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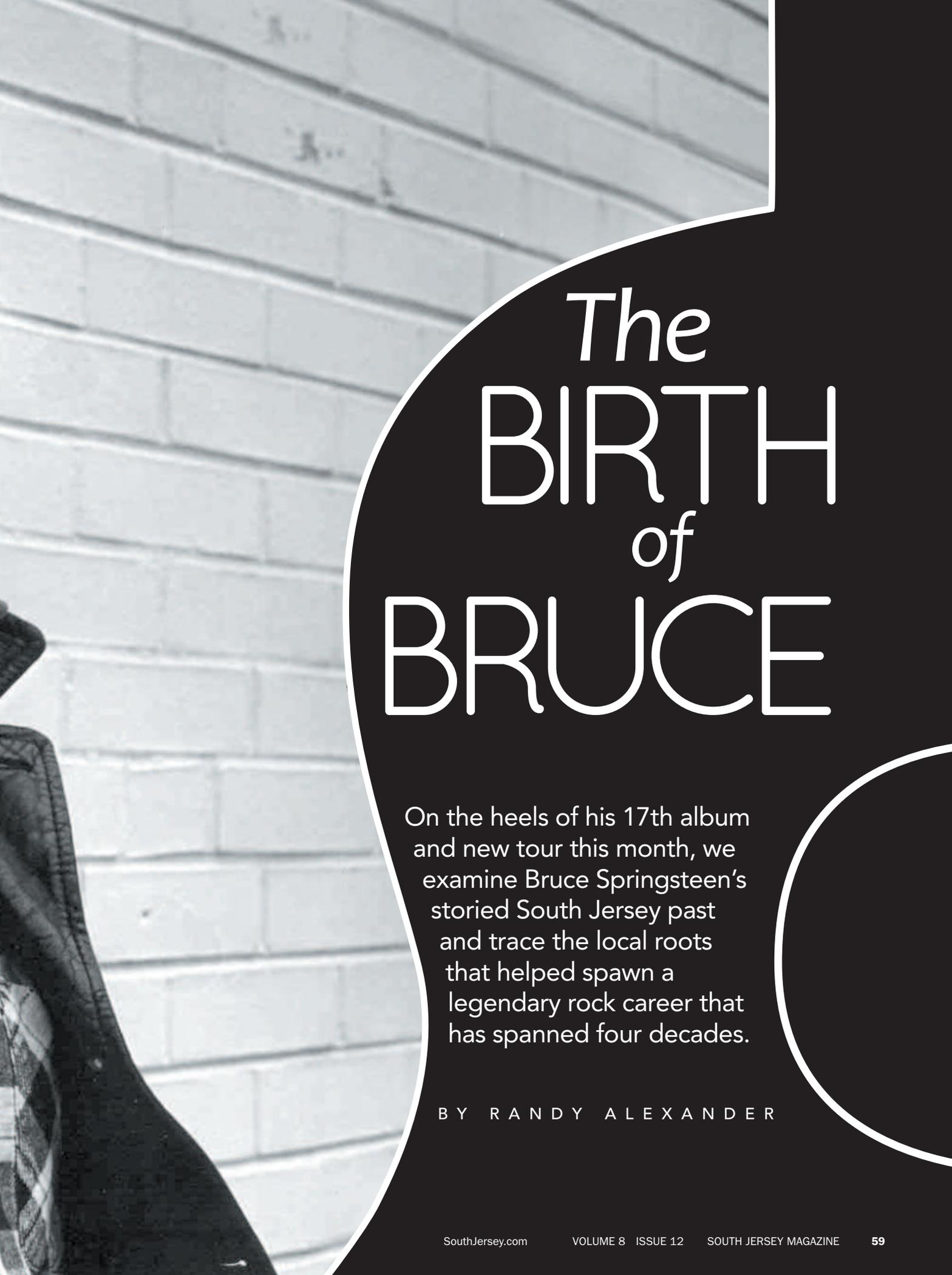
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MUST-HAVE LOOKS

BRUCE

TRACING THE ROCK ICON'S
SOUTH JERSEY ROOTS

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN IN HADDONFIELD IN 1978, AS SHOT BY LOCAL PHOTOGRAPHER FRANK STEFANKO.





The BIRTH *of* BRUCE

On the heels of his 17th album and new tour this month, we examine Bruce Springsteen's storied South Jersey past and trace the local roots that helped spawn a legendary rock career that has spanned four decades.

BY RANDY ALEXANDER

B

ACK IN HIS college days, Dell Poncett used to fancy himself as the first Bruce Springsteen fan in South Jersey. He got hooked one mid-January night in 1973 on Long Island, having left Cherry Hill for the weekend to visit his cousin. Looking to catch some live music, Poncett stumbled upon “this scruffy little kid” with “so much charisma” as the opening act for the Paul Winter Consort at My Father’s Place, a popular cabaret housed in a Roslyn, N.Y. bowling alley.

Poncett couldn’t wait to get back to Cherry Hill to tell his buddies how he’d been impressed by this “unbelievable” guy with vividly intoxicating songs and lighthearted stories made funnier when he’d stop mid-song and bang on his amplifier to keep it from short-circuiting.

Seven months later, by that point an admitted fanatic, Poncett arguably became the first Bruce Springsteen fan to see him perform in South Jersey. It was Aug. 14, 1973, and Springsteen was making his local debut at Uncle Al’s Erlton Theatre Lounge on King’s Highway in Cherry Hill, just two-thirds of a mile from Poncett’s home in the Kingston Estates development. Oddly enough, the joint where Bruce was appearing was once again a bowling alley.

Poncett and his two pals arrived early to make sure they secured the best spot in the house. So early, in fact, they were forced to wait outside for the lounge to open. That’s when they encountered Springsteen and the band—Clarence Clemons on sax, Danny Federici and David Sancious on keyboards, Garry Tallent on bass and Vini “Mad Dog” Lopez on drums—looking to kill some time before the gig. Bruce and Clarence walked out of the club and right over to Poncett to ask where the group



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN & THE E STREET BAND INSIDE SHELLLOW’S LUNCHEONETTE IN EAST CAMDEN (1978); A FLYER FOR A CAMDEN COUNTY COLLEGE SHOW IN 1974; SPRINGSTEEN AND HIS 1960 CORVETTE ON COLONIAL AVENUE IN HADDONFIELD (1978); OUTSIDE PHOTOGRAPHER FRANK STEFANKO’S HOME IN HADDONFIELD (1978); A FLYER MISPELLING SPRINGSTEEN’S NAME, FOR A CHERRY HILL SHOW IN 1973; THE BAND ON THE STREET IN EAST CAMDEN (1978); SPRINGSTEEN OUTSIDE A HADDONFIELD BARBERSHOP (1978); ENJOYING A SUMMER NIGHT IN HADDONFIELD (1982).

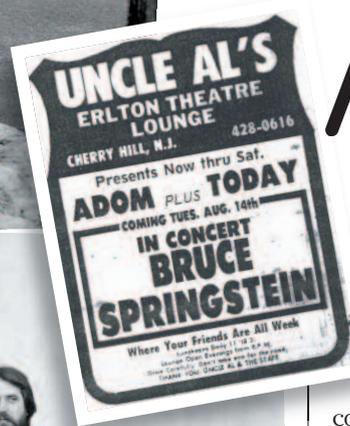
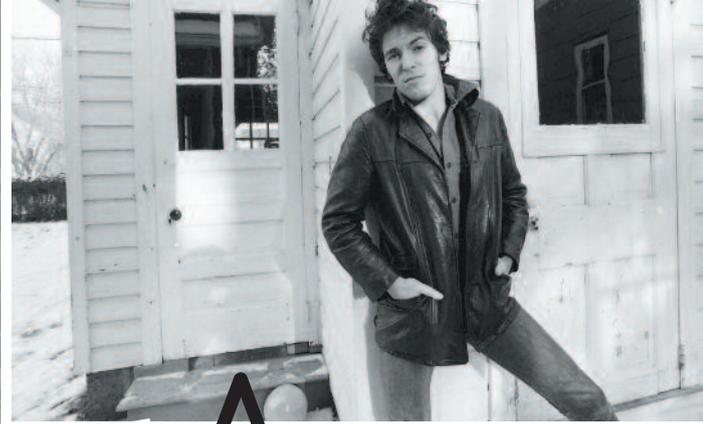
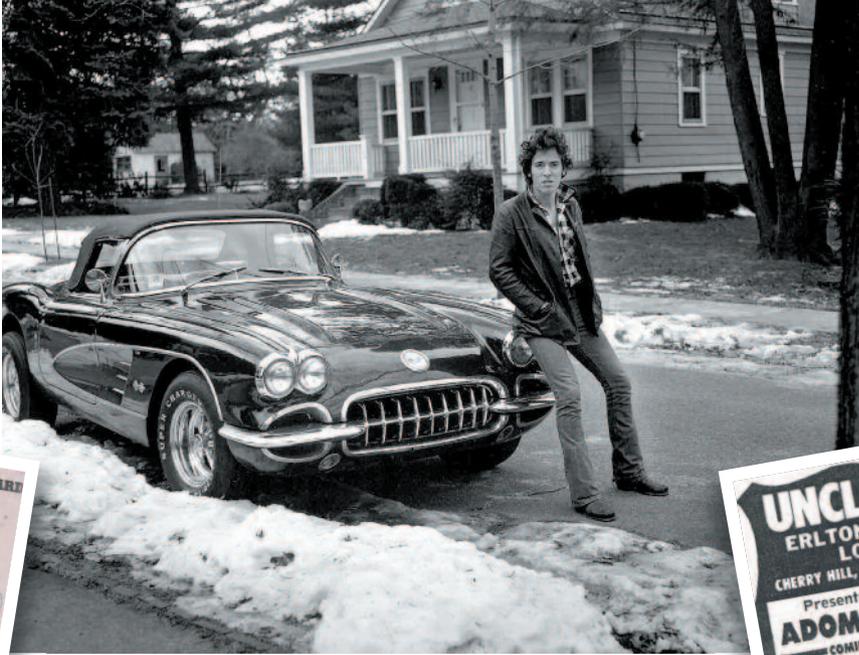
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK STEFANKO

might be able to bide their time by shooting a couple rounds of pool. Without hesitation, Poncett sent them 2 ½ miles up Route 70 to the Silver Cue, a pool hall that was located on the eastbound side, across the highway from the landmark King of Pizza. Armed with directions, the group zoomed off in a metal-flake, lime-green Buick Riviera, Clarence behind the wheel.

Poncett vividly recalls Springsteen dressing “oddly for him” on stage that night, wearing a bright yellow T-shirt, khaki colored jeans and sneakers, while Clemons sported a light-colored zoot suit and fedora,

a precursor to that iconic look from the *Born to Run* cover, two years in the future.

The Erlton Lounge was owned by Julius “Ju-Ju” Kinkle of North Camden, “Uncle Al” to his patrons, a reputed mobster who had left his job as a waiter at the old Latin Casino to open his own Cherry Hill nightspot. The Erlton Lounge was the spot “Where Your Friends Are All Week,” the newspaper ad touting Springsteen’s arrival declared. Poncett, now managing editor of the *Philadelphia Business Journal*, fondly remembers the Erlton Lounge as “sort of a grungy bar with a little



stage where bands played.” Springsteen was booked there at the end of the Greetings From Asbury Park tour supporting his first album. He’d return to the Erlton Lounge in December, four days before Christmas and a couple months into the tour for his second album, *The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle*. This time, Bruce was the headliner on a triple bill with a pair of local bands, Uproar and Moxie, in the midst of a week-long residency. Springsteen was a last-minute addition, taking the stage just before midnight and leaving after 2 a.m.

Those weren’t Springsteen’s only South Jersey gigs in the early days of his career as a Columbia recording artist, before the *Born to Run* breakthrough. In

1974, he played another club similar in spirit to the Erlton Lounge, only much larger and without the bowling lanes—the Satellite Lounge in Cookstown. He also performed that year at Burlington County College (April 6) and Camden County College’s Blackwood campus (Nov. 21). The latter was a game-changing moment for Cherry Hill rocker John Eddie, who has mentioned that night at Lincoln Hall Auditorium as the first time he’d ever seen Springsteen live and “that’s when I realized you could be theatrical and rock ‘n’ roll, and not have to wear women’s clothing.” Eddie would emerge in the early ‘80s as a Springsteen-inspired rocker, and he’s been especially embraced by Springsteen lovers ever

since. **A**LL OF THOSE EARLY South Jersey shows happened during the magical, mythical era in local Springsteen lore that, for nearly 40 years, has staked its claim to the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware. The perception always has been that Bruce’s meeting across the river with Philly fans was a career-launching love affair rooted at the Main Point coffeehouse in Bryn Mawr and surrounding Main Line colleges, and propelled over the FM airwaves by WMMR, with the late Ed Sciaky leading the album rock station’s efforts to crown Bruce as the next King of Rock ‘n’ Roll. Westmont resident Michael Tearson, the first person to play Springsteen on the radio anywhere during his early WMMR tenure, says it was a complete team effort to break Springsteen at the station.

Too often overlooked is the key role South Jersey played in Springsteen’s rise not only in the early ‘70s, but through the entire decade. Gigs aside, South Jersey also was where Bruce would be photographed for two album covers, and would seek out the sage wisdom that would rocket his career into the 1980s and to phenomenal new heights.

Mike Appel, Springsteen’s manager through the first half of the ‘70s, says all of that WMMR exposure naturally “bled across the border to South Jersey,” but there was no real touring strategy at the time to bring Bruce from Asbury Park to the Garden State’s lower half beyond getting as much exposure and money as he could for the band to survive.

“We had a lot of concerts in South Jersey, Cherry Hill in particular,” says Appel. “It didn’t matter if Bruce was playing Mafia-tinged clubs or not. Everybody treated us very well and paid us what we needed to be paid. We only have good memories of those Cherry Hill dates. Any shows we did down there were way stronger than in New York City. I always say that the Philadelphia area is the epicenter of fanaticism for Bruce and the E Street Band. We had a great deal of support down there. They

“WE ONLY HAVE GOOD MEMORIES OF THOSE CHERRY HILL DATES.
Any shows we did down there were way stronger than in New York City.”

—MIKE APPEL, SPRINGSTEEN’S MANAGER IN THE 1970s

were great places for Bruce to keep performing and building his live show resume.”

WXPN and NPR “World Café” host David Dye was a member of the WMMR air staff that boosted the Boss in 1973. He had become “a Springsteen groupie” and recalls being one of the only WMMR staffers dissatisfied with simply following Bruce around the Delaware Valley on the Philly side. “I thought the South Jersey live experience was the coolest thing,” says Dye, “because to me, rather than seeing Bruce at the Main Point out of his element, you were seeing him in his element, like at a Jersey bar show.”

Dye got to the Erlton Lounge early, too, positioning himself at a kitchen table, drinking beer and watching Uproar, then Moxie, while waiting for Bruce to hit the stage. Sometime during Moxie’s set, “Bruce and the band walked through the crowd to get to the dressing room, and everybody stood up and clapped,” says Dye. “And the band on stage thought it

was for them. I remember that vividly.”

“We rehearsed everything we did and knew it verbatim back then,” drummer Vini Lopez explains, noting that Rolling Stone named the Lopez-era E Street Band the No. 1 live performing act of all time. “It’s crazy when I think about those days. We were very tight—we sounded loose but we played tight. A lot of bands didn’t like to have us opening for them in those days, because once we got done it was tough to keep the crowd around.

“It was a terrific time. We wanted to be the best at what we did. Every show we did, the band was very tight—we were like married. It was more than exciting. We were playing terrific. It was our dream.”

Fast forward two months: Springsteen does his last South Jersey club show on Feb. 23, 1974, at the “new” Satellite Lounge, then known as the biggest bar in New Jersey, an expansive, lone-standing, one-floor building on the Fort Dix outskirts. It’s easily his best chronicled local

appearance, not only because of its historic importance as the official debut of new drummer Ernest “Boom” Carter, but for the sensational ripple effect of that sudden personnel change, courtesy of club owner Carlo Rossi. Rossi was a longtime New Hanover Township committeeman who also owned the Whisper Bar and Restaurant in Browns Mills and at one time also operated two bars in Northeast Philly—Carlo’s Circle Club and the Club Rossi.

As Appel recounts, Springsteen wanted to postpone the Satellite show by a couple of weeks because he needed more time to rehearse with Carter, who had replaced Lopez on drums three days earlier. (Lopez had been fired in the wee hours following a Feb. 12 gig in Kentucky for punching out Appel’s brother, Steve, the road manager, before the show). Appel, thinking nothing of asking for a schedule change, asked the William Morris Agency, which was booking Springsteen by then, to call Rossi and make the request. Instead of granting it, Rossi obtained Appel’s phone number from the agent and wanted to speak to the manager personally.

“Rossi gets on the phone with me,” Appel recalls, “and says, ‘Listen, Bruce has gotta play my place on the date I decided on. And if you don’t do what I say, I’m gonna give Bruce ‘the kiss’ in Asbury Park.’ I was stunned. I mean, did that guy just tell me what I think he told me? I called Bruce right away and said, ‘Hey, Bruce: Not for nothing, but I just got a call from a bad dude and I think he really means business. We really have to watch what we do and say here.

“In the meantime, the guy calls back and gets my brother, Steve, on the phone and after the call, Steve comes over, and says to me that Carlo has threatened both of us with death threats, too. I call back Bruce. ‘What do you wanna do?’ He says, ‘Oh dammit, tell him we’ll play.’ So we do and Carlo says, ‘Thank you very much, you won’t be disappointed.’

“We go down there, and it’s a giant place and the place is mobbed. One of Carlo’s henchmen calls me over and says, ‘Listen, just in case you thought that was an idle threat, let me tell you a little story about Carlo.”

In the weeks that followed, Springsteen recounted the story during a March 8, 1974, radio interview in Houston, transcribed in the book *Bruce Springsteen on the Road, 1968-2005*, by noted Springsteen biogra-

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pher Dave Marsh:

"We just got a new drummer, he'd only been with us about four days and we were gonna cancel out the gig because we weren't ready, and Carlo calls up my manager and says, 'Tell 'em to get down here,' and he said 'he's gonna kill me if I didn't come [laughter]. So we called up these cats we know—Tyrone and Rocky [laughter]—and these cats run another place, they run this joint called the Erlton Lounge, which is like another little chapter, you know, about 25, 30 miles up. We said, 'Tyrone, man, this cat Carlo, he's gonna kill Bruce unless we ... you know.' And Tyrone says, 'Be there. Go' [chuckles]. And it's funny because a week before ... this band Foghat played there and [Rossi] came out and he told them to turn down, and they didn't listen to him. He came up again and told 'em to turn down, and they didn't listen to him. So the third time he comes up, he says, 'I told you guys to turn down,' pulls out a gun and shoots the amps [laughter]. That's a true story ... pulls out a gun, blows the amps away, right [chuckles]. So I was there on Saturday night. But yeah—Satellite Lounge, don't ever go there."

Not only did Springsteen blow away the Satellite audience, giving them well more than their five bucks' worth, but Carter, despite just a single rehearsal, "performed splendidly," says Appel. "There wasn't a soul in the audience who didn't think he wasn't with them for the band for three years." Little did they realize that because Carter hadn't had enough time to learn Bruce's material, the show—a pair of 70- to 80-minute sets starting, respectively, at midnight and 3 a.m. with a long intermission—contained an extra-high proportion of classic rock standards.

Rossi was so happy after the Satellite gig that he called Appel over to give him a hug and arrange for the band and crew to fill their gas tanks in the middle of the night, well past normal operating hours around those parts.

"He opened up a gas station that was closed," says Appel. "We drive out to the middle of nowhere to a Gulf station, and all our cars are following a state trooper. And the state trooper opens up the station and gives us free gas!"

DESPITE NO LONGER BEING a part of the group, Lopez continued to build South Jersey roots post-Springsteen, as a security worker



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at Emerald City, the late '70s/early '80s rock emporium in Cherry Hill on the site of the Latin Casino, now Subaru headquarters. Emerald City also was known for a time to be a favorite hangout of Clarence Clemons.

The transition in drummers from Lopez to Carter completely changed the dynamic of the E Street Band, both sonically and rhythmically, notes Tom Cunningham, host of The Bruce Brunch on WCHR-FM in Manahawkin and the nationally syndicated Boss Time Radio show. Cunningham, a longtime Bruce historian, was stunned to hear Springsteen speak last year at an Asbury Park conference on the history of race in the Asbury scene, about the balanced complexion of the band lineup that debuted at the Satellite Lounge—three white members (Springsteen, Tallent, Federici) and three African-Americans (Clemons, Sancious, Carter).

"This was a band that was completely integrated at a time when rock bands were not," says Cunningham. "And the best thing about it was that Bruce Springsteen had enough confidence in his music and his sense of self to just say, 'Here we are.' He just presented it like that was the way it should be, and it was very liberating.

"The band was different then. Boom Carter was more of a swing, jazz type drummer. David Sancious could play anything on keyboards. That version of the band wasn't together all that long, and it was tremendous to hear Springsteen finally talk about it, how much he loved it, and how no one ever made a big deal about the band's integration, because people loved them. That's what made it so special."

The E Street Band had moved up to the South Jersey college circuit for the rest of 1974 following the Satellite Lounge event. Colleges paid better and "always treated us well," says Lopez. And on April 4, they reached Burlington County College in Pemberton on a double bill with the Persuasions, the venerable Brooklyn gospel/pop a cappella group, opening the show. Fans of Springsteen's first two albums witnessed a dream set list over 90 minutes, containing, in part, "New York City Serenade," "Spirit in the Night," "The E Street Shuffle," "4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)," "Kitty's Back," "Blinded by the Light," "For You," and "Ros-alita (Come Out Tonight)."

It would be seven more months until Springsteen returned to South Jersey. In between, he was supposed to play Glassboro State College (now Rowan University) but the May 12 commitment was

scratched for a recording session in New York. Springsteen was supposed to headline over Fairport Convention, but was replaced instead by the Bogus Baby Band, and never returned. Three days earlier, Springsteen played the Boston show reviewed by future manager Jon Landau in Boston's *The Real Paper* with the infamous line: "I saw rock 'n' roll's future and its name is Bruce Springsteen."

A Camden County College Blackwood campus concert would, however, be rescheduled, from Oct. 21 to Nov. 21 at what's now known as the Dennis Flyer Theater. It was a double bill, with long-forgotten Buddah Records R&B artist Jae Mason as the opening act.

BY 1978, THE PHOTOGRAPHY of Frank Stefanko brought South Jersey's role into entirely new focus. Stefanko met Springsteen through Patti Smith, a close friend from Glassboro State College who grew up in Deptford Township and, as punk rock's burgeoning poet laureate, also would record the definitive version of the Springsteen-penned "Because the Night."

Smith showed Springsteen publicity

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photos Stefanko had taken of her, and he was impressed enough to express interest in hiring him. Stefanko shot the album cover portraits for 1978's *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and 1980's *The River* during combined sessions at his home in Haddonfield. Stefanko's full band photos seen on the *The River* double album design were taken in East Camden, as well as Manhattan.

"Patti called me up and said, 'You wanna photograph Bruce Springsteen? He's crazy about your work,'" Stefanko, already a Bruce fan, recalls. "I didn't hear anything for three months, and one day in February 1978, I get this call: 'Hey Frank. Let's get together and do some photos. How 'bout I come down to your place? What should I bring?' I said bring some changes of clothes."

And on one cool Saturday morning, Springsteen pulled up to Stefanko's house in a '58 Chevy pickup truck with tree trunks in the back to weigh it down from skidding on the icy roads. He arrived at the door carrying a brown paper bag packed with flannel shirts. The next day, Springsteen returned in a much flashier 1960 Corvette—the same Corvette on display at the National Constitution Center in the new exhibit, "From Asbury Park to the Promised Land." Adjacent to the Corvette at the exhibit is a life-sized blowup of Stefanko's photo of Springsteen standing next to the car in front of the photographer's house on a snow-lined Colonial Avenue. One of those flannel shirts in Bruce's bag made the cover of *The River*.

The following weekend, the entire E Street Band arrived at Stefanko's home in two big "pimpmobile" cars with fins—one was Steven Van Zandt's, the other belonged to Clemons, reminiscent of the car Poncett saw the Big Man driving in Cherry Hill five years earlier. After a few photos around the house, the shoot moved to Shellow's Luncheonette on Federal Street in East Camden. Stefanko had known about the place through his uncles, who began to frequent it back in the 1940s. He thought the knotty pine wood interior, formica chrome counters and booths, and pinball machine combined for a number of creative possibilities, and called Bill Shellow.

"I said, 'Keep the shop open, I'm coming over with Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band,' and he didn't believe me," says Stefanko. "But we went over and took photos of them on the counter, and all crammed in the

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Behind the Music

A new exhibit chronicles Springsteen's mark on rock music.

A special exhibit across the bridge at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia has Bruce Springsteen fans buzzing, while allowing them to get an up close and personal look at The Boss' storied career. Visitors can check out "From Asbury Park to the Promised Land: The Life and Music of Bruce Springsteen" through Sept. 3 to catch glimpses of one-of-a-kind memorabilia on loan from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Everything from handwritten lyrics and old guitars to the famous blue jeans and white T-shirt he popularized on the cover of *Born in the U.S.A.* is showcased. During the exhibit's run, several special events are planned, including documentary screenings and Q&A sessions with Springsteen historians. For more details, visit ConstitutionCenter.org. — Peter Proko

booths, and shots of Bruce playing pin-ball."

The band—which by now had replaced Sancious and Carter with Roy Bittan on keyboards and Max Weinberg on drums, adding Van Zandt on guitar—was having too much fun, as best expressed in a Stefanko photo on the inner sleeve of *The River* with Van Zandt almost doubled over with laughter.

"In those days," Stefanko recalls, "Bruce was this young man who was really down to earth. He could've been my brother, loving the Jersey Shore, loving rock 'n' roll, cracking jokes, telling stories, keeping the band amused, laughing all the time, and just having a good time. But it all came with a drive of having something to prove, something that had to get said. He was a perfectionist."

THAT DRIVE QUIETLY BROUGHT Springsteen back to Cherry Hill in 1979. Darkness on the Edge of Town, the long-awaited followup to *Born to Run*, finally had been released but four albums into his career, a Top 10 hit still evaded The Boss.

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He wanted to see if Kal Rudman, Cherry Hill's "Man with the Golden Ears," could help finally elevate Springsteen to the "Promised Land" of the record charts. Rudman's national reputation as publisher of the highly influential broadcast and music industry bible, the *Friday Morning Quarterback* (FMQB), was soaring. He could be seen regularly at the time as the music industry's hit-picking maven on *The Merv Griffin Show* and the *Today Show*.

Bruce arranged for a secret meeting at Rudman's offices on Route 70 in Cherry Hill through Herbie Gordon, the legendary Philadelphia regional Columbia Records representative, also from Cherry Hill.

"Bruce was very humble, kind of shy, and very low key," Rudman remembers. "He said, 'Everybody told me you're the expert. That's why I'm here. I have a question that's very important to me in my career. Very basic. You have a Top Album list and a Top Singles list. I've never made the Top 10 yet with an album. But I'm feeling hits, and based on the audience response at my concerts, it's all selling. But I can't get near the Top 10. Can you tell me what I'm doing wrong?'"

"He had no clue. And I looked at him, and with a wry smile, I said, 'Not only are you doing something wrong, but in the

science and art of creating Top 10 records, you've got a big vacuum.' And his eyes widened like half dollars.

"What is it?," he says.

"All your songs are directed to the male demographic. If you look at a lot of Top 10 records, you'll see the words 'cry' and 'girl,' angst about young female emotions. You have no songs for girls. And many more girls listen to Top 40 than boys. And that's the science and art of demographics and psychographics."

"Bruce was astonished. And he looked at me and he said, 'Boy, what you say is true. I sure can't deny it. So I'm not makin' it with the girls?'" And I chuckled. Myself and a lot of listeners had been asking, 'What's the matter with Bruce? Doesn't he like females?'"

Springsteen recalled the incident to influential music executive Danny Goldberg in his 2009 book, *Bumping Into Geniuses: My Life Inside the Rock and Roll Business*.

"Kal explained to me that Top 40 radio is mainly listened to by girls and that my female demographic was low. And I thought about the songs on *Darkness* and I realized that the lyrics really were mostly for and about guys. So on this new album I'm working on—there are some songs for girls."

The new album, released several months later, was *The River*, which would bear Stefanko's cover portrait in the flannel shirt, and Rudman's imprint on "Hungry Heart," which countered the macho celebrations of the rest of the album with sped-up vocal, romantic lyrics, and retro harmonies by '60s pop greats The Turtles. "Hungry Heart" became Springsteen's first Top 10 hit and the only one on that double album, peaking at No. 5 on the Billboard Hot 100. Springsteen's next rock album with the E Street Band, 1984's *Born in the USA*, was an unparalleled smash, netting seven Top 10 hits.

Needless to say, Springsteen went on to become one of the biggest rock stars of all time. This month he will release his 17th album, *Wrecking Ball*, and play to a sold-out Wells Fargo Center crowd, all in such close proximity to the South Jersey towns where it all started some 40 years ago.

Randy Alexander is president and CEO of Randex Communications, a South Jersey entertainment, lifestyle and music publicity firm celebrating its 15th anniversary in 2012. Throughout the '80s and '90s, he was an award-winning pop music critic and entertainment columnist at The Trenton Times, where he wrote more about Bruce Springsteen than anyone else in his 20-year newspaper career.

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