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A new cultural force: a Boss view of music

At this year's South By Southwest music festival the keynote presentation was delivered by Bruce Springsteen whose personal perspective on the development of popular music included some interesting explanations of the contribution British artists made to the development of his career. Jonathan Ives indulged himself by hanging on the Boss's every word.

The South By South West festival used to be a little-known gathering of music industry insiders. Held in Austin, a Texan city rather more appreciative of unorthodoxy than many in the state, the event was a specialised conference where record company executives could talk shop for some of the day and go out to see what the local music scene had to offer for most of the night. SXSW, as the event is now known, has grown from such relatively low-key origins to become one of the major events on the global music industry calendar, boasting huge delegate numbers, a myriad of musicians hoping to get noticed and some big-name keynotes.

The big name this year was one of the biggest. Bruce Springsteen has been one of the dominant names of the US music scene and beyond since the 1970s when, as a young guitar slinger fresh out of New Jersey, he was burdened with the label of "the future of rock and roll". Whether serving time as one of the New Dylans or a stadium-filling superstar, a brooding presence on the cultural sidelines or a focal point for America's social conscience, Springsteen has remained one of music's leading figures throughout his career, celebrated and respected by fans and critics both for his commitment to the quality of his output and his faith in the ability of rock and roll to speak to hearts and minds.

At the unearthly hour of midday Springsteen took to the lectern in front of a packed house and offered an explanation of pop music as a new cultural force, a force that had grown so powerful in such a short space of time that America now had a soul-singing president. Along with some advice for those following in his musical footsteps, his presentation was also striking for its acknowledgement of the role of British musical culture in the development of the sound and career of one of America's most revered and celebrated artists.

Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1956 had been, Springsteen suggested, a transformational moment, unleashing a genie of creativity that could not be put back in the bottle. By the time a young Springsteen picked up a guitar in 1964, there was only ten years of rock and roll history upon which to draw but already rock and roll had changed the cultural landscape. The continuing creativity was to be the only consistent element of popular music from then on; as Lester Bangs put it a decade or so later, "Elvis was the last thing we could all agree on." Springsteen and his peers grasped the potential for involvement and improvisation immediately. "There was no right or pure way of doing it," he said. "The power and the purpose of your music was all that mattered."

Relaxing into the unfamiliar confines of the lectern, Springsteen then charted the music that shaped his understanding of what music could become. After Elvis came doowop – "the most sexual music ever made, the sound of bra straps snapping across the USA" – and Roy Orbison, "the true master of the romantic apocalypse", who sung of the "wreckage, the ruin and heartache" but assured you that it was all worth it. After that it was Phil Spectre and the Wall of Sound, music that "hit me and it felt like a kiss; violence covered in sugar."

Then came the British invasion, which, Springsteen explained, "shifted the lie of the land". The Beatles changed the way things were done. They were independent and they showed aspiring musicians in the US "that everything could come out of your garage". However, Springsteen reserved his most passionate appreciation for a rather unlikely brigade on the invasion force: The Animals. This group of Newcastle-born British bluesmen were, he said, "a revelation" that introduced him to "full-blown class-consciousness for the first time". Calling for an acoustic guitar, Springsteen played the opening chords of

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We've Got to Get Out of This Place and sung a growling, too-early-in-the-morning-to-be-singing version of the opening verse and chorus. He marvelled again at the lyrics, speaking them again for emphasis: "We've got to get out of this place/ Girl, there's a better place for you and me." He smiled at the memory. "That's every song I've ever written right there," he laughed. "Even the new ones."

Beyond the lyrics of escape, ambition and betterment, the themes that were to become Springsteen staples, there was another important element to The Animals' impact that struck an immediate chord with Springsteen as a young man: "There were no good-looking members! The Animals was one of the ugliest groups in rock and roll. Eric Burden looked like a shrunken dad with a wig on." Even the name of the group itself captured Springsteen's imagination. "'The Animals': the name was unforgiving. Final. Irrevocable."

Reaching for the guitar again, he picked the opening riff of Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood and demonstrated how he had appropriated it almost in its entirety for the central riff of Badlands, one of the tracks on Springsteen's Darkness on the Edge of Town album. Released in 1978, Darkness... had followed Born to Run, the album that had announced Springsteen to the world. However, while Born to Run had recreated Phil Spector's Wall of Sound tuned to the note of a racing engine with lyrics speaking of the hopes and aspirations of escape and adventure, Darkness... was more austere, a hard, stripped-down sound that seethed with the frustration and anger of the trapped. This stark energy, Springsteen told SXSW, was fuelled by the UK punk explosion. "I went out and bought all the Sex Pistols records," he said. "They shook the earth." For Springsteen struggling to understand the success he had recently found and struggling to write a new album that would meet the huge expectations of his new admirers and, most importantly, himself, the Pistols records were frightening. "But that was part of their great beauty," he said. "They made you brave. You could not ignore that challenge."

If punk had fuelled a new energy in the growing artist it was the "blue-collar grit" of soul music that had helped him learn his craft as a performer and a writer. "This was music of the earth and the sex-soaked heavens," he said. "It was adult music." Steeped in the social consciousness of Curtis Mayfield, this was the soundtrack of the civil rights movement, while James Brown, still underrated today according to Springsteen, showed that performance was everything for a musician, that "you had to cut it live and your audience would remember you".

In common with so many singer-songwriters Springsteen had been signed to a record label as another New Dylan, which made no sense to him then or now. "The old Dylan was only 30," he laughed. "I don't know why they fucking needed another one." With a single guitar and a unique approach to the task of singing, Bob Dylan had ambled into the civil rights movement to deliver another revelatory moment for Springsteen. "Dylan was the first time I had heard a version of the place I lived that was unvarnished," he said. "He gave us those words. The first thing he asked was 'How does it feel to be on your own?' Bob is the father of my musical country for now and forever. And I thank him."

By the late 1970s Springsteen explained how he had found his way into country music as he tried to write music that he could see himself performing "at the ripe old age of 40". Country's fatalism attracted him. "It was the working man's blues," he said, "the stoic recognition of everyday reality. Rarely politically angry or critical, country had a toxic element best summed up by Jerry Lee Lewis when he sang: 'I've fallen to the bottom and I'm working my way down.'" Hank Williams was singing about having a hole in his bucket and after listening to it countless times Springsteen thought he began to grasp the dark heart of country music and what it meant for him as a performer. He explained: "I felt I was an average guy with an above-average gift but if I worked my ass off on it [I could succeed]. Country was about the truth emanating out of your own sweat."

However, he still felt the need to explore the 'why' at the heart of country. "I wanted an answer to the question of why Hank Williams' bucket had a hole in it," he told SXSW. This exploration led him to Woody Guthrie, the 'Dust Bowl Troubadour' who told the stories of the poor and the dispossessed during the Depression of the 1930s. "Woody's world was one where fatalism was tempered by a practical idealism, where speaking truth to power wasn't futile," Springsteen said. "He never had a hit but he's a ghost in the machine and he tried to answer Hank Williams' question." Picking up the guitar again, he strummed the chords of Guthrie's This Land is Your Land. Playing with Pete Seeger, "the living embodiment of Woody's legacy", helped Springsteen admit that he himself was not going to be Woody Guthrie, not least because "in my

own way I quite liked the comfort of being a star". However, he did understand the potential impact of music and its role in lives of people and places, the poor and the powerful: "I realised that things from the outside make their way in to become the beating heart of a nation." To demonstrate the point he began to sing, pausing briefly to remind his audience that this above all others was a song meant to sung by everyone. They duly obliged.

Bringing his musical journey to a close, Springsteen looked to the future and offered a little advice to the young bloods. "Rumble, young musicians, rumble... Don't take yourselves too seriously and take yourselves as seriously as death itself. Don't worry but worry your asses off. Have iron-clad confidence but doubt. Stay hard, stay hungry and stay alive. Treat it like it's all we have and then remember that it's only rock and roll."

And, having shuffled his notes back into shape, he thanked his audience for listening to him, gave a final wave and headed off for breakfast.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of *The Leisure Review* and, as you may well have guessed, something of a Springsteen aficionado.

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