

The Stars and Stripes, rock anthems and stadiums have gone. In their place, a black T-shirt, acoustic guitar and a single spotlight. And Bruce Springsteen has never sounded—or felt—better.

# REBORN in the USA

The clock is approaching midnight backstage at the Township Auditorium in Columbia, South Carolina, as Bruce Springsteen sits chatting to a group of workers from the Harvest Hope Food Bank, a local charity that dispenses food to the swelling ranks of homeless and dispossessed in the mid-90s. Downstairs, a handful of Springsteen fans sit clustered around the foot of the stage in the deserted auditorium, hoping for a post-concert autograph. Their patience is rewarded a few minutes later when Springsteen ambles down dressed in blue jeans, black boots and a khaki shirt to crouch on the stage for an informal chat while signing tickets and autograph books.

A decade ago, when Springsteen last visited this southern college town of 500,000, he was the biggest rock star in the United States, perhaps the world. Those were the heady days of his *Born In The USA* album, when Springsteen toured like a triumphal hero from one packed football stadium to another, playing legendary three-hour performances with the E Street Band against a gargantuan backdrop of the American flag.

But tonight, Springsteen performed alone under stark lighting to a couple of thousand diehard fans, most of them middle-aged and married like he is. His dressing room was a windowless,

area of the modest '40s auditorium. His entourage consisted of a handful of roadies, a manager, his six-year-old son Evan a latest album, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, has long since dropped from the Billboard charts, the least popular record he has ever made. By midnight he has gone as the tour moves on quietly towards Alabama, where Springsteen will give his 100th performance for 1996.

To any other major-league American rock star, this would sound like a career in free fall, but when Springsteen talks about his latest incarnation – a two-hour, one-man performance in which his only accompaniment comes from a six- or 12-string guitar and a rack of harmonicas – he sounds like someone who has found a new calling.

"After 30 years on the road, to find yourself in some new place where you have a job to do, where you feel useful, where you feel connected to the most vital part of your voice ... I'm a lucky guy," he says in his familiar husky tone. Apologising for his 10-year absence from Australia, Springsteen laughs self-consciously. "A lot of stuff went on – marriages, and so on. But I feel like I'm coming back with my best."

Rock stars often say things like this, of course, particularly when they have a new album in the shops. But in Springsteen's case, the sentiments are no mere self-promotional hubris. The concert he brings to Australia next month marks a

genuine creative rebirth after a decade in which his personal and artistic life seemed to drift through a mid-life malaise.

Liberated from the burdens of stardom, Springsteen has re-emerged as a folk singer, albeit one with a finely tuned sense of theatrics and enough emotional maturity to talk wryly on stage about his failed first marriage and the incongruities of fame.

"This is the best song I've ever written – forget all that *Born In The USA* bullshit," he cheerfully tells his audience in Alabama, the night after the South Carolina concert. Then he launches into a scabrous ditty called *Sell It*, which lampoons Dionne Warwick's psychic phone-in-line, Cher's 1-800 cosmetics line and other desperate acts of American celebrity marketing.

If Springsteen's new-found candour is unexpected – his extended monologue about oral sex certainly surprises some US audiences – the new show is also a powerful reminder of why he has long been the most hyped stage performer in rock'n'roll than a meditation on the struggles of the American poor, a subject that should by now be reduced to a hollowed-out cliché but is, instead, delivered with an intense conviction that overrides even its most sentimental moments.

Knees bent, leaning into his 12-string acoustic guitar as if a gale were blowing, Springsteen delivers raw-throated,

dramatically reinterpreted versions of old songs like *The Promised Land* and *Adam Raised a Cain*, their bleak lyrical themes meshing seamlessly with new songs about the homeless, jobless and immigrant underclass. Not many performers could get away with this concert's finale, in which Springsteen plays several of his saddest and most understated new songs to a silent hall, delivering a hushed monologue which recapitulates (believe it or not) the final scene of the movie version of John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Springsteen was a pop star when he visited Australia in 1986; a decade later he's become one of the rare rock musicians capable of reinventing both himself and the form without losing the essence of either.

"It's not a rock show," Springsteen says. "The rock'n'roll in it is in its spirit and in its essence, in the way that Hank Williams was rock'n'roll or [Delta bluesman] Robert Johnson was rock'n'roll. It's in the idea of telling a story about a secret part of the country, which is what I always thought was the function of rock music and country music at its best – telling the story of people you weren't supposed to see; people who were meant to be invisible and stay invisible."

BY RICHARD GUILLIATT