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# BOSS

*It's Bruce Springsteen in utterly candid mode, discussing how Bush ruined America, and how he coped with recent tragedies of his own. But with a new president, the singer has a fresh optimism – hell, he even loves his local supermarket now. Exclusive interview by **Mark Hagen**. Portrait by **Ben Watts***



It's a cold winter's day, and I'm driving through snowy fields on my way to meet Bruce Springsteen. Towards the end of the 18th century, a Scottish emigré came to this part of northern New Jersey in search of a new world. He bought land, built a house for his family and settled down to the life of a farmer. The ducks and chickens are still here, but the current owner lives a very different life.

Bruce Springsteen and I struck up a friendship 10 years ago when I came to this same farm to make a film for the BBC. It's a warm, familiar place, the wood and slate of the kitchen giving way to a small recording studio and a front room decorated with photographs of Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan and the Band; the room, in fact, where Springsteen made 2006's *The Seeger Sessions* album, the musicians setting up around the sofas and on the stairs. In the parlour some of the photographs for *Devils & Dust* were taken in 2005 and just out the back is the swimming pool from which he emerged, dripping, in the dread of night for the video of *A Night With the Jersey Devil*, a spectral blues number based on a sample of Gene Vincent's 1958 single *Baby Blue* and given away as a web-based Hallowe'en surprise last year.

I've been back regularly, sometimes to revisit old ground, sometimes to talk about new projects, but always to drink beer, swap musical discoveries and speculate on life's great mysteries, like how exactly Elvis got his hair to do that quiff thing. Today I'm here as Springsteen prepares to release his 16th studio album, *Working on a Dream*, a collection of intimate songs about long-term relationships, meditations on the effects of time that come wrapped in lush, layered arrangements rooted in the 1960s of the Beach Boys, the Turtles and the Byrds.

Springsteen has seldom shied away from big themes – think back to 1975 and the way a worried post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America responded to *Born to Run*'s romantic vision of escape, or how the small-town dramas of 1984's *Born in the USA* found resonance as the Reagan era deepened the divide between have and have not. In recent years that has continued to be the case; he famously began to make 2002's *The Rising* in the wake of 9/11 after a passing stranger wound down his car window and told the singer: "We need you now." *Magic*, released

## 'I SPENT 35 YEARS SINGING ABOUT AMERICA. ON ELECTION NIGHT, IT SHOWED ITS FACE'

two years ago, was in large part a railing against the Bush era, and in November last year, Barack Obama came to see him play live and confessed to his wife that he was only running for president because he couldn't be Bruce Springsteen. He has often referred to his work as a long conversation with his audience, and it's the ability to keep that exchange going – and it is most definitely a two-way thing – that has kept him relevant, timely and firmly in place alongside Dylan, Presley and

Johnny Cash on the Mount Rushmore of American popular music.

With that in mind, plus the fact that he plays at the Super Bowl – that most American of events – on 1 February, the week after its release, it's something of a surprise that *Working on a Dream* isn't a state of the nation address, but something more personal, and a departure from his usual sound. Springsteen himself recognises this when he says: "You'll hear pieces of it in all my other records, but if you have all my other records, you don't have this – it takes it to some different place."

The Springsteen who greets me with a warm hug is in typical form, however, laughing wheezily as he recalls the time he saw the New York Dolls at Max's Kansas City in 1972, stranded in Manhattan after missing his last bus home. He asks me what I'm listening to at the moment, and carefully notes down the names of Kate Rusby and Girls Aloud for further investigation. Svelte in a black shirt over a black skull and crossbones T-shirt, he's never been the world's most eager interviewee, but he goes about it with a good grace, refining and honing his answers as meticulously as one suspects he writes his songs. Which isn't to say that he's guarded or in any way circumspect, nor does he steer clear of politics. In fact, the next couple of hours reveal a man prepared to open up about his life and work to a quite remarkable degree.

**Mark Hagen** *Working on a Dream* starts with *Outlaw Pete*, which is a very American story: a fable about a character who can't escape his past.

**Bruce Springsteen** "The past is never the past. It is always present. And you better reckon with it in your life and in your daily experience, or it will get you. It will get you really bad. It will come and it will devour you, it will remove you from the present. It will steal your future and this happens every day.

"We've lived through a nightmare like that in the past eight years here. We had a historically blind administration who didn't take consideration of the past; thousands and thousands of people died, lives were ruined and terrible, terrible things occurred because, there was no sense of history, no sense that the past is living and real.

"So the song is about this happening to this character. He moves ahead. He tries to make the right moves. He awakes from a vision of his death, and realises: life is finite. Time is with me always. And I'm frightened. And he rides west where he settles down. But the past comes back in the form of this bounty hunter, whose mind is

also quickened and burdened by the need to get his man. And these possessed creatures meet along the shores of this river where the bounty hunter of course is killed, and his last words are: 'We can't undo the things we've done.'

"In other words, your past is your past. You carry it with you always. These are your sins. You carry them with you always. You better learn how to live with them, learn the story that they're telling you. Because they're whispering your future



in your ear, and if you don't listen, it will be contaminated by the toxicity of your past."

**MH** So do you think that kind of nightmare is going to change? That to an extent America has now taken account of that?

**BS** "Yes, because, you know... the whole place practically has come crashing down. [laughs] Yes, there is severe accounting being taken of it right now. We're going through something that we haven't gone through in my life. Foreign policy, domestic policy – driven to its breaking point. Everything got broken.

"And the philosophy that was at the base of the last administration has ruined many, many people's lives. The deregulation, the idea of the unfettered, free market, the blind foreign policy. This was a very radical group of people who pushed things in a very radical direction, had great success at moving things in that direction, and we are suffering the consequences."

**MH** And are you optimistic?

**BS** "It's like this. You go out. You spend 35 years, singing your songs about a place. And you see that place in things that people are doing in their





2 November  
2008: the Obama  
family join  
Springsteen  
on stage in  
Cleveland, Ohio.

communities from city to city on a local basis. But you don't see it on a national level. Matter of fact, you see the opposite. You see the country drifting further from democratic values, drifting further from any fair sense of economic justice.

"So you work under the assumption that you have some small thing that you can do about it. You proceed under the assumption that you can have some limited impact in the marketplace of ideas about the kind of place you live in, its values and the things that make it special to you. But you don't see it. And then something happens that you didn't think you might see in your lifetime, which is that that country actually shows its face one night, on election night."

A man whose political beliefs had generally been implied rather than stated, Springsteen finally broke cover with his public support for Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004. This time he came out for Obama early, declaring him "head and shoulders above the rest" in April 2008. In October he headlined a fundraiser alongside Billy Joel and John Legend, then hit

## BRUCE ON BARACK THE CLEVELAND SPEECH

An extract from Springsteen's speech  
from the stage on 2 Nov 2008

"I spent most of my life as a musician measuring the distance between the American dream and American reality. For many... the distance between that dream and their reality has never been greater or more painful. I believe Senator Obama has taken the measure of that distance in his own life and work. I believe he understands in his heart the cost of that distance in blood and suffering in the lives of everyday Americans. I believe as president he would work to bring that dream back to life.

"So I don't know about you, but I want my country back, I want my dream back. Now is the time to stand together with Barack Obama and Joe Biden and the millions of Americans that are hungry for a new day, roll up our sleeves and come on up for the rising."

the road to play four rallies; the last of these, in Cleveland, Ohio on 2 November, saw him debuting the title track of *Working on a Dream* before bringing his entire family out on stage to stand alongside Obama's wife and daughters.

**MH** You said you had to be "peeled off the wall" after Kerry lost; what was this year like?

**BS** "Well, it was an exhilaration I've never seen after an election. And it was rooted, I think, in a recognition that this country, that so often seems buried beneath missteps and mistakes, had suddenly shown its real face."

**MH** And what about Obama himself?

**BS** "Obama's a unique figure in history. The fundamental American-ness of his story and the fact that he represents for many, many people an image and a view of the country that felt like it was so long missing in action.

"His election was an incredible moment for someone who seemed to carry, both seriously, and... not, not lightly but without great burden, enormous parts of American history with him. Enormous and painful parts.

"Somebody who can reckon with the past, ►►



who can live with the past in the present, and move towards the future – that’s fabulous. And for the country to recognise that was a wonderful moment. This place we’ve been talking about, singing about... it’s alive. It isn’t dead. It exists.

“That dynamic in my life has been a big part of staying alive. Staying present. Not fucking it up too bad at any given time. But it’s a day-to-day experience. There’s always tomorrow and, hopefully, you can use the word ‘hopefully’ now. You can live here, and use the word ‘hopefully’. So that’s pretty nice.”

**With the election won, it would seem that other things are on Springsteen’s mind.** Now approaching 60, his personal world is changing too. Much of that has been constant: he’s lived in this same part of Jersey for most of his life. His professional career has predominantly been spent with the same group of musicians, the E Street Band, and this in a world where the Beatles barely lasted a decade. He’s been with wife Patti Scialfa – herself a member of the band – for 20 years, and they have three teenage children.

Now those children are growing up and leaving home, with eldest son Evan just starting college, and in the past 18 months he’s had to endure the deaths of two close friends: personal assistant Terry Magovern and then, in April, E Street keyboardist Danny Federici, who had played with Springsteen for more than 40 years. Little surprise, then, that when talking about the themes of this new album he quotes Martin Scorsese – “The artist’s job is to make people care about your obsessions and see them and experience them as their own” – although some of those obsessions come from unlikely sources.

**MH** There’s a song on this album – Queen of the Supermarket – about a guy who has a terrible crush on a check-out girl. Where on earth did that spring from?

**BS** “They opened up this big, beautiful supermarket near where we lived. Patti and I would go down, and I remember walking through the aisles – I hadn’t been in one in a while – and I thought his place is spectacular. This place is... it’s a fantasy land! And then I started to get into it. I started looking around and hmmm – the subtext in here is so heavy! It’s like, ‘Do people really want to shop in this store or do they just want to screw on the floor?’” [laughs]

## ‘MUCH OF OUR LIFE IS SPENT RUNNING, BEING ON THE RUN. IT’S ONE OF MY SPECIALITIES’

**MH** Sometimes it’s about buying groceries, you know...

**BS** “But maybe... [laughs] maybe there’s this other thing going on. In the States they’re sort of shameless, the bounty in them is overflowing. So the sexual subtext in the supermarket; well, perhaps, it’s just twisted me.”

**MH** It must be really hard to go shopping with you.

**BS** “I’m telling you, it’s there! So I came home,

said: ‘Wow, the supermarket is fantastic, it’s my new favourite place. And I’m going to write a song about it!’ If there’s a supermarket and all these things are there, well, there has to be a queen. And if you go there, of course there is. There’s millions of them, so it’s kind of a song about finding beauty where it’s ignored or where it’s passed by.”

**MH** And does Patti still take you shopping?

**BS** “Yeah, she does [laughs]. Says, ‘Hey – what’s this one about?’”

**MH** I wouldn’t tell her if I were you... you’ve got to keep some mystery.

**BS** “It’s funny – all those great old records always seem to trail off into mystery. You always wonder, ‘What was the room like that these guys made that record in? Where they made those Sun records, what did it feel like?’ They’re surrounded with so much mystery. These days a lot of the mystery has been drained from popular music, but it still comes forth.”

**He first became enthralled by that mystery in the small town of Freehold in Jersey’s Monmouth County where he grew up the son of a bus driver and a legal secretary.** By all accounts blindsided by Elvis, and an awkward youth who could only make sense of his world through music, he chuckles when he mentions he’s recently been listening to tapes of his first band the Castiles and his face lights up at the memory:

**BS** “All the music I loved as a child, people thought it was junk. People were unaware of the subtext in so many of those records but if you were a kid you were just completely tuned in, even though you didn’t always say – you wouldn’t dare say it was beautiful. You would just say, ‘I like it. No, Dad, I like this,’ or it’s great, or it’s fun, or it’s exciting me. And those records, some of them sustained their beauty. If you listen to the great Beatle records, the earliest ones where the lyrics are incredibly simple. Why are they still beautiful? Well, they’re beautifully sung, beautifully played, and the mathematics in them is elegant. They retain their elegance. So you’re trying to write elegantly also. I was interested in that kind of a creative pull, and that’s not the stream that runs on top through your farm, it’s the stream where it disappears underground.”

**MH** Kingdom of Days has the best line on the record – “I don’t see the summer as it wanes,

just the subtle change of light upon your face.”

**BS** “It’s a line about time and I’m old enough to worry about that a little bit. Not too much but a little bit [laughs]. And at certain moments time is

obliterated in the presence of somebody you love; there seems to be a transcendence of time in love. Or I believe that there is. I carry a lot of people with me that aren’t here any more. And so love transcends time. The normal markers of the day, the month, the year, as you get older those very fearsome markers... in the presence of love – they lose some of their power.”

**MH** That’s true...

**BS** “But it also deals with the deterioration of



your physical body. It drifts away, it’s just a part of your life. But beauty remains. It’s about two people and you visit that place in each other’s face. Not just the past and today, but you visit the tomorrows in that person’s face now. And everybody knows what that holds.”

**MH** And recently that’s the thing that you’ve had to deal with that you haven’t really had to deal with before, which is the death of people your age that have been close to you...

**BS** “It’s in most great rock music, you know. Because the impact of so many great records, immediately tells you, ‘Oh, there’s something else, my friend!’ The desperate presentness of so much great rock music, the life force in it, it’s a ranting against the other thing.

“The mythology is always mixed. The skulls, crossbones, death’s head. It’s ever-present. I hear death in all those early Elvis records, in all those early, spooky blues records. And in records made by young kids – it’s in Thunder Road. A sense of time and the passage of time, the passage of innocence. It cuts through all popular music but in this record, it comes more to the surface.”



Above: with wife Patti Scialfa last year, and in 2007 with E Street Band stalwart Danny Federici, who died in 2008. Left: a classic pose in LA in 1975.

**MH** Well, The Last Carnival is obviously for, if not about, Danny Federici...

**BS** "It started out as a way of making sense of his passing. He was a part of that sound of the boardwalk the band grew up with and that's something that's going to be missing now."

**MH** Does writing something like that help you process it yourself?

**BS** "Maybe. I don't know. You know, uh... on one hand it's just a song."

**MH** It's never just a song, Bruce...

**BS** "You know, he's the first guy we ever lost. The thing I've been proudest about for a long time was that unlike many other bands, our band members, they lived. They lived and that was something that was a group effort; it was something that we did together. The surviving part. People did watch the other person. And it was a testament to the life force that I think was at the core of our music – that nobody gave up on you. And that lasted a long time. People got pulled out of a lot of holes. And I would include myself, in different ways over many, many different years."

If nothing else, time tells us that a lot of rock

stars struggle with the ageing process. One of the tragedies of Presley's life was that he was the first of those stars and back then the job didn't come with a road map. Thirty-six years after he released his first album, it's obvious that Springsteen does have a map, one he drew himself and studied carefully. He has a clear vision of the future, saying: "All I'm trying to do now is get music to my audience that is relevant to the times we're living in and to the times in their lives," and in difficult times his thoughts are on what endures.

**MH** That sense of survival – or maybe not – is also in the title song you wrote for the film *The Wrestler*, where your friend Mickey Rourke plays a man who's washed up, whose career is ending. How do you write something like that?

**BS** "It's the old job of putting yourself in somebody else's shoes, while you've got a foot in your own shoe. And that's how it works. I'm grounding this song in something I've experienced myself, that I believe I can write about."

"Everybody understands damage by the time they're 12 years old. Most of what you write

comes from that point in time, and before. Your life narrative, the inner geography that you are going to have to make your way through is quite firmly set pretty early on.

"And that was a song about damage, about what it does to somebody with the inability to get in to normal life. The inability to stand the things that nurture you. Because much of our life is spent running. We're running, we're on the run; one of my specialities.

"You can find your identity in the damage that's been done to you. Very, very dangerous. You find your identity in your wounds, in your scars, in the places where you've been beat up and you turn them into a medal. We all wear the things we've survived with some honour, but the real honour is in also transcending them.

"Everybody has experience with those things, but if you live in them, it's a very dangerous life, and it's going to be a very hard and unsatisfying one. And that's a daily choice. In my own life I've built a lot, but... I don't kid myself?"

**MH** Do you still feel like that 12-year-old?

**BS** "Of course. There is no part of yourself that you leave behind; it can't be done. You can't remove any part of yourself, you can only manage the different parts of yourself. There's a car, it's filled with people. The 12-year-old kid's in the back. So's the 22-year-old. So is the 40-year-old. So is the 50-year-old guy that's done pretty well, so's the 40-year-old guy that likes to screw up. So's the 30-year-old guy that wants to get his hands on his wheel and put the pedal to the metal, and drive you into a tree.

"That's never going to change. Nobody's leaving. Nobody's getting thrown out by the roadside. The doors are shut, locked and sealed, until you go into your box. But who's driving makes a really big difference about where the car is going. And if the wrong guy's at the wheel, it's crash time. You want the latest model of yourself at the wheel, the part of you that's sussed some of this out and can drive you someplace where you want to go.

"The artists people are interested in have something eating at them. Those are the guys they're interested in. Elvis. What was eating at that guy? Why did he have to sing like that and move like that? Jerry Lee Lewis, what was eating at him, what was eating at Hank Williams? Johnny Lydon. Something was.

"So the idea is: how do you manage that thing that's eating at you, without letting it eat you? 'Cause that's what it wants to do. The thing that's eating at you, wants to eat you. And so your life is... how do you keep that from happening? That's a pretty interesting story too, and that's what a lot of my records are about, maybe all of them. So now, you know – my records and the music and everything are me attempting to keep from being eaten." He laughs. "As best as I can." **OMM**

*Mark Hagen's Springsteen On Songwriting is on Radio 2, Saturday 24 January at 7pm. Working on a Dream is released by SonyBMG on 26 January*

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