

MY BEST BUDDY Steve Walter (today the owner of the Cutting Room nightclub in New York) and I first saw Bruce Springsteen appear live on stage in early 1972 at the local area Jewish Community Center in Deal, N.J., located just a few blocks from Steve's house. After seeing an orange-colored flyer there promoting an upcoming show by "Bruce Spring-STEIN" for \$1.50, Steve and I purchased our tickets out of curiosity—we never had heard of him before. Plus, we assumed since his last name was Jewish, it would be kind of cool to see a fellow "Yehudi" play rock and roll. I'm sure today that misspelled flyer would be a collector's item.

Steve and I sat in the first row of the JCC's auditorium in folding metal chairs. Bruce and his group (not yet called the E Street Band) played incredibly loud. According to Steve's memory, they played Bruce's early, original material, but not yet songs from "Greetings from Asbury Park." The band screeched so loudly I couldn't stand it. I left after maybe four songs. I clearly remember walking home from that show, thinking how bad that music was.

Exactly one year later, Bruce and his band were booked to perform at the Sunshine Inn—the small, now defunct rock concert hall in Asbury Park, N.J., where Steve and I worked as stage managers during our high school years during the early 1970s. While Steve and I spent many hundreds of hours working at The Inn, both with stage crew and stage lighting, I, independently of Steve, also worked occasionally in the front office, answering phones and selling tickets.

I happened to be at The Inn alone when Bruce showed up to rehearse. I was on the phone with someone asking about ticket prices for his two upcoming shows on Feb. 10, 1973 (\$3.50 for the 7:30 p.m. performance, and \$4.50 for the 10:30 p.m. show), when I heard a knock on the front office door. Finishing my call, I opened the door to see a scraggly-haired, very skinny guy holding a guitar case in one hand and the hand of a pretty brunette wearing purple stockings in the other. Not recognizing the man I'd seen perform on stage one year earlier, I asked, "Are you Bruce Springsteen?" He replied, "Yeah, man, that's me."

We shook hands, but I was more impressed with the purple-colored legs of his girlfriend than with him. I led the pair through the front office and up the short staircase leading to the stage inside the hall. Next, Steve and the rest of Bruce's band members arrived. Together, we all unloaded their truck and carried their amplifiers, drums, and keyboards onto the stage. The band at that time was comprised of Danny Federici on organ, Garry W. Tallent on bass, Vinnie Lopez on drums, and Clarence Clemons—who had just joined—on saxophone. Clarence showed up late: "Sorry guys, I just got outta jail. I was late on child support."

Once everything was set up, Steve and I stood on the stage while Bruce and the band

performed their first song during rehearsal: "Six-Eight-Four-Five-Seven-Eight-Nine"—a tune about a phone number. Later, Bruce was experimenting with the volume control knob on his guitar, making his instrument sound like a violin. Steve and I never had seen anyone do that before and, as a guitarist himself, Steve was impressed. In rehearsal, Bruce and his band performed several other tunes (lost to my memory) before saying, "Okay, sounds pretty

the backstage hallway and past the front office to exit the building. Steve and I were in the office at the time, and as he passed, Steve yelled out, "Hey Bruce, what'd you think of the light show?" Springsteen stopped walking for a second, took a good look at Steve, then a good look at me. Smiling, he replied, "You cats were incredible!"—and just like that, he vanished, like a "Spirit in the Night."

Just a few days later, Steve somehow heard

In the Beginning . . .

BY DAN HARARY

A Hollywood publicist recalls when Bruce Springsteen tickets went for as little as a buck-fifty and The Boss got around by hitchhiking.

good. That's a wrap." Bruce and the band split, and Steve and I rode our bicycles back home.

The next day (concert day), the owner of the Sunshine Inn, "Bob Fischer"—a short, stout, obnoxious man with a bad temper renowned for not paying his bills—showed up in a Cadillac, having driven to Asbury Park from his home in Queens. When Fischer realized that only 200 total tickets had been sold for both of Bruce's two separate shows, he decided that Bruce would do only one show at 10:30 p.m. for all the ticket buyers. No one complained that I recall. At capacity, the Sunshine Inn held about 2,000 people. The 200 people who appeared for Bruce's show that night made the hall look virtually empty.

Steve decided to run the lighting board inside the stage pit, while I ran the trouper/spotlight that was located midway through the venue, atop the left side bleachers. Bruce and his band performed his entire first album, "Greetings from Asbury Park." Having never before in my life heard music like this ("Madman Drummers, Bumpers, and Indians in the Summer, with a Teenage Diplomat" from "Blinded by the Light"), I had no idea what he was singing about. His music sounded completely Martian to me. I had no connection to any of his material and could barely understand his words.

After a 90-minute concert, Bruce, *et al.* went backstage for cold drinks. Then Bruce, with his purple-legged gal pal in tow, walked through

through the grapevine that Bruce and his band would be rehearsing for an upcoming concert at Monmouth College, only a few miles from Steve's house. Steve and I rode our bikes over to the school's auditorium, then entered and walked up some bleachers to watch the rehearsal. While I, again, was no fan of Bruce or his music, Steve had gotten "bitten by The Boss," and was excited to watch him play once more. I was bored to tears during this rehearsal, but Steve seemed to be having a good time.

During a band break, Clarence Clemons (may he rest in peace) walked up the bleachers to where Steve and I were sitting. He stood directly in front of us. "Hey, would you guys be interested in working as our road crew? We're going down to Washington, D.C., next week, and we could use some help." Steve and I looked at each other in amazement. I then turned to face the soon-to-become globally iconic sax man and said, "Clarence, we're only 16; we don't even drive yet. Besides that, I'm pretty sure our fathers want us to go to college." Clarence paused. He took a long stare into Steve's face and then into mine and said, "Okay, that's cool. I understand." He turned and walked back down the bleachers to rejoin the band on the small auditorium's stage.

Was that the lucky break in life that Steve and I turned down? Of course, with Bruce becoming a living legend just two years later with the release of "Born to Run," Steve and I, had we accepted the offer—and killed our fathers



by not going to college—could have seen the world, had sex with countless groupies, and become part of rock and roll history. We’d also have become deaf and hunchbacked, having had to schlep heavy equipment around the world for the next 50 years.

During Bruce’s show at the Sunshine Inn, Steve and I met Carl “Tinker” West, who was Bruce’s first manager. Tinker hired Steve and me to run the spotlights at a concert he was producing at the Long Branch (N.J.) Armory—about 15 minutes north of Asbury Park—a few weeks later. The night we worked that show, Bruce showed up—along with drummer Vinnie Lopez and a girl in a remarkably short miniskirt—and hung out at the front of the auditorium with Tinker. Bruce waved to Steve and me while we were precariously positioned high up on a raised—and rather shaky—lighting scaffold.

Several months after his show at the Sunshine Inn, Bruce was performing solo—just him and his guitar on a stool—inside the Student Prince bar, directly across the street from The Inn. Admission was one dollar. Steve and me were at The Inn that night, cleaning up and hanging out with Fischer, when someone came in and told him that Bruce was at The Prince. Fischer invited Steve and me to cross the street with him to see the show. What’s interesting to note here is that this was a bar, and Steve and I were only 16 years old. Fischer had a beer, Steve and I had sodas, and we watched Bruce’s

acoustic show. We sat about five feet in front of him. There were maybe 20 people in the room, probably less.

When he took a break, Bruce hopped off the tiny stage, and walked up to Fischer to say hello. “Bruuucie, baby,” Fischer said in his most obnoxious, guttural, salesman pitch. “Lemme be your manager, kid. I wanna represent you.” Bruce looked at Steve and me, kind of smiled (a wink maybe?) and replied, “Thanks for the offer, man, but I’m okay. I’m with Tinker, but thanks anyway.”

Summer of 1973: My mother dropped me off at West End Beach (Long Branch, N.J.) for the day to sunbathe and swim. I sat on a towel, alone. Once I’d set myself up to relax, I glanced up the sand about 20 feet behind me to see Springsteen sitting, alone, on his towel. He seemed to be staring into space (and was probably orchestrating “Jungleland”). For the next two hours, Bruce Springsteen and I, and almost no one else for miles, sat on that beach, separate and alone. Even though I’d already met him and had been within his orbit for months earlier that year, I simply had no interest in him. (Hard to believe now, I know, but sadly true.) He saw me. I saw him. A quick nod, maybe?

I will add that in those days I was very shy and since he was seven years older than me, I wouldn’t have felt comfortable walking up to him to talk, even if I had enjoyed his music. I will say that had Steve been there with me that

day, it’s likely the three of us would have spent the afternoon together.

When my mother returned to pick me up and take me home, we had driven about a quarter-mile from the beach when I saw Bruce hitchhiking on the side of the road. He was holding a guitar with one hand, and the other featured a prominent hitchhiker’s thumb. “Hey Mom,” I said as we passed him, “see that guy over there? His name is Bruce Springsteen. He thinks he’s a rock star!” My mother and I chuckled as we simply drove on by.

Do I regret not talking to Bruce that day on the beach and not asking my mom to give him a lift? Of course! After all the various encounters I’d already had with him, I should have asked my mother to give him a ride simply out of basic human courtesy and kindness.

Because I was the big shot “know-it-all” who simply had no interest in his music or lyrics and had no idea what the hell his songs were about, I dismissed the very existence of the man who would soon become one of the most prominent, important, and successful musicians in the history of the world.

Bruce, I’m sorry we didn’t give you a ride that day. I rot! ★

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