

Springsteen Silences Crowd With Orders, Powerful Acoustic Songs

(Review. Rick Warner is an editor for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By Rick Warner

May 20 (Bloomberg) -- Shush, the Boss is working.

Bruce Springsteen, who insists on quiet while performing during his current acoustic tour, told some loudmouthed fans to zip it during his performance last night at Continental Airlines Arena in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

``Shut the (expletive) up, man!'' he shouted at some yahoos who were loudly complaining about the quality of the sound system. ``If there's a problem, there's the door.''

Bruce's strict rules for the tour -- theater-size venues, no seating during songs, no concession sales during the show, no intermission and ABSOLUTELY no ringing cell phones -- make perfect sense for a singer who wants the audience to concentrate on his solo tour de force with as few distractions as possible.

Those who pay attention are richly rewarded.

At last night's show, before a crowd of 5,000 that filled the partitioned ``theater'' section of the arena, Springsteen showed he can command a stage for 2 1/2 hours without the rollicking accompaniment of the E Street Band. His 25-song set, which included nine of the 12 tracks from his new ``Devils & Dust'' CD, showcased Bruce on guitar, pump organ, piano, harmonica and even banjo, on a whistling-enhanced, almost unrecognizable version of ``I'm on Fire.''

``Devils & Dust''

It's Springsteen's haunting voice, though, that brings deeper meaning to the lives of the loners, lovers, drifters, killers, fighters and other marginal characters who populate his musical short stories. From the guttural, bluesy sound of ``Reason to Believe,''' which was accentuated by his rhythmic stomping foot, to his high-pitched, prairie wailing on ``Lonesome Day'' and the sad, soulful sound of ``Reno,''' Springsteen displayed a range of emotion and styles rarely seen among rock superstars.

Other standouts included a dirge-like ``My Beautiful Reward,''' a soaring ``Paradise,''' a hard-driving ``Further On (Up the Road)'' and a raw, stripped-down ``Promised Land'' in which Springsteen provided his own drumbeat by

slapping his hand on the body of his guitar.

Since it's called the ``Devils & Dust'' tour, it's no surprise that Bruce is spotlighting his new album. Along with ``Reno,'' an explicit tale about prostitution that got that CD banned from the Starbucks coffee chain, Springsteen performed every song from ``Devils & Dust'' except ``Maria's Bed,'' ``Silver Palomino'' and ``All I'm Thinkin' About.''

Political Opinions

The best of the bunch were the bouncy ``Long Time Comin','' the tragic ``Matamoros Banks'' (about an illegal immigrant who drowns trying to cross over the Mexican-U.S. border) and ``The Hitter,'' the mournful tale of a broken-down boxer. While it's too early to tell if anything off ``Devils & Dust'' will enter the hallowed Springsteen canon, these songs clearly show that he hasn't lost his passion for songwriting or social messages.

If you're turned off by musicians voicing their opinions on political and religious issues, you should stay away from this tour. Along with Springsteen's music, you get his take on the changing of popes (``It's like watching a high-end trade for a team you don't root for. You hope it works out, but you really don't care.''), immigration (``We need a president with the guts to come out with a humane immigration policy.'') and evolution critics (``You couldn't make `The Flintstones' today. It would be too controversial.'')

But for those of us who appreciate a musical artist who hasn't let big-time success sap his talents or energy, Springsteen remains the Boss.

--Editors: Hoelterhoff, Wilson.

Story illustration: For more cultural news from Bloomberg, see {MUSE <GO>}. For more information on Springsteen's tour, visit <http://www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index.html>

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