

A BENEFIT CONCERT

CHRISTIC INSTITUTE

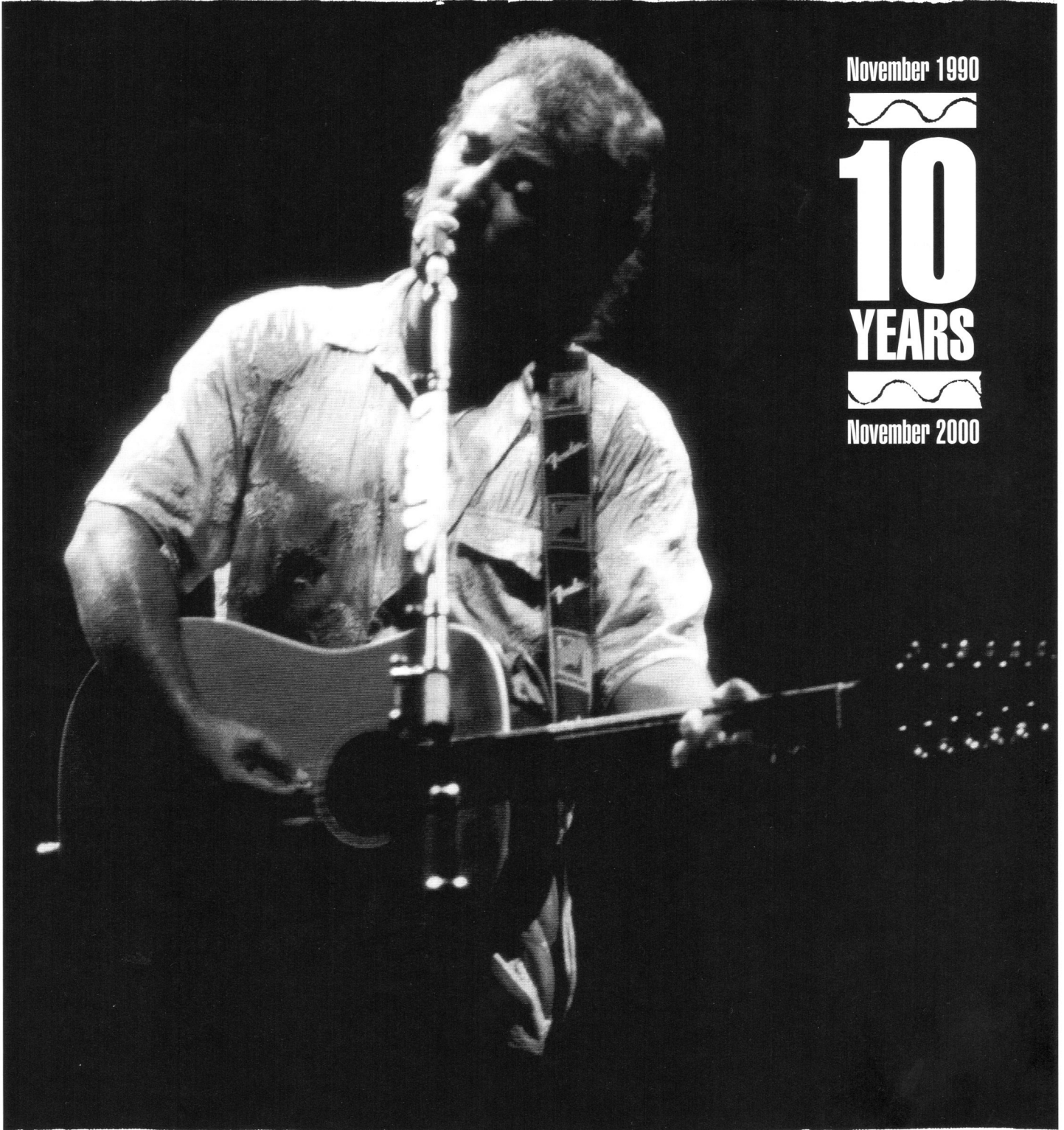
November 1990



**10
YEARS**



November 2000



**NOVEMBER 16 & 17 1990
SHRINE AUDITORIUM**

MEETING THE NEW BOSS

THE CHRISTIC SHOWS: TEN YEARS BURNING DOWN THE ROAD

JUST OVER A DECADE AGO, BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN elected to take a unique hiatus. Three years had passed since the release of perhaps his most introspective album, *Tunnel of Love*, but the artist wasn't particularly busy. The man, however, was. Springsteen got divorced, moved to Los Angeles, and told members of the E Street Band that they should "feel free to accept other offers." He started a family. The summer of 1989, which saw him blasting through guest appearances in bars and clubs in New Jersey, was a last hurrah. After that, he was gone.

By the next summer, his customary act of disappearing between professional obligations had never seemed longer, and there was no clue about a new record. But for Springsteen, music and life would cross paths that autumn. Over two nights in November, 1990, Springsteen joined Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt for concerts in Los Angeles. The trio was performing benefit shows for the Christic Institute, a self-described "interfaith center for law and public policy" (the media characterized it as a leftist organization investigating covert operations in Latin America). Excitement mounted when details of the benefit shows became known. They would take place at the Shrine Auditorium, a 6,500 seat theater, the most intimate venue Springsteen had played for a formal concert since the 1981 European tour.

Ten years later, this matched pair of 100-minute sets remain landmarks. First, the concerts were acoustic, and, moreover, solo. That was a first since Springsteen assembled (and disassembled) the E Street Band. No stranger to the occasional coffeehouse gig, he certainly played well enough on his own to impress CBS Records' talent man John Hammond in May, 1972. But this time, Bruce went a lot further.

He surprised just about everyone by playing songs on piano, a first since "The Promise" in 1978. He debuted six new songs and rearranged older ones, some drastically. Perhaps the most memorable feature was Springsteen

himself: as his first-night jitters settled, he grew reflective. He spoke about his off-stage life with unprecedented candor. He was a bit rusty, but this performer has never shied away from a challenge on stage. In the process, he made these two shows like no other in his career.

The Christic sets mark one of those rare moments in Springsteen's performance history where music collided with powerful external circumstances. And, like a chemical reaction, the result was as magical as it was fleeting. Consider other shows where music and moment intersected: the unforgettable Night for the Vietnam Veteran (August 20, 1981, Los Angeles) and opening night at Madison Square Garden last summer. In the second instance, Springsteen raised the stakes in the controversy that followed "American Skin (41 Shots)" by opening with the explosive "Code of Silence." In both cases real-life issues about which Springsteen typically wrote framed his concerts. And in both cases Springsteen played with unparalleled passion and purpose. These weren't just any stops in different towns near the end of year-long tours. Rather, they were here-and-now reminders of why Bruce Springsteen picked up a guitar in the first place.

So if Springsteen was in the process of staring down his past and imagining his future in the fall of 1990, you could pretty much count on the same sort of

intensity he had displayed at the Vets' show nine years earlier. But this time, the issues were personal. And this time, he stood alone.

The set-up was spare, and the stage was unadorned save for the piano that remained on stage after Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt finished their respective sets. Raitt, nearing a zenith in popularity, seemed particularly at home, playing a mix of originals and covers she made her own. Her easy-going grace and elegance eased an edgy audience.

The stage was dark as Springsteen strolled from the wings unannounced. After greeting the audience, he made what at the time was an unusual request: "If you're moved to clap along, please don't," he asked. "It'll mess me up." He didn't stop there. A second request was for more quiet in the hall. Sound familiar?

That was a significant contrast from his other recent acoustic appearance at the first Bridge School Benefit Concert in 1986. That concert came on the heels of *Born in the U.S.A.*, and it was, in a word, fun. In addition to new versions of "Born in the U.S.A." and "Seeds," Bruce worked the hits. In retrospect, it was appropriate to play "Hungry Heart" and "Dancing in the Dark" for the Shoreline Amphitheater audience. After all, a lot of them had probably been at the Oakland Stadium shows only a year earlier. Even if the hysteria that marked

the *Born in the U.S.A.* tour had diminished, this set primarily was a celebration of those songs. Only the format changed. And while Bruce had taken time off after the 1985 tour ended, he wasn't exactly invisible: Bruce and the E Street Band had jammed in Asbury Park, and a live album was set for release only a month after the Bridge appearance. Plus, Nils Lofgren and Danny Federici joined the fun at Shoreline, adding guitar and accordion and relieving some of the pressure of having to perform a one-off show.

But at the Shrine, Springsteen was not there to celebrate. He talked about feeling isolated, and spoke of seeking therapy when he grew puzzled about his habit of driving through his boyhood town late at night. At the second show, he discussed his experiences as a father, including an etched-in-my-mind image of how he had caught his son's first tear on the tip of his finger. They weren't lengthy revelations, but they were compelling. Bruce Springsteen was making one thing perfectly clear: He was no longer a prisoner of rock and roll.

Springsteen revealed a lot, but first he first drew a line. Early on in the opening-night set, someone in the audience took advantage of the quiet between songs to gruffly yell in a loud voice, "We love you, Bruce!"

"But you don't really know me," came the reply, a firm rebuttal delivered

November 16, 1990

Brilliant Disguise
Darkness on the Edge of Town
Mansion on the Hill
Reason to Believe
Red Headed Woman
57 Channels
My Father's House
Tenth Avenue Freeze-out¹
Atlantic City
Wild Billy's Circus Story
Nebraska
When the Lights Go Out
Thunder Road¹
My Hometown¹
The Real World¹
Highway 61 Revisited²
Across the Borderline²

November 17, 1990

Brilliant Disguise
Darkness on the Edge of Town
Mansion on the Hill
Reason to Believe
Red Headed Woman
57 Channels
The Wish
Tougher Than the Rest¹
Tenth Avenue Freeze-out¹
Soul Driver
State Trooper
Nebraska
When the Lights Go Out
Thunder Road¹
My Hometown¹
The Real World¹
Highway 61 Revisited²
Across the Borderline²

¹ on piano ² with Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt

BY JONATHAN B. PONT • PHOTOS BY DAVID DUBOIS



with a measured coolness. That could have stopped the show, and for a second the house held its collective breath. It was funny, and the audience howled, but it was also serious. Bruce wasn't kidding.

Astonishing dialogue aside, the music still took top billing. As the set progressed, it became evident that this format was not only viable, but also exciting. Here was Bruce, who had disappeared for two years, going from guitar to piano and back, from "Wild Billy's Circus Story" to "Real World" to "Nebraska." The second night, it was "Tougher Than the Rest" and a dark, stunning "Soul Driver." He made it look easy, and he sounded great. Above all, it felt raw and real. If Bruce sought significant change for his music, the solo acoustic setting allowed the freedom to do just about anything.

Here, Bruce experimented with instruments he rarely played in public: 12-string guitar and piano. The guitar seemed like a natural choice, especially since Bruce was by himself. More resonant than a six string, its low end and sustain provided tone and rhythm. Bruce not only used the 12-string for

accompaniment but also to try new styles and arrangements: "Reason to Believe" featured a slide part, and the riveting "Darkness on the Edge of Town" was all but a different song entirely.

Springsteen hadn't played the piano on stage for twelve years. So when he sat down to play, he joked that "any bad notes in this are intentional." His timing on "Tenth Avenue Freeze-out" was impeccable, from the name-that-tune intro that elicited involuntary gasps of recognition from the crowd to the giddy look he flashed as he approached the first verse. By this time, Bruce and the audience were in the groove.

In the *Songs* book, Bruce recounted that this was a time when he hadn't written much. But evidently he had been writing some: he played a half dozen new songs over the two nights. All told, they covered a pretty wide terrain, from the ribald "Red Headed Woman" to the declarative "Real World," the latter co-written with Roy Bittan (Springsteen later revealed that Bittan had played him music for which he subsequently provided lyrics).

Springsteen matched the epic reading of the haunting "My Father's House" on the first night with a moving autobiographical tribute to his mother, "The Wish," on the second night.

Together, the songs showed a man in pursuit of his craft, albeit from an entirely new point of departure. Where exactly Bruce wanted to go, no one knew. But the songs provided the only glimpse in the four-and-a-half years between *Tunnel of Love* and the simultaneously released *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*.

When those albums appeared in 1992, the Christic performances seemed more like a tryout for compositions rather than arrangements. "Real World," for example, sounded cemented down by overproduction on *Human Touch*. But in its plaintive solo arrangement, played both nights in the encore, the story emerged over simple piano chords, as Springsteen's passionate vocal filled the auditorium. The spare arrangement would later indicate how far Springsteen had gone in fleshing out his new material with new sounds and new players. "Soul Driver," vamped up for the record, appeared again on

tour in 1992 in an arrangement much closer to its Christic debut.

Only one time is a song new, and this batch made a strong impression. Looking back, "Red Headed Woman" never quite lived up to its inherent shock value after the first night; "Real World," as majestic and heartfelt as anything Springsteen ever played, became an arena anthem. The soulful band versions of 1992-93 couldn't approach the stately version Springsteen played alone at the piano.

Songs weren't the only things carried forward from these shows. It's safe to assume that these shows played a role in conceiving the solo tour in 1995. Bruce had reportedly considered an acoustic tour for *Tunnel of Love*, but elected to take to the road with a concept show where the tickets read "Bruce Springsteen, featuring the E Street Band." Where he had hinted at the more personal direction with his lone-wolf recording process for that record, and gave it the old college try with new bandmates in 1992-93, clearly Springsteen sought to create something that only he alone could

INSTITUTIONAL RESERACH

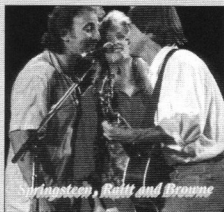
The Christic shows occurred not long after the dawn of the CD bootleg era, and tracks from both these shows have appeared on a variety of unofficial CD releases in varying degrees of quality. Amazingly, ten years down the line, there has yet to be one consummate document of Springsteen's Christic performances. The following are a listing of the best and/or more complete ones:

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN ACOUSTIC TALES

ACOUSTIC TALES (Swingin' Pig, 2CD) This release presents the complete, unedited November 16th show with 3 bonus tracks from the next night—all in the best sound quality possible—including the only high quality version of "State Trooper" to appear on CD. Downsides: the bonus tracks don't include "The Wish," the thick longbox is cumbersome, and its faux-woodgrain look in lieu of photos makes for an unattractive package. This set has also been copied as *Unplugged* on the Live Line label with even worse packaging, using a "Born in the U.S.A."-era cover shot. Duh.

SPRINGSTEEN, RAITT AND BROWNE

(Great Dane, 3CD) This release offers the sets for all three performers from the November 16th show, each on their own disc. Unfortunately, to fit the Bruce show on one disc, plenty of Bruce's between song stage-patter was edited out. Still, there is no better single release to document a nearly complete night.



Springsteen, Raitt and Browne

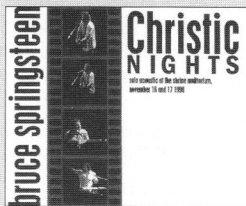
GREETINGS FROM LOS ANGELES

(FTD/Great Dane) Included with an issue of the Italian Bruce fanzine *Follow That Dream*, this is a CD-EP of five songs from the November 17th show, presented in the best sound quality available. I'm surprised "State Trooper" wasn't included here, which would have made this set a bit more desirable. Still, what is here is great.

MORE GREETINGS FROM LOS ANGELES aka THE ACOUSTIC UNRELEASED

(FTD/Great Dane) Also included in a subsequent issue of *Follow That Dream*, this is another CD-EP of six more songs from the November 17th show in best-available sound quality. This one is more desirable as it collects in one place all the then-unreleased songs played at this show: "Red-Headed Woman," "57 Channels (And Nothin' On)," "The Wish," "When The Lights Go Out," "Real World" and "Soul Driver."

THE LOST ACOUSTIC SHOW (Red Line/Postscript) Until a few years ago, this was the only release of a nearly complete November 17th show. For unexplained reasons in the cosmos, the complete second Christic show has been rather poorly documented on CD. This one is taken from what sounds like an analog dub a few generations away from the master, so the sound is not the greatest. And it's not complete.

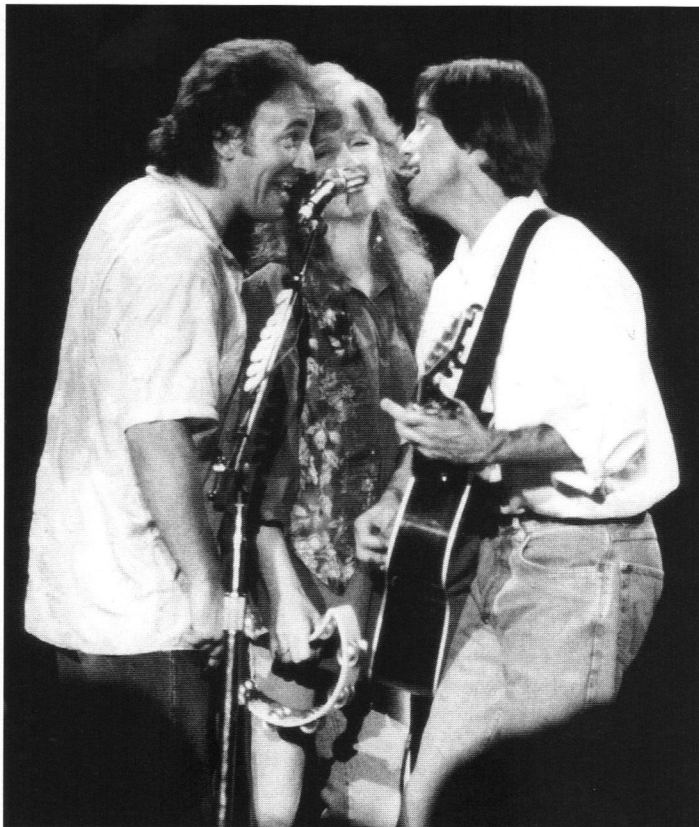


CHRISTIC NIGHTS (PurpleHayes Productions, 3CD-R) This is one of the more interesting sets: it documents Bruce's performances from both nights in their entirety and from completely different DAT sources than the other releases. The source tapes sound a bit more distant than the best sources for these shows, but they are still fine. The main sets for both nights are found on discs one and two, and the encores for both nights are on disc three. But what

makes this set stand out is that disc three also includes an MPEG video of the complete November 16th performance. The video is a bit grainy given the conversion involved but is quite enjoyable to watch. This one is not sold in stores, only traded, and as a result is very hard to find. Only around 50 original copies exist.

On the video front: as noted above, a complete video of the November 16th show is regularly traded. Unfortunately, only about 60 minutes are available for the November 17th show. The sound on both is quite acceptable, but both are taken from single hand-held camera sources in the middle of the crowd (no tripods here). The result is rather choppy video, with only audio in places. But when it's on Bruce, which is for a good portion of the show, it's gripping to watch.

—Richard Breton



communicate. What he successfully achieved on the *Tom Joad* tour was born at the Christic.

What Springsteen did those two nights in Los Angeles was to get primal, in essence going back to square one. That's an unusual place for a performer of such prominence, just a few years removed from two of the biggest albums (*Born in the U.S.A.* and *Live 1975-85*) in rock history. But in Bruce's estimation, there was no real option. "Artists with the ability to engage a mass audience are always involved in an inner debate as to whether it's worth it, whether the rewards compensate for the single-mindedness, energy, and exposure necessary to meet the demands of the crowd," Springsteen wrote in *Songs*. "Also, I felt that a large audience is, by nature, transient. If you depend on it too much, it may distort what you do and who you are." To this day, the Christic concerts bear the mark of an artist searching for the best way to move forward.

Unencumbered, Springsteen hopped-scotched from the Christic shows through a grab-bag decade. He toured for a year with a hired band behind *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, and he won Oscar and Grammy awards for the hip-hop tinged sadness of "Streets of Philadelphia." He made a record and hit the club circuit with Joe Grushecky. And throughout, of course, he recorded for a variety of his own projects.

Then in 1995, on the heels of a brief reunion with the E Street Band, Spring-

steen threw another curve. In November, he released *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. That night in New Jersey, he began a solo acoustic tour. The setting bore some similarity to that of the Christic shows, taking place in theaters holding 3,000 or so. By this time, Springsteen's direction seemed as clear as ever. He had a record and ideas about how his songs should sound when performed. He had layers of context, both in the new songs and in the older ones he chose to play. The piano stayed home, as did the songs debuted in 1990 (save for "Red Headed Woman," which appeared later in the tour). Audiences loved it, and Bruce did, too: he stayed on the road until the spring of 1997. Some, including Bruce himself, argue that it was his most successful and rewarding tour ever.

Even without the benefit of the Christic Institute shows, Bruce probably would have gotten around to something like the *Tom Joad* tour. The legacy of those two very special nights in Los Angeles is not necessarily that he figured out then and there that he could thrive in the solo acoustic format. But it didn't hurt matters, either.

The real legacy is that Bruce played intimate shows of considerable magnitude at a time music seemed to be a low priority. These two nights may have informed his future a bit, and there were moments when they had his past on the run, too. But in 1990 they primarily embraced the present, like no other time before or after. 🐉