedway and Atlantic City. So I drove to Laguna Beach instead, using the time productively, giving a really good listen to *Darkness*.

Until that album, I thought of Bruce Springsteen as an East Coast voice. In Southern California we still had the Long Beach Pike amusement park and a small year-round carnival at Balboa Island. But neither represented anything metaphorically and lived solely in the shadow of Disneyland, which certainly had no *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* qualities to it. And *Born to Run*, while great, was clearly an opera out on the turnpike. We didn't have turnpikes in California. We had freeways and six-lane streets that snaked through dozens of cities before reaching the border with Mexico.

But *Badlands*? We had 'em, even if they were only represented by freeway-exit signs. Girls named Candy? We had those in abundance, too, and men really did bring them anything they wanted. I regularly drove down Kingsley Street in West Los Angeles. We had more Main Streets and Fairviews per capita than any other metropolitan area. Los Angeles was, in fact, built on a desert floor. *East of Eden* starring James Dean, played regularly at the Nuart Theater in Santa Monica. And since my dad let me drive his red, 1967 Camero Rally Sport whenever I wanted, I was that dude from L.A.

Of course in Los Angeles we spent more time waiting for green lights than moments, and the things you found near the edge of town were porn theaters, burrito huts and stereo stores. Hunger you can't resist? There was always The Original Pantry, Cantor's Deli, Al Pennie's all-night restaurant in Culver City, or Tommy's Burgers. And for a very chosen few, dreams really did come true.

So by the time I had driven back and forth from Laguna to Playa del

Rey (near Venice Beach) I had listened to *Darkness* quite a few times over and had already fallen in love, feeling like it was the ultimate L.A. album. So now it was just a question of what to do during the live broadcast of the Roxy show scheduled to begin in a few hours on local FM powerhouse KMET.

Fortunately my roommate was going to be home so I instructed him on how to operate my new cassette tape recorder and he agreed to capture the broadcast for me on the best-grade Maxell tapes I could find. This left me free to do something pretty rare: test-drive a recording before it even became a recording. I would spend my evening driving around Los Angeles listening live to Bruce's Roxy show in the car, where it seemed to belong.

But where to go? My first decision was not to drive around The Roxy nightclub, since it would only make me jealous of the lucky stiffs inside. Rather, I decided to go to those places I deemed more Springsteen-compatible. The lonely stretches of industrial roads cutting through oil refineries in El Segundo certainly qualified, complete with flames shooting from the smokestacks as so-called "byproducts" burned off.

I'd also sit for a while in the abandon housing tracks purchased by the Los Angeles Airport during a noise-abatement phase. This once-middle-class neighborhood was now a ghost town of vacant homes and driveways leading to nowhere, shaken every three or four minutes by a low-flying jet taking off to somewhere far away.

And though I rarely ventured there, I felt like a cruise through downtown Los Angeles was required if only because it was one of the few places you could still see old-style "bums" of the type I imagined populated places like New Jersey. Then down Wilshire to West Los Angeles where I could ride down Kingsley. If time permitted, I'd then head through Santa Monica to Pacific Coast Highway and head north along the beach until the radio signal weakened enough to turn around and head back.

The night was pretty typical of early July in Los Angeles – not hot but hot enough to know it was indeed summer, and a bit on the "muggy" side, since the day had been a bit hazy and peaked only in the low 80s. It typically didn't get super hot in L.A. until August and September; but by July, many car tops were down and on this particular Friday the abandoned make-shift outdoor fireworks stands were still standing, only now devoid of any celebratory flammables.

The show began simply enough and I cranked the Jensens up to maximum distortion. "Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer said, "please welcome Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band." My neck began to tingle and I don't think it stopped for several days.

It goes without saying that the Roxy show turned into one of the great rock and roll performances of all time. I had been to The Roxy many times

and so I pictured the cramped quarters, the smoke rising, the veteran waitresses desperately trying to enforce the two-drink minimum. I hope they gave up, put down their trays and joined in. That was a show worth getting fired for.

During the introduction to "Rosalita," Bruce challenged the radio audience driving in their cars to "crank it up," so I did. Those poor speakers were living on life support by now, but it didn't matter. Several times I had to pull over and applaud.

Eventually I gave up on my efforts to keep moving and parked in the far reaches of some supermarket lot. I sat and listened. I wanted to see the face of the girl that yells "you got it" during "Growing Up" when Bruce suggests he wanted "everything." You could feel the excitement in that small club come right through the speakers and into the car. I just closed my eyes and imagined I had really, really good seats.

When I look back at the defining moments in my life, that night is certainly one of the best. I had been to plenty of rock shows and yet the energy, or dare I say jealousy and envy I felt were unmatched. Listening so much to that performance, I wore out the two Maxell tapes my roommate recorded. It certainly hooked me on Springsteen big time and started me on my journey to leave Los Angeles.

For old-times sake I took *Darkness* on a test drive the other evening, a windy but stunningly beautiful one in Petaluma where I live north of San Francisco. This time the drive consisted of an iPod walk around the dog park and nature trail near my home. It's a bit different listening to an album like *Darkness* among fluttering oak trees and waving spring grasses.

But of course it "drove" just as well 30 years later. I'm about to begin a new and unpleasantly disruptive journey in my life, one I didn't plan for. So I'm glad I took that walk the other night. Listening to *Darkness on the Edge of Town* once again gave me hope, the sort of hope that tempers sadness and depression without denying how brutal those things can be.

Somewhere in one of the many junk-yards that dot Southern California, a pair of long-ago crushed Jensen speakers are trembling just a little in anticipation of the next journey. Thanks Bruce!

— Gene Gable, ggable@sonic.net

Rave On

Driving down Sunset Boulevard at 4 a.m. one July night in 1978, I notice the "improved" billboard, high up above, but didn't know at the time that it was just improved by Bruce and his outlaw graffiti brigade. I parked just off Sunset and walked up the deserted street to The Roxy, where I find a lone employee atop a ladder affixing plastic letters to the lighted marquee. "Tonight Only. Bruce Springsteen and E Street Band. Sold Out," it read.

"Hey", I said. "You spelled Springsteen wrong. It's e-E-n." Not to be so easily corrected by some stranger on the street, the guy pulled a little piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and informed me that he is right and I am wrong. After a little more persuasive conversation, he atop his ladder and me on the sidewalk looking up, he climbed down, went inside The Roxy and came out a few minutes later clutching a copy of the *Darkness* album. He traces his finger across the words "Bruce Springsteen" and humbly says, "I guess you are right." He fumbled through his cardboard box of plastic letters, grabbed another "E" and re-climbed his ladder to fix the mistake. In a little more than 12 hours, I would be one of the lucky few to buy a \$5 ticket to one of the best shows of the last 31 years.

– Michael Hayes, seldomseensince@hotmail.com



Ticket stub to \$5 Los Angeles Roxy show.

I WORKED FOR CBS RECORDS IN 1978, BUT was a minion. I had never seen Bruce in concert and was just becoming a fan, but I sensed the magic surrounding his upcoming July 1978 gig at Los Angeles' 500-seat Roxy nightclub. So I asked a very high-ranking CBS Records VP, a pal of mine, if I could buy a ticket for the show through his connections, and he just chuckled and said, "Don't worry, Pete, I'll get you in." The next day he approached me with a long face and admitted, "Man, that show's impossible. I'm really very sorry."

So a friend and I made the dramatic decision that we would pay scalpers \$100 each to get in. It's very hard to explain today what \$100 for a ticket meant in 1978. You can't just say, "That's like \$700 today," you have to realize it was considered insanity back then. Like paying, say, \$2500 today. But people actually do that now, especially rich people when a group like The Stones come to town. I was laughed at around the halls of the CBS office in which I worked, despite Springsteen being on our label.

But those of us who love music know. I had no qualms about it, I just forged ahead and made it happen. My friend got there before I did and found a scalper in the street who probably couldn't believe he was about to sell two \$5 tickets for \$190 profit. But there we were, and once inside, the excitement and magic in the air was so thick you could cut it and serve it on a piece of bread. And I'll say now what I said the day after the show: it was worth every penny after just one song, and remains the greatest concert I've ever seen in my life.

A postscript: When I staggered out of my room late the next morning, my mom asked, "So, how was Silverspoon?" She wasn't joking ... that was her best guess at his name. It wouldn't be long before Bruce became a household name that people would no longer be butchering.

– Pete Howard, pete@postcentral.com



The Sunset Strip Billboard Caper

Interview with WNEW DJ Dave Herman July 9, 1978

DH: "...talking about tour stories, you gotta tell me the one about the sign on the Sunset Strip. In L.A. they have gigantic billboards advertising records. There are like twenty or thirty of them on the Sunset Boulevard, on the strip.

Bruce: It was just real ugly looking.

DH: Tell them what the sign was.

Bruce: It was just a sign of the album, it was an advertisement. What it is is that they put up those big advertisements, you know, paint your face real big and out of shape. Your nose is big enough, and they made it like 10 feet long, and like, it was just funny. It was just the ugliest thing I've ever seen.

DH: It was just a big picture of you?

Bruce: Well no, it was words too. So I said, 'OK guys, we're gonna hit the sign, we're gonna get some paint, we're gonna hit the sign'. I don't know if we were a little drunk or what was going on, but we came back home and I said 'tonight's the night.' It was two or three in the morning and I said 'whoever wants to go hit the sign, c'mon we're gonna go now.' So we all went, Clarence wants to go, me and Garry and some of the guys

from the crew and the crew manager, we all went down there, and we had bought all the cans of spray paint, and we went down there. The building was wide open, and it was vacant, it was real strange, the elevator was working and everything.

DH: You had to get way up at the top.

Bruce: It was like 6 stories up on a frame. Some of the guys went up on the fire escape, they didn't know the elevator was working. We went up, and we figured there would be like a locked door or something. The elevator opened up, and we went up a flight of stairs. Then there we were, up on the roof, and there it was. It was just big and bright. So we all ran out there and climbed up, there was a ladder that climbs up to the sign. So we climbed up the sign, and we just got out the paint and we started to work on it all night. I wanted to write E Street, the band's name up there. So Clarence said get up on my shoulders, so I got on his shoulders, and we were like 5-6 stories up. I asked Clarence, 'You tired yet?' he says 'No, I got you, boss. I got you.' So I do a letter. I say 'You tired yet?' and he says 'I got you.' As I look back, there's nothing but the pavement. It was funny, dude."

Poor Man Wanna Be Rich

DURING THE PAST 30 YEARS, *DARKNESS ON THE EDGE OF TOWN* has become the definitive Bruce Springsteen album. It's his "A" game. The stranded-on-a-desert-island, must-have of his catalog.

"Badlands," the opening track, a four-minute diamond, stands as Springsteen's best work. Not his most popular, nor most commercially successful. But "Badlands" is the Michael Jordan, the '23 Yankees of the Springsteen catalog.

Time after time it speaks when we need to hear, because in many ways, 1978 and 2009 are a lot alike.

When Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band took the stage May 23, 1978 at Shea's Theatre in Buffalo, New York to kick off the *Darkness* Tour, worldwide unemployment was on the rise. Inflation was out of control, rising to 7.62 percent, en route to then unseen levels of 11.22 in '79 and 13.58 in '80. President Jimmy Carter had just signed legislation raising the mandatory retirement age to 70. Several cities, including Cleveland, were so overcome by debt that they were on the verge of bankruptcy. At year's end, the Dow Jones Industrial Market would close at a five-year low.

Springsteen opened the show that May night, and nearly every show he played in 1978, with "Badlands."

Fast forward 11,271 days to April 1, 2009. America, and the world, are again plunging to the bottom of the economic rollercoaster hill, and gaining speed. Unemployment is approaching record levels as American cities turn into scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath*. The United States government has stepped in to assist failing American corporations, without being much help. Gun sales are on the rise while the sale of nearly everything else plummets. Homeownership, the foundation of the American Dream, is becoming a nightmare as millions have their homes foreclosed. Just as in 1978, the American Dream is cloaked in doubt, buried in the fear that it's out of reach for most.

I don't think it's a coincidence that when Springsteen took the stage to open the "Working on A Dream" tour April 1, 2009, at the HP Pavilion at San Jose in San Jose, California he opened with "Badlands."

It may be easy to dismiss as a coincidence. After all, odds are any time Springsteen straps on his Fender Esquire, you are just as likely to hear "Badlands" as any song in his catalog.

According to the *Bruce Springsteen Database Killing Floor* (www.brucespringsteen.it), between May 23, 1978, and August 30, 2008, (the end of the *Magic* Tour), Springsteen performed in public 1,685 times. The most performed songs during that time period: "Born to Run" 957 times, "Promised Land" 904 times, "Badlands" 872 times.

The numbers don't change much after the release and performances in the wake of the monstrous, 13-times platinum *Born in the U.S.A.*

Between June 29, 1984, (the opening show of the *Born in the U.S.A.* tour) and August 30, 2008, Springsteen has performed 1,305 times. The "most played" list looks like this: "Born to Run" 720 times, "Promised Land" 662

times, "Born in the U.S.A." 641 times, "Badlands" 631 times.

Not bad when you consider that "Born to Run" and "Born in the U.S.A." are staples off of multi-platinum records, and "Badlands" didn't crack the Top 40.

Poor man wanna be rich,
Rich man wanna be king
And a king ain't satisfied
Till he rules everything

It's the American Dream, circa 2009, in four lines.

As a society, we're programmed to want the upgrade, to super size, to keep up with the Joneses by downloading faster. The Accord is not enough, I want the BMW. Cubicle? I want the corner office. There's no ceiling, only layer upon higher layer. We want to be famous and we'll do anything to achieve it. Reality show? Check. YouTube? Been there. Blogs, Facebook, MySpace ... it's all about chasing the dream, a dream that seems to always be one step beyond our grasp.

Poor man wanna be rich.

In 2009 there are more than 5 million unemployed Americans. They wanna be rich. They wanna provide. They wanna produce. A job brings income, the key to the American dream.

Rich man wanna be king.

More than 1 million homes are in foreclosure. We all want to be king, but these days, many Americans are struggling to be king of their own castle. The dream continues to dim.

And a king ain't satisfied
Till he rules everything.

The moral of the story: We can have too much of a good thing; we can become tyrants. At these times, we must turn and lend a hand to our brother; that we must be content. That "it ain't no sin to be glad you're alive." The live performances of "Badlands" also bring us together. With spotlights on the crowd, fans punch the air together. In unison; we are one. We are sharing a common bond, this shared experience, and we are united and together we will persevere.

Whether you sing "oooh oooh" or, as Springsteen wrote "mmmmmmmm, mmmmm, mmmmm" near the end of "Badlands," it brings us together and holds a significant meaning. In discussing the lyrics of "The Rising" on VH1 *Storytellers*, Springsteen notes that the "Li,li, li,li,li,li, li,li,li" section says "sing with me; stand alongside of me. We will stand together in this." And the same rings true for the end of "Badlands."

The track rings true; the lyrics hold a deep, profound meaning — for Springsteen, for his fans, for America in 1978 and 30 years later. "Badlands" maintains the message of faith in faithless times; hope during hopelessness and the dream (or is it a promise?) that things will get better.

— Chris Kozak writes for the *Toledo Free Press*: ckozak@bex.net.