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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: November 19, 2010 04:16 PM

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Music: Bruce Springsteen's Boxed Set -- The DVD Review

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Bruce Springsteen's new boxed set (\$119.98; Columbia) is manna for hardcore fans like myself. You get a newly remastered edition of *Darkness On The Edge Of Town*, the album that established Springsteen as a serious artist and a grown-up. Then there's the two CD set *The Promise*, the "outtakes" from the sessions for *Darkness* that provided enough great music for two more albums. This is the road not taken, powerful catchy stuff that would have cemented his commercial appeal. But until *Born In The USA* Springsteen ran in the opposite direction whenever success reared its head. That's why Patti Smith got "Because The Night" and the Pointer Sisters (!) got "Fire" and Springsteen kept "Adam Raised A Cain." It all comes in a boxed set that is oversized (which I hate) but for a purpose: the case holding the discs is also a reproduction of one of the many notebooks Springsteen filled to overflowing with song lyrics, sometimes including endless variations on a particular song until he got it just right. It's a blast to pore over.

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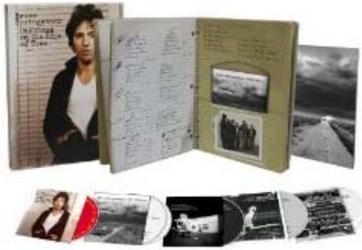
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Almost every review talks about his classic album and the bonus CDs with a brief mention at the end of the three DVDs in this boxed set. I'm going to focus on the DVDs. DVD one contains *The Promise: The Making Of Darkness On The Edge Of Town*, directed by Thom Zimny. It's a delight, filled with classic archival footage. I'm intrigued by the idea that Springsteen was wary of fame but also let a film crew into his rehearsals for days and weeks on end. The movie features in-depth interviews with all the band members as well as Springsteen's once estranged manager Mike Appel. Locked in a court battle over control of his career, Bruce was kept out of the studio for literally years after the titanic success of *Born To Run*, which landed him on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*. The film captures well the tension of the times, how two or three years between albums was an eternity back then.

This happened, ironically, when the music was pouring out of him. As Steven Van Zandt says, before this album they just came up with the next 10 or 12 good songs and then recorded them. But instead of coming up with about ten songs, like he did for *Born To Run* (ultimately including only eight), this time he was writing more than 70 songs, an explosion of ideas. Every artist has to believe they're going to change the world and rewrite the rules to achieve greatness. In one of the quotes that jumps out at you, Springsteen says that at the time, more than fame and wealth, more than happiness, he wanted to be great. They describe tossing out great songs that just didn't fit the album, crafting a coherent idea from beginning to end, ignoring commerce for the sake of art as if they were the very first people in the history of the world to do so. Toss aside a great song just because it didn't fit? Crazy. Of course, anyone who has heard the Bob Dylan bootlegs or seen how the Beatles came up with their albums know Bruce wasn't inventing the wheel. But it's fascinating to see how they had to believe they were to stay passionate and committed.

You really feel like you're in the studio with them, thanks to a lot of footage that shows them bickering and discussing songs, Springsteen spending hours and hours trying to get the right drum sound, the band teasing him by placing bets on what song he was going to take off the album that day or the length of the tracks. (4:45 sounded like a winner.) As Springsteen sits alone discussing those days, he is thoughtful as always. It seems like the more sincere and earnest he gets, the more likely he is to look down and away, not making eye contact with the interviewer or the camera, as if he's almost afraid to speak that loftily about what he was trying to accomplish. It's a fascinating film, though not one to draw in a lot of new fans. It should be enjoyable to anyone but will surely resonate most with those already baptized into the faith.

The second DVD is my favorite. it contains *Thrill Hill Vault Houston '78 Bootleg: House Cut*. It's a raucous three hour show -- the band had finally been released from purgatory and was out on the road doing what they do best. It's not in any way a remarkable or stand-out show. It's what you probably would have seen anywhere along the way: three hours of hellaciously entertaining rock and roll by the best live band in the world. From the opener "Badlands" to the don't-you-dare-sit encore featuring a Detroit medley, "Tenth Avenue Freeze Out" and more, it's a delight.

Strangely, Springsteen is a legendary live act but has rarely been caught well on film. It began with the faux live video for "Dancing In the Dark," directed by Brian De Palma, not the most musical of film directors to begin with. Springsteen seemed stiff and fake, the utter opposite of him in real life on stage. The boxed set *Live 1971-1985* was great, but that was audio only. Every time he's done a concert film, like the one in New York or the one in Dublin (or Barcelona or London), it's been a relentlessly tiresome barrage of cut-cut-cuts to create excitement in the editing when the last thing a Springsteen show needs is help to generate power. Give any director today 15 cameras and by god, he's going to use them. It's the curse of most concert films, though exceptions like *Stop Making Sense* by the Talking Heads prove it still can be done with artistry. But not for Springsteen, who is whipsawed from camera to camera.

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Happily, this relatively primitive recording in 1978 only had a few cameras. And though the director cuts between them far more than say the artistry on display in *The Last Waltz* or *Jazz On A Summer's Day*, they're a lot more likely to stay with a song and not feel the need to exploit eight different angles on every single tune. So this is much, much closer to the experience of sitting in the audience and seeing his show in person. The image stays still long enough to let the performers create the moment, not the camera. It's a treat and easily the best Springsteen concert film I've seen to date.

The final DVD has a grab-bag of stuff, some of it also sensational for hardcore fans. The first batch is called *Thrill Hill Vault 1976-1978*. It begins with two rehearsals in someone's house in Holmdel, New Jersey in 1976. Springsteen is shirtless and swaggering, having fun as they work through the songs "Save My Love" and "Candy's Boy" (an early version of "Candy's Room") and then another tune -- "Something In The Night" at Red Bank. You literally feel like you're hanging out with the guys, watching them work their way towards greatness. Whoever is shooting the footage just has one camera, thank God, so they stay focused on one person at a time, maybe panning from Steven Van Zandt back to Bruce as it gets. Fly on the wall stuff.

Then comes four songs recorded live in the studio in New York City in 1978. I've no idea what happened on the first number, "Don't Look Back." It's utterly different than the rest, filled with all sorts of cuts and edits, like any mishmash number recorded today. Maybe they just cut together a bunch of footage from the session and kept the audio track to make it all seem to be happening at the same moment. It's of course far less satisfying emotionally and artistically than the rest. The heart-stopping moment here is getting to watch Springsteen sit at the piano and play "Candy's Room" as he works through the lyrics and gives the others a sense of what it is. It's like getting to watch Lennon and McCartney sit down with an acoustic guitar and audition their latest tunes for George Martin. (If only such footage existed.) Otherwise, it's just one camera, which in one song moves from musician to musician just as if you were in the room looking around. Artless, simple and again, much more fun than any concert he's recorded in the past 20 years.

Then we get five songs from a Phoenix show in 1978 that produced the footage (I believe) for the music video MTV ran over and over for "Rosalita (Come Out Tonight)." It's a well-light, raucous show and while the editing is getting a little more fast-paced it's not out of control quite yet

Finally, we get a 2009 performance of the entire *Darkness On The Edge Of Town* album in order at the Paramount Theatre in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Like the documentary film, it's directed by Thom Zimny, but here he squanders a golden opportunity. This is a rehearsal of sorts -- just the band performing the album without an audience. They're focused and tight and ready to prove the album and the band are both as relevant and fiery as ever -- Springsteen wanted music that was rebellious but ready to own up to its responsibilities, which is one reason it carries such conviction. It was meant to be played by adults and it shows.

But of course, this being today, instead of a few well-placed cameras or cinematographers encouraged to find a great angle and stick with it, all we get is cut-cut-cut throughout the set. The edits are so absurd both musically and emotionally it'll drive you nuts. They cut in the middle of lines, sometimes even in the middle of a word or phrase and for no apparent purpose. Since there's no audience, Zimny was presumably even freer to place cameras anywhere he wanted without fear of blocking the sight line of a fan. They could have been as close and intimate as they wanted. But you'd be hard-pressed to see any visual difference between this and any other concert film done with an audience. The band sounds great of course. But oh, what might have been.

Any time I think of Springsteen on film, I think of the *No Nukes* concert. Springsteen is on stage and right behind him is this red spotlight that bleeds out all around him. There's one camera and it's focused tight on him as he begins to tell the story of "The River" and then sing that brilliant song. Springsteen is rooted to the spot but when he moves just a little to the left or the right, that red light fills up the screen so you can barely see him at times. But the camera stays right there and the director doesn't cut away for the longest time and it's one of the most magnetic things you'll ever see.

It's out of character for Springsteen to not have released the remastered *Darkness* CD on its own already. It's not even scheduled for release that I can see, when at most there should have been maybe a week or two when only the people who could shell out for the entire box got the album as well. Right now you can buy the two CD set of *The Promise*, which is like a great lost Springsteen album. And presumably at some point soon you'll be able to get the *Darkness* CD. But for hardcore fans, the three DVDs contain a wealth of material they'll soak up. And anyone wondering how to capture a great artist on film can learn a lot by seeing how much more gripping and involving it is to simply let the artist perform. Constant cutting is



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like refusing to use a wide shot when Fred Astaire is dancing. It's a lot more exciting to see him do his stuff than it is to cut cut cut and ruin the beauty of his skill. The same is true for rock and roll. Happily, you'll find enough accidental and intentional examples of that here, along with the best live concert film of Springsteen to date. It puts to shame all the more elaborate efforts that have come out in recent years. No fan will want to miss it.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs to consider for review. He typically does not guarantee coverage and invariably receives far more screeners and DVDs than he can cover each week. Also, Michael Giltz freelances as a writer of DVD copy (the text that appears on the back of DVDs) for some titles released by IFC and other subsidiaries of MPI. It helps pay the rent, but does not obligate him in any way to speak positively or negatively of their titles.

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Bruce made it possible to believe that we could find meaning, feel love and snatch pleasure from pain. The gospels of contemporary culture have similar messages but are delivered with whimsy, finesse and media savvy.

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traveler291 09:16 AM on 12/21/2010

11 Fans

probably because it wasn't filmed, but the "winterland" show (dec. 15, '78) would have made this box an even greater holiday treat. the west coast radio simulcast produced by jimmy iovine is probably the greatest live recording ever made, bootleg or otherwise.

i saw five shows on the darkness tour and none of that recording strife was shown...when e-street hit the stage it was nothing but fun. if it wore them out any putting darkness together, it was payback time by wearing the audience out...and they proved it all night, every night.

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FoxNude 07:29 PM on 11/22/2010

8 Fans

Mine just came today with a t-shirt and poster.Can't wait to go home and indulge. I saw him on this tour in 1978.

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Woochifer 04:34 PM on 11/22/2010

1 Fans

Quite an astounding collection. IMO, Darkness is Springsteen's most enduring album (and most relevant to current times), and it's great to see the burst of creativity that accompanied that album more fully documented in this set.

Gotta note though that the Houston concert has its own moments of cinematic cheese, with the overlapping video transitions and Wayne's Worldeesque back-forth camera zooming that give away its late-70s origins (IMO, this is a lot more annoying than the quick-cut editing that prevails today).

It's great though that we get a complete concert from the Darkness tour, which is really when the E Street Band started to find their voice. The playing is focused and forceful, but still loose and raw. The band is not as tentative as the 1975 Hammersmith Odeon concert that accompanied the Born to Run boxset.

In terms of the playing and presentation, I give the nod to the Phoenix concert footage. This set includes 35 minutes of footage from that concert, and I wonder why that the Houston show was chosen over the Phoenix concert. (Bootlegs of the Phoenix show have been circulating for years, so the footage exists somewhere)

For one thing, the Phoenix concert was recorded using film cameras, which show much higher resolution than the primitive video cameras used to shoot the Houston concert. This is especially apparent on Blu-ray, which shows the Promise documentary, closed rehearsal, and other filmed footage in their high def glory.

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Estreet1964 05:38 PM on 11/23/2010

245 Fans



Apparently, due to the expense involved, only those five songs were filmed and not the entire concert.

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RobBlack 04:21 PM on 11/22/2010

37 Fans

Still impossible to believe that the music on "Born to Run" earned him the front cover of TIME and Newsweek. Unfortunately says far more about the magazines' proclivity for sensationalism than it does about the greatness of Springsteen's music. As the next 7 or so years would bear out, the Boss could not measure up with phenomenal music emanating from the various pop genres of time.

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Estreet1964 05:37 PM on 11/23/2010

245 Fans



How many stadiums have those people who were making the "phenomenal music emanating from the various pop genres of time" sold out lately?

Are any of them even selling out little clubs in strip malls in Podunk?

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argentino 11:07 AM on 11/22/2010

259 Fans



"Factory", "Backstreets", "Racing In The Street" & "Stolen Car" are my favorite Bruce songs (this will, of course change tomorrow)

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ktano0 04:35 PM on 11/21/2010

10 Fans

Thanks for a great review, and thank you for the critique of how the usual concert is filmed. I remember when I was a mere lad, learning to play guitar. I was really trying hard to get my lead technique, but had hit an impasse. I believe I was watching the old Merv Griffin show with BB King as guest. As luck would have it, the director kept the camera dead-on BB's left hand for quite awhile. Seeing what he was doing was an epiphany! In the time it took Mr. King to play "The Thrill Is Gone", I was on my way to guitar heaven. Of course, music was presented better on TV then than now.

Why show someone playing drums or keyboard or worse yet a pimply-faced teen gawking at the stage when someone is playing a burning lead, or singing their heart out. Show the performance, for god's sake. Sure, I don't mind seeing the audience (some of the McCartney DVD's use that technique really well.) But we all don't have ADD. Show the player, playing.

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KayoFrisco 01:32 PM on 11/21/2010

2 Fans

My first Bruce concert was 12/16/78 at Winterland, the night "Fire" was recorded for the 1975-1985 Box Set. That was about a week after the Houston show. Seeing The Boss on my home town stage where I saw many other greats was unbelievable. I had never before or since seen an artist with as much energy, and stamina. Some people first thought the show was so good that it was over after the first set. We were surprised to hear him say he would be back to "drive us insane", and he did. I became a raving fan that night and tried to convince others who had not yet seen him that Bruce was for real. The scales fell from my eyes on that old balcony when I saw the true savior of Rock and Roll. That final month at Winterland I also saw Van Morrison, The Tubes and The Ramones, plus the last night with The Grateful Dead, The Blues Brothers, and "breakfast served at dawn". That Bruce concert stands out as a memory I cherish for life.

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Michael Giltz 06:05 PM on 11/22/2010
59 Fans



Wow. What a lineup of artists to see in a month. Doesn't get any better than that. Thanks for sharing your memories.

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robiform 05:03 PM on 11/20/2010
81 Fans



I have a bootleg videotape of the 1978 Phoenix concert, portions of which are on the third DVD of this package. It's great that finally, footage from some of those concerts of the "Darkness" tour is getting to see the light of day legally! I practically wore out my videotape watching the concert!

I don't have a problem with the covers of "Fire" and "Because the Night" by the Pointer Sisters and Patti Smith, respectively; their interpretations of those songs are classic. But I never have liked Manfred Mann's cover of "Blinded by the Light", and when it comes on the oldies station, I hit the "change" button! (Apologies to any Manfred Mann fans out there!)

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jcop815 03:11 PM on 11/20/2010

8 Fans [Follow](#)

I bought this and it is a brilliant box set. It's great packaging with the only negative I have of it is that it's difficult to put the notebook back into its case. The contents in both the DVDs and the CDs are above par with some of the stuff that other musicians are doing with their box sets. It's 100% worth the money. I also have to point out that while I like Darkness, his magnum opus, Born to Run, did not receive as great packaging for its reissue. Now I just wish that Springsteen can go back in time and redo his Born to Run and make it as superior as this box set

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sufi66 04:07 PM on 11/20/2010

289 Fans

"Born to Run, did not receive as great packaging"

Probably because it wasn't released for Xmas product reasons.

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Woochifer 04:58 PM on 11/22/2010

1 Fans

Really?

Born to Run: 30th Anniversary Edition release date: November 14, 2005
The Promise: The Making of Darkness On The Edge of Town release date:
November 16, 2010

So, something released on November 14th does not have the same "Xmas product reasons" as something released two days after?

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Woochifer 04:54 PM on 11/22/2010

1 Fans

That won't happen. My understanding is that a total of 10 songs were written for Born to Run, 8 of which wound up on the album. There's just not that much material, outside of what's already included in the 30th anniversary boxset, that can be put into yet another boxset.

In contrast, I've read that about 70 songs were written during the Darkness sessions, only 10 of which made it onto the album. Even with the 21 newly released songs from The Promise, more than half of the songs from the Darkness sessions are still unavailable (not counting those that eventually wound up on The River or on bootlegs).

I would hope that a definitive boxed set for Born In The USA is coming up next. Here too, Springsteen wrote and recorded about four albums worth of material. Some of what didn't get included on the album wound up on B-sides or the Tracks set, but much of it is still unreleased. I suspect that some of these songs might surprise us in much the same way that songs on The Promise contrast with what's on Darkness.

If your gripe is just about the packaging, then I would concur. I hate that the Born to Run and Darkness sets are entirely different sizes and don't fit in my CD storage unit. Sony/Columbia have done some phenomenal boxed sets (I'm thinking of the Miles Davis sets) that will actually fit in with the rest of my CD library.

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Michael Giltz 06:11 PM on 11/22/2010
59 Fans



Hey jcop and woochifer,

I'm a big stickler on boxed sets being bulky etc. You're absolutely right about the notebook being hard to put back into the case and how annoying it is not to fit alongside the others. I did appreciate that unlike most bulky annoying boxed sets this was the size and shape it was for a purpose: the duplication of the notebooks he wrote in at the time. So I gave it a break in this one instance but fully agree with you too.

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sufi66 02:40 PM on 11/20/2010

289 Fans

Mostly second rate stuff released for Xmas. Avoid. Cherish the memories of the Darkness-River live shows before he sold out to play the big stadiums, which he once "promised" he would never do. He also said he would never write "married" music either, then put the wife in the band for no real musical purpose.

He's still a great legend but the luster has worn somewhat. Hasn't written a great song for a long time.

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jtd67 11:00 AM on 11/21/2010

0 Fans

Yes, his focus changed over the years, but to be fair, Patti Scialfa was a professional singer who he hired long before he married her..

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sufi66 11:08 AM on 11/21/2010

289 Fans

She's not quite useless Yoko, but she's a backup singer, a dime a dozen. She literally married the boss.

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JasonM 01:55 PM on 11/20/2010

4 Fans

Thanks for writing this, I've been looking for reviews of the dvds,most just focus on the outtakes. When I first heard about the box set, the Houston concert was what interested me the most.

Sounds like great footage.

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sufi66 02:55 PM on 11/20/2010

289 Fans

"the Houston concert"

Yes but the rest isn't worth it.

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theothersideofsilence 09:58 AM on 11/22/2010

36 Fans

Having fun with your pot stirring? I just figured you out. Sad, really.

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Woochifer 05:30 PM on 11/22/2010

1 Fans

The concert itself is great. You can really sense the ascension of the E Street Band in this full length concert.

The review though doesn't make note of the spotty picture quality (typical of anything shot on video tape during the 70s), which has a lot of ghosting and visible scan lines. The review also gripes about the quick-cut editing of today's concert videos, but doesn't mention some of the cheesy oh-so-70s video effects (again, typical of concert footage shot during that period) used in the Houston footage.

As noted earlier, I just wonder why the Phoenix concert wasn't used instead. The boxset includes 35 minutes from that concert. IMO, the Phoenix performances, audio mix, and editing are better. And the Phoenix concert was shot on film, so it looks a lot better on Blu-ray.

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Michael Giltz 06:24 PM on 11/22/2010

59 Fans



Hey, I did call it "primitive" at least. That's certainly a tip-off that this isn't the Rolling Stones in IMAX. I agree that the artistry isn't high on the film, just that given the time they did less cutting and crazy effects and given the fewer cameras they just didn't have the ability to go crazy like they would today. The result is a relatively better experience, but as you say it's certainly not high fidelity or a great picture. The Phoenix footage does look great. The reason they didn't use it is the usual blinkered mentality. When it comes to live recordings of Bruce, their record of what to release and when has been absurd for decades.

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