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SEARCHING FOR BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

A Tale of Asbury Park, New Jersey

In 1980's New Jersey, the quest to be present when Bruce Springsteen magically appeared in some aging Jersey Shore bar was a crusade of mythic proportions. Somebody's sister or cousin or "some guy who works with Clarence Clemons' brother" always had the inside scoop on when Bruce was going to show up, unannounced, at The Stone Pony in Asbury Park, and jam with the local rock n' roll heroes. The tip would come unexpectedly, sometimes just hours before show time, as I sat at my clerk's desk in Manhattan waiting for the workday to wind down. My original plans for the evening were immediately discarded, and my beach house buddies or college friends and I would head for Asbury Park by car or New Jersey Transit train. We'd leave behind the limitless possibilities and excitement presented by a Friday night in New York City, for that small, decaying block, just a few feet from the Asbury Park boardwalk.

In March of 1999, Bruce and The E Street Band returned to the Asbury Park Convention Center to rehearse for their first tour together in over ten years. Diehard fans huddled outside the historic boardwalk building in freezing temperatures, and listened as Springsteen's music escaped from the hall and covered the beach like a mist. While there are many references to Asbury Park in Bruce's songs and the "Greetings From Asbury Park, N. J." postcard adorns the cover of his debut album, the connections between Bruce, his music, the city and its spirit, run much deeper than the surface of album sleeves or liner notes.

Asbury Park, like many boardwalk towns, has always had many more "mom and pop" luncheonettes and ice cream parlors than chain restaurants. Motels with names like "Albion", "Ambassador", and "Empress" outnumbered the solitary Howard Johnson's. Anyone who visited Asbury Park during the 1960's and 70's most likely experienced a boardwalk crowded with families on vacation, eating cotton candy and caramel apples, Taylor ham sandwiches, chocolate fudge and salt water taffy. The children rode the merry-go-round and played harmless games of chance (like the ten cent betting wheel or fish pond), winning worthless but coveted prizes, such as colorful combs the length of a ruler and the width of a wallet, long, plastic backscratchers shaped like a monkey's paw at the end, and neatly wrapped packets of fake money.

Like a number of New Jersey cities, the riots of the late 1960's and other economic factors propelled Asbury into decline. With urban blight, however, came the promise of gentrification, and throughout >

the 1980's and 1990's, Asbury was the subject of a number of ambitious redevelopment projects, with property rights to the boardwalk changing hands. None of those plans ever got off the ground though. On my last trip to Asbury's boardwalk, I stood near The Casino, stunned by the languished landscape before me. There was a biker bar where the tea-cups ride used to be. Young men with beepers stood guard outside the lone remaining arcade, reality having invaded the fantasyland of winning a stuffed animal for your girlfriend after ten high-scoring games of Skee-ball. To one side of me, a shirtless young man hosed down a mysterious crimson stain on the boardwalk with some fast-acting chemicals, while on the other side of the fence an elderly woman blessed the beach with a metal detector, her eyes shaded by a green visor and her precise sweeping movements making her appear robotic. The "Merchant of Venice" boat ride, which had taken would-be Venetians on a half-hour tour through man-made canals (that weaved in and out underneath the boardwalk and out to the piers over the ocean), was dry; replica gondolas were stacked on top of each other like poker chips waiting to be tossed onto the table during the next boardwalk redevelopment project bluff. Most, if not all, of the food stands were closed, although the circle-shaped Howard Johnson's restaurant at the other end of the boardwalk, the only one I had ever seen without the traditional orange roof, looked as if it might be open for business.

Still somewhat dazed, I wandered in front of the boarded-up Kohr's frozen custard stand, its overhead sign resting at my feet. My childhood delight of choosing from thirty-five different flavors and drinking freshly squeezed orangeade (with pulp floating on top) through a candy cane-colored paper straw had been swindled from me by broken promises.

Though no longer in its golden age, Asbury Park was the place to comb the avenues for Bruce. For the truly inspired, the search knew no limitations, seasonal or otherwise. You might think the summer trips were more enjoyable, but, in many ways, the winter journeys were superior because the dark streets and the beach were deserted, having been abandoned at first chill. Making the pilgrimage, we felt devoted and unstoppable; particularly when we took the New Jersey Transit train, which left us in the center of the city, and walked for blocks through swirling winds and bitter cold air until we reached the ocean. There was no reason to be down there on a 20-degree night unless you were searching for something.

Some nights, we knew right away that Bruce wasn't going to show up, like the time we arrived and the marquee displayed the names of three metal bands with The Edgar Winter Group headlining, but we stayed 'til the end nevertheless. (The worst thing that could

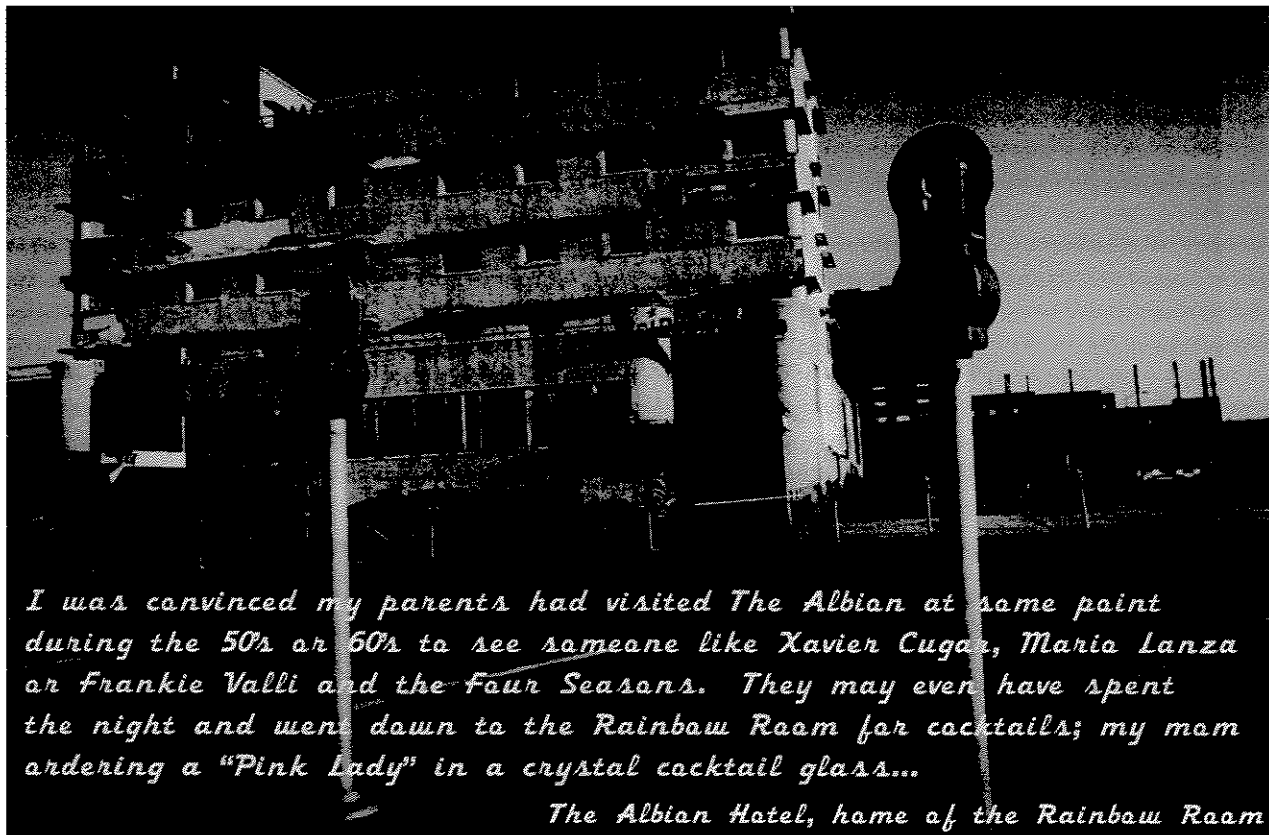


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My voice was hoarse from screaming out requested songs and loudly participating in a group sing-along of a cover of "Maggie May." My ears were ringing, but I could hear the muffled sounds of the ocean waves crashing on the beach a block to my right; as if I had covered my ears with sea shells.



I was convinced my parents had visited The Albion at some point during the 50's or 60's to see someone like Xavier Cugat, Maria Lanza or Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. They may even have spent the night and went down to the Rainbow Room for cocktails; my mom ordering a "Pink Lady" in a crystal cocktail glass...

The Albion Hotel, home of the Rainbow Room

have happened was that "he" showed up after we had given up, and we read about it in the newspaper the next day). On those low-percentage nights, we got our hands stamped with the club's trademark red pony and went to the pizza joint next door while the opening acts played. The pizza place was a great hole-in-the-wall that was warmed by huge baker's ovens and served slices, cafeteria-style, on white paper plates. On concert nights, the pizza joint was the holy ground surrounding the sanctuary next door. Inside, there was the comforting feeling that everyone was there for the same reason. On a few occasions, we hurriedly swallowed our slices after hearing what sounded like a huge ovation coming from The Pony and getting paranoid that Bruce had taken the stage.

The spirit from the club and the passion of countless others who had made the journey before us, sanctified the pizza place. Even the time I spotted a huge bug crawling by my feet on the men's room floor, added to the magic and made us think that was part of what the Jersey Shore rock n' roll experience was all about.

After pizza, on the way back to the show, we'd pass by the club's side door nearest the stage. There being no "backstage" area to retreat to after the final set, band members would often exit through the door and huddle on a small patch of grass outside the building, soaking in the adrenaline highs and excitedly shouting out titles of possible encore songs to the group's leader. Even the sounds of a club patron getting sick nearby wouldn't distract the band as they ran back into the building and up the side steps to stand before their adoring fans.

After the last encore, the house lights were turned up, and we'd exit through that same side door. On the many nights we walked

away from the club dejected, after having waited for Bruce for hours, we craned our necks into the pizza place just to make sure he wasn't in there fueling up with a couple of Sicilian slices for a 3 a.m. curtain call.

Perhaps more myth than fact, Asbury Park lore during the 1980's was that one might run into Bruce anywhere within the city's limits. Wandering the boardwalk one night before a show, I entered the Palace Amusements building. If The Stone Pony was Asbury's temple of rock n' roll, the Palace Amusements building was the cathedral of the boardwalk. Springsteen fans know The Palace from, among other things, the lyrical reference in "Born to Run", and the "Tunnel of Love" video. The huge grinning face known as "Tillie" is painted on one of The Palace's exterior walls. A mainstay of the boardwalk, The Palace had entertained people of all ages for 100 years until it closed in 1988.

The Palace had been home to the one hundred-year-old carousel built by legendary carousel designer Charles Looft in 1895. I remember examining the beautifully painted, ornate panels that encircled the top frame of the carousel, and depicted the "Seven Wonders of the World." In 1989, the carousel was dismantled and sold in anticipation of a condominium redevelopment project that never materialized; the beautifully hand-carved wooden stallions, cherubs and Roman chariot were actually auctioned off piece by piece. During the same year, Springsteen's shows on the "Tunnel of Love" tour opened with carnival spotlights weaving "figure eight's" across the stage, as carousel and calliope music filled the building, bringing The Palace's Tunnel of Love and majestic carousel to cities throughout the world.

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In late 1998, part of The Palace collapsed, and the city declared it structurally unsound. The news of the collapse prompted The Asbury Park Press to solicit stories of The Palace from its readers. A woman celebrating her 47th year of marriage told how she met her husband at the carousel and that he still had the ring she gave him from "the merry-go-round that night in 1950"; another woman wrote, that for the brief moment she rode the carousel as a 9-year-old, she was free from the worries and fears of her parents' divorce; others wrote of cuddling with lovers on the Ferris wheel, which rose through the roof of the complex, listening to the waves crash against the beach. In all cases, the people spoke of a connection to Asbury Park that had endured for more than forty years.

Bruce never did show up on any of those nights I journeyed to Asbury Park, not even on one eerie Memorial Day weekend evening in 1989 when a photographer from Time Magazine was inside The Stone Pony snapping ghost shots of the crowd to accompany an article about the dying boardwalk. That's okay though, because somewhere in the process of searching for Bruce Springsteen among the Asbury Park landmarks immortalized by his songs, a lasting connection developed with him and the city with which he will forever be associated. That bond is epitomized by another Stone Pony excursion I made that ended close to 4:00 a.m. on July 4, 1989 with a slow walk to my car. My guinea T-shirt and Levi's jeans were drenched with sweat from four and one-half hours of rock n' roll. My black boots decorated with the dusty footprints of fellow bar fly brothers and sisters who had inadvertently stepped on me while balancing two beers and trying to get closer to the stage. My voice was hoarse from screaming out requested songs and loudly participating in a group sing-along of a cover of "Maggie May." My ears were ringing, but I could hear the muffled sounds of the ocean waves crashing on the beach a block to my right; as if I had covered my ears with sea shells.

Just across the parking lot from where I stood rested the remains of The Albion Hotel, a five story building which overlooked the Atlantic Ocean and was built around the time of the 1939-1940 World's Fair. Vacant and in disrepair, but at the same time structurally sound and thirsty for renovation, The Albion looked like it could be ready to re-open in about a month.

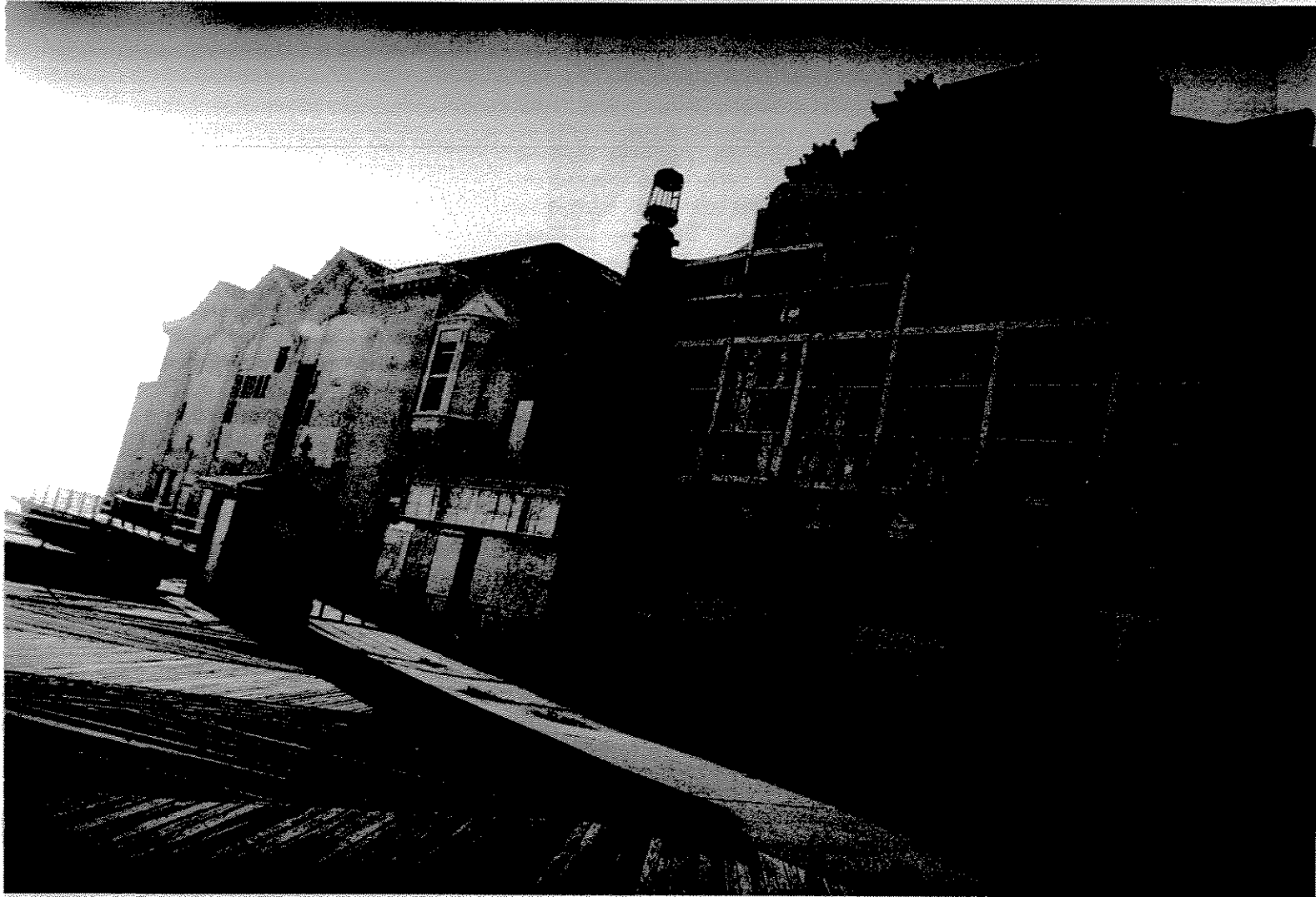
My eyes were drawn to the slightly curved neon "Rainbow Room" nightclub sign bent across the first floor entrance like the wings of a seagull. I didn't know it at the time, but I was convinced my parents had visited The Albion at some point during the 50's or 60's to see someone like Xavier Cugat, Mario Lanza or Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. They may even have spent the night and went down to the Rainbow Room for cocktails; my mom ordering a "Pink Lady" in a crystal cocktail glass and then sipping coffee which a white-gloved waiter poured from a silver pot with a long spout into a rose-adorned, fine china cup; my father, looking lovingly across the small linen-covered table at my mother, smiling, and drinking a whiskey sour. Who wouldn't leave Newark for a romantic night by the sea and a dip in a "Floridian" pool? I didn't know it that night in 1989, but both of my parents, like that grand hotel, would soon be gone.

I got in my car and began a lonely drive out of town, back up the Garden State Parkway. Not too far out of Asbury Park, Bruce Springsteen's 1973 tune, "4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)" came on the radio courtesy of a graveyard shift, Bruce aficionado deejay. Hearing that song made me smile. Bruce's story of summer romance and flight from the boardwalk lifted my spirits, carrying me through the darkest part of the morning, all the way from Eatontown to the Amboy Bridges.

At that moment, I felt the same happiness I did when I was eight, riding home in the dark back seat of the family Oldsmobile, blindly picking colorful sticks of salt water taffy out of a tub I had just won during a day on the boardwalk with my parents.

As I approached the only open tollbooth lane just before the exit to my house, I didn't know what was ahead of me, but amazingly, still alive amidst all the decay, was the promise of something great. And although the odds weren't in my favor, I was sure that that something was unbelievably close -- either down the nearest alleyway or pulling up in the car next to me. >

Looking back on it now, I'm actually glad that none of those redevelopment plans were completed before I made my trips to Asbury. I know the experience wouldn't have been the same if The Palace had been a Six Flags; the pizza joint a Pizzeria Uno; The Albion, a Holiday Inn Express; and The Stone Pony, a Hard Rock Café. And while the deterioration of Asbury Park's physical landscape might lead the casual observer to conclude that the spirit of the city is dead and



buried, the next time you catch Bruce on schedule at 8:20 p.m. sharp at the biggest corporate arena in your city, or unexpectedly at 1 a.m. in a seaside bar, watch carefully when you hear him proclaim: "One, two, ah, one, two, three, four . . ." cherished memories from the boardwalk, romantic visions from The Rainbow Room, and the conviction that something magical lay just around the corner, will come alive before your very eyes. ☆