

Water of life

The Boss bends the rules of his 'River Tour' – and wins. By Keith Cameron.

Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band Olympiastadion, Berlin

Rock'n'roll is a thirsty business. So it's apt that, in recent years, during his epic shows Bruce Springsteen has begun accepting gifts of beer from fans and downing them in one. With the many grog vendors around the Olympiastadion doing brisk business, he has no shortage of offers. Having abstained for over 90 minutes, even the saintly Springsteen – a man whose physique attests to iron discipline when confronted by temptation – can resist no longer. It being Germany, however, the gift isn't in a pint glass but a litre plastic *stein*. The man they call "der Chef" still makes short work of the contents. "Oh, that's cold," he gasps. "That's good."

Bruce takes his beer break amid Darlington County, a loosey-goosey sing-along that typically comprises the part of the concert when a certain cadre of Springsteen diehards roll their eyes and hit the message boards. They accuse their hero of freewheeling towards retirement, dishing easy thrills for the masses with sets built around a predictable core of material. Then Springsteen follows Darlington County with Waitin' On A Sunny Day and plucks a kid from the audience to sing in his cutest Berliner-English; cue Bossweb meltdown.

The obvious riposte to such cavils is that Bruce Springsteen has always been a blend of rock'n'roll melodrama, existential grit and pure ham with a side order of cheese. Particularly at venues of this scale, a measure of pragmatism is inevitable: Springsteen didn't get to this place by treating a 70,000 crowd to three hours' worth of hard truths like *The Price You Pay*, however intense that might be. What he and the E Street Band do instead is corral decades of experience and imbue even the set's goofier stops with an ascetic collective power that the stadium rock experience usually negates. He also, unfailingly, mixes things up each night, takes audience requests, ad-libs setlist changes at the last minute – as here with an impromptu Backstreets. The spontaneity seems to summon a higher calibre performance.

The opening song of a Springsteen show is invariably pertinent to the time and place: hence, to stand at this historic epicentre of a continent, in the stadium built to glorify the Third Reich, and witness a grim-faced Bruce raise his guitar and slam into the simmering admonition of *Adam Raised A Cain* – "You inherit the sins, you inherit the flames" – feels unavoidably pertinent to a Europe wracked once more with turbulence and doubt. Segueing into *Badlands*, the E Street Band embody the song's exhortation to confront a "fear so real". They've played it more than a thousand times in almost 40 years, yet the

Der master Chef: (main) The E Street Band in full flow (from left) Max Weinberg, Nils Lofgren, Soozie Tyrell, Bruce Springsteen, Garry Tallent, Steve Van Zandt; (bottom row) Bruce in full flow, and with saxophonist Jake Clemons.

attack feels ever more committed, with Max Weinberg's drumming as sharp as his threads.

The mood lightens with *Out In The Street* and *Sherry Darling*, both from *The River*, the sprawling 1980 opus that is ostensibly this tour's *raison d'être*: the preceding US arena leg featured the double album played *in toto*. That concept got parked on the other side of the Atlantic, however, presumably because the desolate vistas of *The River's* latter third would be too hard a sell in stadia. Nonetheless, as they shell out for merchandise featuring Bruce as his 1980 self, Berlin fans might justifiably wonder why *The River* has now been downgraded to the extent that it's no longer even the album most represented, overtaken by half-a-dozen crowd-pleasers each from *Born To Run* and *Born In The USA*. With no *River* outtakes played either, the tour surely contravenes EU naming rights law.

Except, of course, this is E Street, a road built on revelation, where the familiar becomes fresh and the underdog has its day. There are many long-time Springsteen advocates who might struggle to nominate many keepers from his last three albums, yet both *My Lucky Day* – a Steve Van Zandt showcase – and *Wrecking Ball* are delivered with such heightened levels of taut discipline to warrant reappraisal. This latest E Street configuration benefits from dispensing with the additional horns and backing singers that began cluttering up the stage circa 2012. Jake Clemons is plenty loud enough to fill his late Uncle Clarence's boots alone, as his floor-shaking saxophone solo on an exultant *Born To Run* proves.

For most bands, delivering that mythic song would amount to an unsurpassable high, but Boss-logic defies the known parameters of physics; at almost 67, der Chef is consistently playing the longest shows of his life. Perhaps that explains the manic edge to the home stretch. Moon Mullican's *Seven Nights To Rock* crashes into *Dancing In The Dark*, then the soul saturation of *Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out* and *The Isley Brothers' Shout*, before we reach the least logical, most heroic finale a 200-minute Bruce Springsteen stadium show could have: a teary solo *Thunder Road*, daring us even to consider the madness of not showing up next time.

"WITNESS A GRIM-FACED BRUCE RAISE HIS GUITAR AND SLAM INTO A SIMMERING ADAM RAISED UP CAIN."



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