

“Born to Run”—Bruce Springsteen (1975)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Tyler Hayes (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Bruce Springsteen

Two albums into his career, Bruce Springsteen’s music trajectory was not set to contain notoriety. He was on a path that would soon see him without a record label. The rock ’n roller’s music had not yet broken through. Regardless of how “Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.” and “The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle” would be received by future fans, they didn’t find a wide enough audience to impress record label executives on release. Financial and emotional support may have been running out from people tasked with getting a return on their investment, but Springsteen’s resilience was unwavering with nowhere else to go except to press on.

In 1974, months ahead of his third album, “Born To Run,” the title track was sent off to radio stations. Even the rough cut was something special that select DJs began to spin religiously. Before the third album was fully finished, the song gained traction. Buzz was building. A breakthrough was coming.

From “Thunder Road” to “Jungleland,” Bruce Springsteen’s third studio album, “Born To Run,” is laced with invigorating youth. Innocence-tinged lyrics paint vivid pictures of a life explored while the music keeps hearts beating quickly. In the decades since the album’s release in 1975, it hasn’t faded from initial glory. The lead single, “Born To Run,” tucked in the middle of the track listing, rings now with all the same vigor it did when it was first released. It was the song that first gave Springsteen’s name to the masses. Bigger than the song though, the album lifted the American rock ’n roller and his famous band out of the trenches and into hearts around the country.

It was here, in 1975, that most fans and critics agree that Bruce Springsteen came into his own in a meaningful way. The imagery set forth from his scratchy, urgent voice is memorable. The melodies foreshadowing lyrics waiting to be fully uncovered on further investigation. Both these elements, the music and lyrics, work together to create a relatable soundtrack. It’s a soundtrack stitched together in a way that makes it feel like the backing to a singular, unforgettable night. From hastily leaving the house and looking for the promised land on “Thunder Road” to gathering in groups in parking lots on “Jungleland.” The songs, of course, stand independently, but as a whole build to something greater.

The rise of Springsteen with “Born To Run” meant a growing musical opposition to some of the most recognized 70s’ pop at the time. On release, the record contrasted the decade’s folk rock and more sedated easy listening groups lingering on from the late 60s. Springsteen, at the age of

25, was bringing forth a more raw form of pop music. It layers in thick and fuzzy electric guitar with other instruments from the E Street Band. The music, straightforward overall, is effective at being captivating. Throughout the eight-track-long album is a funky groove that pokes out in various places through distinct piano and saxophone riffs. The songs are musically joyous, in major keys, despite their darker and pointed lyrical content.

Part of Springsteen's appeal has always been his lyrical, storytelling ability. He's been called a storyteller of the streets. As the country became acquainted with Springsteen and his E Street Band, they were greeted with imagery of the working-class plight. The struggles that came along with communities facing varied types of systematic oppression. Bruce Springsteen was a symbol of raw and unfiltered youth and "Born To Run" was a reunion of political speech with the radio airwaves. He was speaking about real issues in a way that resonated both with those like him and those residing on the other side of the tracks. Simply put, Springsteen was singing about the possibility of every person being able to live with decency and self-respect. It was a sound and statement that was met with enthusiasm. "Time" magazine praised the album as "a renewal of rock." Springsteen also appeared on the cover of "Newsweek" at the same time. The album was a breakthrough for the artist and allowed him to escape the life he was singing about.

"Born To Run," an album born out of personal experience and tireless determination, paved the way for Springsteen's follow up albums. Subsequent albums further entrenched him in America's musical history.

The album all worked together well enough to peak at number three on the "Billboard" 200 album chart. The album was certified 6x platinum selling more than 6,000,000 copies. Its accolades grow from there. In 2003, "Born to Run" was named to the National Registry for its cultural importance. It ranked at number 18 on VH1's list of the 500 greatest rock albums ever. It is listed as number eight on the greatest albums of all time by "Rolling Stone" magazine. The album remains a staple in American culture because the music is electric, but more importantly, because America has not escaped what "Born to Run" was running from. The locations have changed, but the experiences remain. Asbury Park looks different, but its initial inspiration still resonates.

As influential as the break-through album is, the greatest testament to its creator is that it was just beginning. Through 2020, 45 years since "Born to Run" was released, Springsteen has put out 17 additional studio albums. It was the catalyst that allowed the rest to follow.

"The highway's jammed with broken heroes on a last chance power drive... We're gonna get to that place where we really want to go and we'll walk in the sun..."

"But till then, tramps like us, baby, we were born to run..."

Tyler Hayes writes about music and technology, often about how the two intersect with each other. He has written for "The New York Times," "Fast Company," and "Business Insider," among many other publications.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.