

Devils & Dust by Bruce Springsteen

Right around the time that most of America's other major songwriters were making albums with a scaled-down sound, with a proud and organic acoustic sound reflective of the resurgence of folk and country music all the way down the food chain, Bruce Springsteen made *The Rising* (2002). Produced by Brendan O'Brien, famous for making records with a succession of hard-rocking bands, the album did not disappoint in that respect. *The Rising* is to be commended for trying to combine anti war sentiments with empathy for the victims of 9/11. But through a combination of the choice of title track, the songs chosen to open concerts on the tie-in tour (*The Rising* and *Lonesome Day*), and the fact that this was the first album recorded by the entire E Street Band in almost twenty years, *The Rising* is best remembered for its tub-thumping songs rather than its more thoughtfully-written and interesting-sounding songs. The sound on the album's songs comes at you like a wash – nothing quite as well-defined as the wall of sound which *Born to Run* (1975) used to such great effect; more a big wet wave swooping at you with all the solid determination of a floundering fish. Springsteen's latest offering, *Devils & Dust*, is a different breed of album. Different stylistically, as the artist displays a delayed reaction to the 'Americana' boom and makes his own intimate, small-band album; different in terms of quality, because the album is a masterpiece. Eight years ago, in his mid-fifties, Bob Dylan released *Time Out of Mind* (1997) – a much-vaunted return to form, in which the songwriter explored personal themes to a garage-band type backing. Springsteen is around the same age now that Dylan was when he made that album, and in a sense *Devils & Dust* is his *Time Out of Mind*. The songs are deeply personal – whether fictional or otherwise – and the directly political and economic messages of Springsteen's 1995 album, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, are rejected in favour of a more nuanced, personal, socio-political approach. The title track, which opens the album, is an anti-war song of sorts: "I got my finger on the trigger / But I don't know who to trust". But as it winds towards its conclusion, and the band gradually grows, the subject matter surprisingly becomes more introspective, and the chorus asks more questions than it answers: "Well I've got God on my side And I'm just trying to survive What if what you do to survive Kills the things you love". The next few songs follow similar personal lines, in the style of Springsteen's best songwriting. *All the Way Home* is a re-hash of a song he wrote many years ago, but O'Brien's production brings the song in line with the mood of the rest of the album. Springsteen swallows and mumbles his words as only he can, and it is left to O'Brien to command the song's image with a McCartney-esque melodic bass line. Following this, *Reno* tells the story of a man who seeks solace from his problems with a prostitute – and doesn't find anything like what he was after. *Long Time Comin'* is an instrumental vehicle for the album's small core band – Marty Rifkin excels on steel guitar. In actual fact, though, it is Springsteen's own guitar which defines the album's sound for the most part. His acoustic playing always comes across as more thoughtful and mature than his electric playing (which sounds impressive but is actually not terribly imaginative). And on this album, it is his well-placed (at times sparse) acoustic playing which creates the album's mood – intimate and reflective without being nostalgic or mawkish. The middle part of *Devils & Dust* is what defines it as one of Springsteen's finest albums, artistically speaking. *Black Cowboys* is a tale of some forgotten heroes of Oklahoma, told through the eyes of a young boy. As you listen to the quiet, acoustic rumblings of the number, you are practically there in that dry place when "Come the fall the rain flooded these homes. Here in Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, it fell hard and dark to the ground." Some song lyrics are described as poetry, but usually this doesn't really work – even the greatest song lyrics can sound somewhat silly without musical backing. But what Springsteen has created here is great prose – words which tell a short story in pure narrative form. It is no small achievement to shape such a story into a song. The CD slip-cover recognises this new style of songwriting, as the lyrics to this (and some other) songs are printed in paragraph form rather than line by line. Pretentious? A little. But some of these songs come close to being more story than song. Springsteen's tendency to mumble has been referred to, but the reader should not go away with the impression that that is the main vocal style of this album. The variety on display is actually very rich, to the extent that Springsteen complements three of the album's lighter songs with a falsetto vocal. On *Maria's Bed* and *All I'm Thinkin'* About in particular, his high-pitched voice sounds surprisingly well-formed, and it seems to drive the band into playing with an impish delight, touching their strings and skins rather than striking and beating them. Finally, Springsteen does recall the politics of the immigrant that underpinned *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. *Matamoros Banks*, with which *Devils & Dust* draws to a close, is a sister track to *Across the Border* – a poignant tale of love, loss and the search for a better life in the United States. The irony of such a dream cannot be lost on the artist, opening the album as he does with the line "I got my finger on the trigger". But the humanity of both songs rings through – along with thanks to some higher being, *Matamoros Banks* narrator sings "Your sweet memory comes on the evenin' wind I sleep and dream of holding you in my arms again". The similarity with the picture painted in such all-American Springsteen songs as *No Surrender* cannot be lost on the listener, and perhaps this is what lies at the heart of the message of *Devils & Dust* – although there is a lot wrong with the world, and with the United States, the remedies and palliatives which Springsteen offers have remained consistent – love, hope and good dreams. With this album, he has kept that message alive by communicating it in a fresh manner, using a new music, and it really works.

About the Author