“Born to Run” was Bruce Springsteen’s third album. The man who is “The Boss” has admitted that the creation of it was his blatant attempt for a true rock and roll record as well as commercial success after the tepid commercial reception of his earlier two albums, “Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.” (1973) and “The Wild, the Innocent & the E Street Shuffle” (1973).

On both counts, he got his wish. Upon its release, “Born to Run” would rise to number three on the charts.

Besides gaining massive audience attention (by the end of the year Springsteen would be featured on the covers of both “Time” and “Newsweek”), “Born to Run” also saw the accomplishment of two other major factors in Springsteen’s artistic development. First, it saw the solidification of the line-up of Springsteen’s legendary back-up musicians, the E-Street Band. Second, it fully delivered on Springsteen’s early promise which saw him labeled as both a “modern day Dylan” and as “rock ‘n’ roll’s future.”

Along with “Born to Run” being named to the National Registry in 2003, it has been ranked number eight on a list of rock’s all-time greatest albums by “Rolling Stone” magazine and was place at 18th on VH1’s list of the 500 greatest rock albums ever.

Eight songs make up the tracks of “Born to Run”: “Thunder Road,” “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out,” “Night,” “Backstreets,” “Born to Run,” “She’s the One,” “Meeting Across the River,” and “Jungleland.” In writing and developing the album, Springsteen has said he was hoping to recreate Phil Spector’s legendary “wall of sound” producing approach.

For an album (and performer) so identified as “rock,” “Born to Run,” the album, kicks off, surprisingly, not with an arena-ready anthem but with the largely piano based “Thunder Road.” It proves an excellent opener, as both a sample of Springsteen’s songwriting prowess and his growly voice. The lyrics of “Thunder Road” are pure Springsteen, hitting on some of his favorite themes—cars, the open road, languid love. In many ways, it mirrors the same message of the album’s key cut, “Born to Run,” while sonically it seems to prefigure much of the later work of Joe Steinman, especially his work with Meat Loaf on their legendary “Bat Out of Hell” album.

The album’s second cut, “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out,” was one of the two singles taken from the collection (the other was “Born to Run”). Over the years, Springsteen has been vague about what this song is actually about, stating that even he has no idea what a “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out”
out” is. Nevertheless, in the song, via its lyrics, we have once again been returned to the streets and to the personal struggles of its narrator (“I’m running on the bad side/And I got my back to the wall”). Among what other meanings the song might have, “Tenth Avenue” also celebrates the addition of the legendary, 6-foot, 11-inch sax player Clarence Clemons to Springsteen’s backup group: “When the change was made uptown/And the Big Man joined the band/From the coastline to the city/All the little pretties raise their hands.” Clemons, who is also pictured on the album’s sleeve, would be an integral part of Springsteen’s sound for the next 20 years.

“Night,” the album’s third song, is a pounding working man’s lament (a Springsteen specialty) and another song that pays tribute to life after dark. It tells the story of a struggling nine-to-fiver who lives only for the freedom that sundown can bring to him and the potential for love it softly promises.

“Backstreets” originally closed out side one of the album and, as such, is resolute in mood though no less passionate and rocking. It too is piano-based and, as the title suggests, is another ode to the open road as a metaphor for movement and escape, or, here, specifically, to anonymity (i.e. “To hiding on the backstreets/Hiding on the backstreets/Where we swore forever friends/On the backstreets until the end”). Here, Springsteen spins a tale of he and “Terry” (assumedly an ex-girlfriend) who wiled away a “soft, infested summer” destined to end in heartache (“But I hated him, and I hated you when you went away.”)

The centerpiece of the album is, of course, its title track “Born to Run.” It is four minutes and 31 seconds of all-out rock and roll. Lyrically it carries on the album’s overarching theme of escape, freedom and its motif of the open road as vital part of the American dream. Here, again, another girlfriend, “Wendy,” figures prominently and is oddly courted by the narrator through a series of images of contemporary working America that are both cold and disturbing (“Baby this town rips the bones from your back/It’s a death trap, it’s a suicide rap”). Only the narrator and his cool ride (as in Tracy Chapman’s “Fast Car” from 1988) offer relief and salvation. But, even then, as Dave Marsh points out, even this hegira is conditional: the future is only so bright because the present is so bleak.

If in the album’s two previous songs (“Backstreets,” “Born to Run”) single-named women inspire unusual love odes, promises and cherished memories, then the album’s next track, “She’s the One,” takes a more cynical view of male-female relationships. While the heroine here has some amazing attributes (“killer graces,” “soft French cream [skin]”), she also possesses a “heart of stone” and eyes that tell “desperate lies.” In the end, while she may be the “one” she is also the one that will break your heart evermore.

“Meeting Across the River” is the album’s most fully realized “story song.” It was originally titled “The Heist.” (In fact, the very first pressings of the album bear that title on its jacket.) It is according to one writer, “an epic character story that Springsteen tells with the spare precision of haiku.” True to its title, “Meeting” tells the tale of two (no doubt, working class) guys attempting to make an easy score by carrying something (drugs? blood money?) to a hood at the other end of the tunnel. Orchestrated in a bare bones style, the song is as spare as Springsteen’s vocal and the desolate state of its narrator’s life.

The song “Jungleland” closes out the album. Clocking in at over nine minutes in length, it is operatic in scope and supposedly took Springsteen sixteen months to compose. Springsteen said, “[Early in my career], I wrote several wild, long pieces that were arranged to leave the band and the audience gasping for breath.” Set again in that complicated, populated, dangerous area between New York and New Jersey, the song tells the story two characters—the Magic Rat and the barefoot girl—as they elude the “Maximum Lawmen” and meet up with a “midnight gang.”
The story takes place—not surprisingly—out on the mean streets of the city. There is a touch of “West Side Story” here as well as precursory elements Springsteen would later explore more fully in his “Nebraska” album from 1982.

Upon its release in 1975, Springsteen’s “Born to Run” garnered critical raves. Reviewers celebrated this slice of full on rock and compared Springsteen as a songwriter to Dylan and as a singer to the great Roy Orbison. Others called him the new Elvis. The cover stories on “Time” and “Newsweek” would arrive shortly afterward.

Meanwhile, the album’s singles brought major radio airplay. After entering the chart at number on September 13, 1975 at number 84, the album rose steadily and peaked at number three. Easily, it was Springsteen’s best showing up til that time.

Since “Born to Run,” Springsteen has continued rocking with his 1984 album “Born in the USA,” becoming, so far, his commercial, if not necessarily critical, highpoint.

The theme of the open road and the dangerous promise of the streets would continue to entice Springsteen in his songwriting. Later recordings include titles like “Racing in the Street,” “Drive All Night,” and “Wreck on the Highway.” Even one of the Boss’s more tender love songs, “Tougher Than the Rest,” contains the line, “The road is dark/And it’s a thin, thin line/But I want you to know I’ll walk it for you anytime.”

This preoccupation with roads, highways, byways and, thus, by extension, with America, as well as his embracing and celebration of the working class, has made Springsteen a sort of de facto chronicler (like Dylan before him) of much of the American experience. He is the rare artist celebrated from the barroom to the concert hall. And the full power of his vision and talent was first witnessed on “Born to Run.”