



## Born in the U.S.A.

*Geoffrey Himes*

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### **Born in the U.S.A.** Geoffrey Himes

When Bruce Springsteen went back on the road in 1984, he opened every show by shouting out, "one, two, one, two, three, four," followed by the droning synth chords of "Born in the U.S.A." Max Weinberg hit his drums with a two-fisted physicality that cut through the swelling chords. With a rolled-up red kerchief around his head and heavy black boots under his faded jeans, Springsteen looked like the character of the song, and from the very first line ("Born down in a dead man's town") he sang with the throat-scraping desperation of a man with his back against the wall. **When he reached the crucial lines, though, the guitars and bass dropped out and Weinberg switched to just the hi-hat. Springsteen's voice grew a bit more private and reluctant as he sang, "Nowhere to run. Nowhere to go." It was as if he weren't sure if this were an admission of defeat or the drawing of a line in the sand. But when the band came crashing back at full strength--building a crescendo that fell apart in the cacophony of Springsteen's and Weinberg's wild soloing, paused and then came together again in the determined, marching riff--it was clear that the singer was ready to make a stand.**

### **Born in the U.S.A. Details**

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Author : Geoffrey Himes

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## From Reader Review Born in the U.S.A. for online ebook

### Doug says

Very dense, a lot of information, not all of it necessary IMO, but probably five stars if you're a big Springsteen fan. I do take issue with the author claiming this is his best album. It's got some great songs on it, but the production is so cheesy 80s it will always be hampered by that, unless at some point they can remix it and turn down those horrible keyboards.

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### Elizabeth Teig Von Hoffman says

This book is very good for anyone who hasn't read about and doesn't care for Bruce Springsteen. Most of his assertions are strictly speculative, often contradicting well documented and aged aspects of Springsteen's mentality and style. Himes spends an exceptional amount of the book trashing on Springsteen's 70s discography, which only furthers a general perception that the reader is not particularly caring or interested in Springsteen. Of all the books I've read about Springsteen, this is the only one I wish I hadn't.

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### Christopher Renberg says

I am a casual Springsteen fan and thus an anomaly of sorts. I've seen him in concert (The Rising tour so way late to the party). This album saturated the radio and MTV my senior year in high school to the point that I kept it at arm's length. "Pink Cadillac" was good for a listen but that was about it for me.

I've tried to read more about Springsteen but get so bogged down in the mythology. I do like these 33 1/3 books, so it seemed the perfect chance to try again. Himes is definitely on the opposite end of the fan spectrum than myself. He has done the research and opened my eyes to the voluminous outpouring of songs by Springsteen at this time. I still have the Gary US Bonds single he wrote somewhere in the collection. The way he fretted over album material, song placement, etc. was fascinating. The book as a whole served its purpose. I came away with a better understanding of an artist and his process during this one sliver of time and a slightly better appreciation of this album.

One nit is the error in referring to the guitarist for Black Sabbath as "Tommy" Iommi rather than Tony. Himes is a music guy and should've caught that.

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### Morgan says

An excellent, brief, introduction to Born In The USA. I wasn't convinced by the author's claim that it's Bruce's best album, but it makes sense that this was written by somebody suitably enthusiastic. I haven't really listened to Springsteen for a couple years (personal reasons, long story), and this helped remind me how important his music has been to me. Since I started the book, I've been going through his albums pretty much non-stop, and for that I can't thank Geoffrey Himes enough!

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## Mark says

This edition of the 33-1/3 series did not cut it for me. It's tough enough to make a case for *The River* and *Born in the USA* as being Bruce's best work, as the author claims here. But the thesis is not well presented, and I was not convinced. I love Bruce, but I'm not a big fan of *Born in the USA*. I picked this volume to shed some light on the record, and perhaps change my opinion. For me, this record was a calculated plan to launch Bruce into the mainstream, not the peak of his songwriting maturity as the author argues. The book was clearly written by someone more accustomed to essays and articles rather than book length works, as it gets mired in repetition and rambling explanations. Some editing would have improved this book.

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## Jonathan Walker says

One of the better entries in the 33 1/3 series. It is not, I think, a coincidence that it's written by an experienced music journalist, who relies on research, and not just superfan, 'This album changed my life' gushing (this trope, once refreshing, has now become predictable and repetitive). Indeed, one of Himes's arguments for the greatness of the album's storytelling is its willingness to reach beyond the shallow insights of autobiography.

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## Patty says

I wasn't convinced I'd like this book; I am a Springsteen snob who considered "Born in the U.S.A." to be when Bruce started to lose his blue-collar roots and turn into a Rock Star. But this book changed my mind.

Himes talks about the evolution of Springsteen's songwriting, from the wordy poem-songs of his early albums to the more pared-down, Dylanesque lyrics of his '80s output, and he also spends a lot of time discussing his comic as well as dramatic lyrical skill. When I dismissed this album as young twentysomething, I wasn't thinking about all of that, I was just thinking that this wasn't the Bruce I was raised on.

The author also describes the experience of a live E Street Band performance in a way that brought it right back to me, goosebumps and ringing ears and all. And the description of the attempts of the Reagan campaign to adopt "Born in the U.S.A." as a patriotic anthem were incredibly timely as I read them today, the day of Barack Obama's inauguration, the day when finally, after twenty-plus years of the division of this country into two Americas, the hope of a new era shines brightly in my heart.

I'm giving the "Born in the U.S.A." album another chance, as soon as I can get it on a format I can listen to (I only have the vinyl). I'm revisiting the whole Springsteen canon with a different ear after reading this book.

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## Mary McDonough says

Sure, I like the Boss; I'm from Jersey. But I hadn't looked much past my sister's favorite, "Born to Run". And "Born in the USA" is hard to hear anew. It's one of those songs neutered by repetitious playings at feel-good public events such as demolition derbies and firework displays.

I had to start all over again with the album, and the book really helped. The author dips into Springsteen's life and the events of the day to explain the importance of the album both to history and to Springsteen himself.

"Born in the USA" may be Springsteen's best album. He explores outsiders, veterans, the powerless feeling of being working class, and even lusting after someone you should leave alone. Listen to the album again, and read this book if you need a little more.

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## Mark says

For the uninitiated, the 33 1/3 series is an ever-growing collection of tiny books (they're slightly smaller than a Blu-Ray disc case), each one dedicated to the creation of a particular album from the past six decades of music.

Geoffrey Himes' contribution to the collection is about Springsteen's most well-known record, his mid-1980s classic *Born In The USA*. He argues that, with its equal combination of humour and angst, it is the perfect Springsteen album.. and his supporting evidence is very persuasive. By examining the writing techniques used by Springsteen to record early demos for the album and putting them into context with the earlier Springsteen LPs, the fascinating story of this record begins to build.

Did you know that the song "Born In The USA" was originally recorded in a much different style on the same cassette demo tape that contained nine solo songs released as the Nebraska LP? Did you know that there was an extra verse in "Glory Days" that Springsteen wisely cut out so as not to spoil the humour of the other verses? Or how about "My Hometown", that began life as "Your Hometown", an upbeat Dave Edmunds-styled rockabilly number with the same lyrics but none of the same feelings of decay and despair as the final album version?

Himes talks about these embryonic forms of the songs and other songs intended to make the album, the strengths and weaknesses of Springsteen's approach to albums, and virtually everything else that anyone who has listened to and loved this record might wish to know about it, and its place in the wider context of rock and roll music. He uses quotes from published interviews with Springsteen to elaborate where necessary, and also reasons that Springsteen's growing enjoyment of film and literature in the late 70s and early 80s sharpened up and focused his songwriting techniques.

At just over 120 pages, Himes' critique of the record is compelling and direct, and never overstays its welcome. He is obviously a big fan of The Boss but doesn't shy away from pointing out the faults as he sees them, and his honesty is refreshing. (Although he doesn't have much time for the song "Bobby Jean" - what's with that?)

Though Himes doesn't mention any "bootleg" recordings in circulation containing the unreleased versions of the songs, fans would do well to check out a set called "Unsatisfied Heart - Remastered Born In The USA Outtakes" to hear for themselves everything that the album could have been. After they've read this book from cover to cover, of course.

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## Bill says

The main argument here is that *Born in the U.S.A.* is the perfect--and the best--Bruce Springsteen album. The author's argument is persuasive and though it's clearly *not* The Boss' best album, it may be a perfect one. The

songwriting, the musicianship, the range of topics, the presentation are all a step beyond (though not necessarily above) what came before. This most readily apparent when you take Nebraska and *Born in the U.S.A.* as two parts of a (conflicted) mind and set them against *Born to Run* and *The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle*. Everything is pared down to what is essential to tell the story at hand--something more apparent with writers and poets, but important for songwriters to understand too. This simplification gives these songs (and the listener) room to breathe and to soak in some pretty challenging ideas that weren't previously part of Springsteen's art. And the commercial success of the album changed how we listen, and what we expect from Springsteen.

Like all of these 33-1/3 books, the writing is not always the strongest. This is full of repetitive and sometimes dicey claims and was in desperate need of an editor to help it stay on the rails. But, overall, Himes does a good job of placing this important album in context--for America, for pop music, for Springsteen's journey--and his discussion of the strengths of the album is certainly compelling. Reading some of the reviews of this, it seems that this little book has indeed changed the minds of many a listener which, after all, was the obvious goal here.

And for the record, when I say this is a perfect album but not his best, it's in part because there are several perfect Springsteen discs, in my book: *The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle*, *Born to Run*, *Nebraska*, *Born to Run*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *Born in the U.S.A.*, *Tunnel of Love* and *The Rising*.

Finally, a tip for you. Here's something I finally figured out about this album after many years of a love-hate relationship: Ya gotta listen to it **loud** for it to do its work. Crank it up and you'll be surprised to hear a whole new record come alive (this, on the assumption that you're as old as me and don't find yourself cranking anything up as often as you used to).

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## Paul Gleason says

The 33 1/3 books come in many forms - and Himes' book is one of the entries that focuses primarily on an album's lyrics.

I've always dismissed Springsteen's 1984 release for its 80s' production. Because of this focus, I never thought deeply about Bruce's lyrics. But after reading Himes' book, which doesn't concentrate on the downsides (and there are plenty) of 80s-syle production, I have a new appreciation for the lyrical breadth of Springsteen's words on USA.

Himes argues that Springsteen's lyrics cover everything from comedy to blatant sexual desire to politics. As such, USA covers the most terrain, according to Himes, in the shortest amount of time. He also says *The River* is a masterpiece for similar reasons, but USA is greater because of its conciseness.

Himes also indicates that Springsteen reaches a new level of maturity on *Born in the USA* because he no longer offers the "adolescent" dichotomy of a nihilistic acceptance of one's condition and a willingness to escape one's condition by up and leaving the situation behind.

I need to re-evaluate the record, thanks to Himes.

My complaint about the book is that it just isn't as good as some of the later entries in the series. Its focus is too narrow. In just discussing the album and its place in Springsteen's career, Himes misses an opportunity to discuss the social relevance of the record. Later 33 1/3 books do this.

## **Bud Smith says**

Pretty good album by Bruce Springsteen, I like side B best. Kind of a shitty book. An actual journalist took some time out of their journalistic life to explore themes and other bullshit in The Boss' work. Kind of crazy reading about how the guy who wrote this thought Bruce Springsteen is/was an actual comedian and should write more joke songs. Guess joke songs would have been Bruce Springsteen's bread and butter. He shouldn't have pursued serious crap like Thunder Road or The River. He should have written funny sing songs. Also, the writer did all kinds of corny stuff like pop in lyrics from the songs to make his prose seem hip or something. Guy is a tool box. Springsteen is half a toll box.

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## **Charlie Cottrell says**

This book works best when the author focuses on the changing influences in Springsteen's writing; the survey of his evolving style and themes is endlessly fascinating, if you ask me. It falls rather flat, though, when the author starts going on about the thematic significance of throwaway lines like, "I'm a long gone daddy in the USA." Learning about the simultaneous development of Born in the USA and Nebraska, two starkly different albums, was a unique treat.

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## **Mike says**

See Mary's review—that covers it all. Definitely one of the better reads in the 33 1/3 series. Oh, I'll also add this. It's still unbelievable that Reagan and other conservatives tried to appropriate a song with the following lyrics:

Born down in a dead man's town  
The first kick I took was when I hit the ground  
You end up like a dog that's been beat too much  
Till you spend half your life just covering up

Got in a little hometown jam  
So they put a rifle in my hand  
Sent me off to a foreign land  
To go and kill the yellow man

Come back home to the refinery  
Hiring man says "Son if it was up to me"  
Went down to see my V.A. man  
He said "Son, don't you understand"

I had a brother at Khe Sahn fighting off the Viet Cong  
They're still there, he's all gone

He had a woman he loved in Saigon  
I got a picture of him in her arms now

Down in the shadow of the penitentiary  
Out by the gas fires of the refinery  
I'm ten years burning down the road  
Nowhere to run ain't got nowhere to go

Born in the USA.... The lyrics are still relevant.

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## **Ben says**

Ever wondered what the connection is between Bruce's Born in the U.S.A. and Nebraska albums? How about his storytelling and that of Flannery O'Connor's (i.e. "The River" and "A Good Man's Hard to Find")? And what's the deal with writing songs for Gary US Bonds and Donna Summer? What did Bruce really think about disco? And how does one reconcile rock 'n roll's escapism and outlawism with post-70s Reaganomics and stagflation?

Like, for example, if I'm "Born to Run" and I got a fly new "Pink Cadillac" and I pick-up my "Sherry Darling" and "Drive all Night" what do I do when every other town I land in is just the same as "My Home Town"?

Well, Geoffrey Himes is "Out in the Street" asking what exactly is "The Price You Pay" for "Dancing in the Dark." And if my review of Himes' book about Springsteen's album hasn't driven you completely batshit and rather, in fact, sent you running for the closest Annie Liebowitz photo of Bruce blue-jeaned butt then you should read the hell out of this book. If you don't dig, you might still like this read if you're interested in songwriting, Vietnam, New Jersey, Elvis Presley, or quotation marks.

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