

Spirit in the night

By Daniel Durchholz

SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

Over a career that spans more than three decades, Bruce Springsteen has cut a huge swath across the rock 'n' roll landscape — the musical equivalent of Sherman's march to the sea.

Yet the impression he makes on each listener is so intense and per-

and all — it was still a cool shirt.

It wasn't a formal interview setting, yet Springsteen spoke in paragraphs, like someone who was used to having people listen to him talk. As journalists who are overjoyed when interview subjects speak at length instead of grunting monosyllables, we were disinclined to interrupt him much.

Because he was touring behind the "Tom Joad" record, the conversation soon turned to "The Grapes of Wrath." I spoke about Steinbeck and how I'd recently reread the book, something I hadn't done since high school. What I didn't realize was that, though Springsteen is an avid reader, too, it wasn't the novel that Springsteen had responded to so viscerally, but rather John Ford's film.

Springsteen seemed aware of the irony of a millionaire rock star being moved to write a suite of songs by a 1940 black-and-white movie about migrant workers, but it was clear that he was serious about his new album and wanted to make a connection with his fans in ways he hadn't been able to before.

On the "Tom Joad" tour, he was performing solo for the first time. There was no Big Man to lean on, no Miami Steve. The record hadn't been a big seller the way some of his full-band rock albums had been, but he seemed comfortable with that. It was as if he'd had enough — for a while at least — of the stadium shows, the platinum albums, the Grammys and even an Oscar. At that moment, he was just a songwriter with some stories to tell, and if only his hard-core audience was there to hear them, so be it.

A decade later, Springsteen has reached that point again. "Devils & Dust" follows in the footsteps of "Tom Joad" and "Nebraska," his solo acoustic effort from 1982. Having toured the last time around with the reunited E Street Band, playing songs from "The Rising," an album that — to the extent that any mere collection of songs could — helped heal the wounds of 9/11, you get the feeling that Springsteen is purposefully stripping things back once more.

These are songs for his core audience members, the ones who are with him whether he is playing in front of a sea of people pumping their fists to his music or sitting by himself with just a guitar and piano.

On Saturday night, he'll be on the stage of the Fox Theatre, which is not a small venue by any stretch. But for me, he'll still be that guy in a small dark room, speaking in hushed tones about the things he cares about and that he wants us to care about, too.

Maybe he'll even wear that cool shirt with the holes in the shoulder.

Springsteen makes each fan feel a special connection

sonal that fans — and journalists — tend to speak unbidden about encounters with the Boss, whether they occurred from a football field's length away from the stage or in a much more personal setting.

Why should I be any different?

I've never interviewed Bruce Springsteen, but I finally met him in Chicago, on his "Ghost of Tom Joad" tour in 1995. By then, I'd been a fan for more than 20 years, a veteran of maybe a dozen shows, from the "Born to Run" tour forward. Eventually, and through circumstances unrelated to Springsteen, I became someone whose job included writing about him.

I attended the show at the Rosemont Theatre with two friends, both of them journalists. One of them knew Springsteen fairly well and had interviewed him several times over the previous few years. The other said he and Bruce were pals from the old days, something we simply didn't believe. Yet when the three of us were ushered into a basement dressing room, Springsteen called that person's name from across the room and the two hugged it out. The other journalist and I picked our jaws up off the floor and then went over to shake hands with Springsteen.

The room was dark and cool, and in the background "Music by Ry Cooder," a collection of the guitarist's soundtrack music, played on a boombox. Springsteen offered us drinks and made small talk about the tour.

He was wearing black jeans and a tan suede shirt that he'd worn onstage. It probably cost as much as the car I'd driven from Minneapolis. I was startled to see that there were holes in the shirt at the shoulder, until I realized they'd been caused by his guitar strap. And what the heck, holes

Bruce Springsteen

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday
Where: Fox Theatre,
527 North Grand Boulevard
How much: \$77.50-\$87.50
More info: 314-531-1111 or
www.metrotix.com

Photo by Carlos Osorio / The Associated Press

