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May 2, 2012— Mama Knows 'Rithmetic

It fell out on a May evening . . .

I find myself in the pit, a green band around my wrist, at the brand-spanking-new Prudential Center in Newark. New York “muso” Richard has opened the door and I have stepped in for my first E Street show since 2004’s *Vote For Change*, when Springsteen had sounded hoarse from all that hectoring. Tonight, he is saying farewell to the arena leg of the *Wrecking Ball* tour. Stadia beckon—again. But for now, he has a home-state audience in a hyped-up state of mind, iPhones akimbo, ready to greet their returning hero. And suddenly there he is, declaiming to the rafters with the first surprise of the evening, “No Surrender,” the truest anthem on that mountainous multimillion seller, *Born In The USA*.

Alongside me are legionnaires of true believers, one of whom, Larry, had been telling me about seeing him at Joe’s Place, a cramped, crumbling Boston bar that had been the E Street Band’s home away from home in 1973–74; when “Rosalita” came out every night and torched the place. A broad grin etches his face when the big boss man announces, half a dozen songs in, that he is gonna do a song he’d never played, well, maybe once: “Bishop danced with a thumbscrew woman/ Did a double-quick back flip and slid across the floor.”

“Bishop Danced” had been the opening track on a classic seventies Springsteen LP, *Fire On The Fingertips*. Just not one that Bruce himself okayed for release. Rather, it was spawned among the stalls of Camden Lock. A bootleg. But for the hard core, this mattered not. It was a lost Bruce classic, transformed by the band arrangement it never got back in

1973. (He *had* done it more than once—and in Boston—but the last documented version was in Berkeley, March 2, 1973.)

And then, as if reading our minds, Springsteen segues into “Saint In The City”—another blast from the past he rarely takes for a spin these days—and a thought flashes across my mind. May 2. It was forty years ago today that a callow kid from Freehold walked into the office of John Hammond, the legendary A&R man who discovered Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Aretha Franklin and Dylan, and played him a song that knocked his socks off. The self-same “Saint.”

After this, the show settles into its routine; but in my mind’s eye, I am already in rewind, back to the days when he spent his afternoons at WBCN, debuting the likes of “Bishop Danced” and “Rosanita” over the radio, and his evenings at Joe’s Place. Or Max’s. Or The Main Point. And I’m thinking this is a surprisingly good facsimile of those moments and that band; but a facsimile, nonetheless. How he got there—and got from there to here—is the story of the *E Street Shuffle*. And quite a story it is. Because, as he told an expectant audience in Austin this very March:

“I had nights and nights of bar-playing behind me to bring my songs home . . . These skills gave me a huge ace up my sleeve. And when we finally went on the road, and we played that ace, we scorched the Earth.”

Prehistory: 1964–72— Kicked Open A Door To Your Mind

Till I was thirteen, the body was presumed dead; and that's how I feel about my whole life up till then. I was just reeling through space and bouncing off the walls, and bouncing off people, and I didn't find anything to hold on to or any connection whatsoever; until the rock & roll thing and the guitar. When I found that . . . the other stuff just didn't matter any more.—Bruce Springsteen, 1978

When Jesus gently chastised his wealthy follower, Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,” he presumably did not have in mind the same “born again” experience which led thirteen-year-old Bruce Springsteen into apostasy. Here was someone who only found “the Spirit” when he cast aside the teachings of J.C., previously laid down with an iron hand by a series of matriarchal authority figures, from the nuns at the local convent school he attended prior to high school to the mother who presided over the Springsteens’ dilapidated leasehold in Freehold, New Jersey.

If Jesus’ own take on rebellion failed to lay a seed in Springsteen’s mind, the one true religion which by AD 325 garbled records of his pithy sayings had spawned wrapped its talons around the boy from the cradle. But not to the grave. Even if its primary message stayed with him until at least 1981, when he told one Belgian interviewer “My Catholic education taught me to have fear. This is a religious experience in which you don’t look up to heaven, but to the people around you.”

A year later he would write “My Father’s House,” the first of several post-therapy compositions to address that time when he lived his whole life in fear. On introducing that song in concert, he struck the same