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## MUSIC

## What's Changed For Bruce Springsteen Fans

By PHIL KUNTZ

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Philadelphia

"I never thought I'd see the day that I would trash my Bruce collection," my friend Chet Karnas e-mailed me in August. Like many others, the 46-year-old New Mexico businessman feels a first-name connection to his Springsteen CDs. He and I were part of a crowd of buddies who met at a Jersey Shore college and bonded over Mr. Springsteen's music in the late 1970s.

More Libertarian than Republican, Mr. Karnas was floored when Mr. Springsteen joined a "Vote for Change" tour of rockers backing Sen. John Kerry, aligning themselves with what my pal sees as the left's blind hatred of President Bush. "It has had a profound effect on my views of my former 'heroes,'" Mr. Karnas wrote. "Can't they just play music without alienating their fan base?"

I didn't have such a visceral reaction. Yet I attended Mr. Springsteen's opening at the Wachovia Center here Friday with trepidation. This was rooted not in my own politics, be they for or against his, but fear that my life as a diehard Bruce fan was about to become a little more difficult, a little less fun.


Mr. Springsteen and the E Street Band is one of 41 acts performing in six traveling troupes for 22 shows in 12 swing states and Washington, D.C., to raise money for get-out-the-vote efforts by the pro-Democratic group America Coming Together. Monday's Washington show will be broadcast live on the Sundance Channel. A final Springsteen show, in New Jersey on Oct. 13, was announced yesterday.

Friday's show here also featured Bright Eyes, R.E.M. and John Fogerty, but it had the feel of any other Springsteen concert. The parking lot was the usual festival of tailgaters, the merriment occasionally interrupted by Democrats seeking to register voters. Kerry T-shirts were in evidence, but Bruce ones outnumbered them.



Inside, "the emphasis [was] placed firmly on hard rockin' rather than grandiose speechifyin'," as the Springsteen fan Web site [backstreets.com](http://backstreets.com)<sup>1</sup> aptly put it. Mr. Springsteen and R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe opened with short statements advocating American regime change. "And we plan to rock the joint while doing so," Mr. Springsteen said. Nothing came close to the mean-spirited insults that Whoopi Goldberg and other liberal entertainers hurl at Mr. Bush. Instead, the performers made fun of themselves. "We're R.E.M., and we approve of this

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REUTERS/Tim Shaffer

**Rocking the vote:** The major part of the Boss's fan base -- under-50 white males -- is more likely to vote for Bush, by almost a 2-to-1 margin.

concert," Mr. Stipe announced. During his set, Mr. Springsteen issued a short "public service announcement" in favor of Mr. Kerry.

The music did most of the talking, for over four hours. "Free Teflon whitewashed presidency, we're sick of being jerked around," Mr. Stipe sang on "Bad Day." Mr. Springsteen opened with a stark Hendrixesque "The Star-Spangled Banner" instrumental on a 12-string acoustic guitar before tearing into a trio of his own anthems: "Born in the USA," "Badlands" and "No Retreat, No Surrender," Sen. Kerry's theme song. "We sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam, now we're wondering what they were dyin' for," Mr. Springsteen mourned later, on 1995's "Youngstown."

Backed by Mr. Springsteen and the band, John Fogerty sang "Fortunate Son," an unstated dig at the president. For fun, Messrs. Springsteen and Stipe joined each other's sets -- the former for R.E.M.'s goofy "Man on the Moon," the latter for Bruce's blistering ode to undying love, "Because the Night."

The show ended with the main performers -- four generations of rock -- cramming the stage for Nick Lowe's "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding" and Patti Smith's "People Have the Power."

It was big fun, and I felt rejuvenated -- not by the message, but by the fact that there was a message. "What's been missing from rock 'n' roll for a long time has been a conscience," Robert Santelli, the director of the Experience Music Project in Seattle, told me.

For selfish reasons, however, I remain disquieted. Some people buy season tickets to the opera or the Knicks. I go to Springsteen shows. I have seen him perform more than 100 times, the first in 1978 at the arena next door to Friday's venue. Back then, his most political statement came while covering Eddie Cochran's "Summertime Blues": "I'd like to help you, son, but you're too young to vote." I've left every Bruce show since drenched in joyful sweat.

Much of my enjoyment stems from introducing people to his craft. I get as many tickets as I can to each show I attend and dole them out to the uninitiated.

During his last tour, a friend made my night when, after long humoring my enthusiasm, she turned to me after the second song and said: "OK, now I get it. When can we go again?" A cherished memory: I dragged my aging parents to a Tallahassee show with three of my siblings 20 years ago. As Mr. Springsteen, soaked and exhausted, fell to his knees to belt out the soulful climax of "Jungleland," my mother stared at him, mouth agape, eyes wide, shaking her head in awe. And then my father struggled to stand on his chair so he could fist-salute to the drumbeat like everybody else.

Now Mr. Springsteen is taking on a cargo-load of political baggage. His leanings long have been clear, from his voice-of-the-underdog lyrics and his short nightly commentaries in favor of liberal charities and against war. In 1984, he chastised Ronald Reagan for invoking his name on the stump in New Jersey. "This is very consistent with everything he's written for the entire arc of his career," Max Weinberg, his drummer, told me.

But I fear that by crossing the Rubicon from political to partisan, Mr. Springsteen has become a harder sell, easier to dismiss as a limousine liberal. I kind of wish my hero had remained above it all and continued to

use the credibility and accessibility that come with nonpartisanship to preach his gospel of peace, hope, redemption and compassion for the downtrodden.

The message board on his official Web site, [bruce.springsteen.net](http://bruce.springsteen.net)<sup>2</sup>, now is peppered with angry missives from self-described former fans. Perhaps the negative reaction illustrates how far rock and its fans have strayed from the we-can-change-the-world roots of Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan and others. Young and middle-aged white men are a major part of Mr. Springsteen's base -- and of President Bush's. In a recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll, Mr. Bush beat Mr. Kerry among 18-to-49-year-old white men by 62% to 32%.

To gauge this crowd's reaction, I called Phil Zito, a hardcore Republican college buddy in New Jersey. We've rocked to Bruce together hundreds of times. Will we again? His answer was reassuring: "If he brings it up at a concert, I'm going to boo him -- and then I'll continue to dance." Then I checked in with Mr. Karnas. His Bruce CDs remain intact, though they're currently banished from his play-list. And, yes, he'll probably check out another Bruce show someday, too. But Mr. Springsteen's partisanship, he said, "will take a little bit of the joy away, and that hurts."

*Mr. Kuntz is the deputy Money & Investing editor for the Journal.*

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