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SIXTY-SIX  
***THE  
RISING***

After the '99 tour I took the band into the studio to do some preliminary recording. We headed into our old stomping grounds in New York City, the Hit Factory. I had "Land of Hope and Dreams," "American Skin" and some material I'd cowritten with blue-collar Pittsburgh rocker Joe Grushcky to get us started. I gathered our old production squad, including Chuck Plotkin, and we spent a few days cutting what we had. I'd made some pretty good demos of my new songs for the band to crib from and we headed home with eight things or so basically recorded.

Upon second listening in the weeks that followed, it all just didn't add up. The band was playing well, the music had been recorded fine, but there was no freshness, no spark, no center, no *record* there. It all lay flat on the tape like nothing was happening. All great rock 'n' roll records convince you of one essential thing: that SOMETHING is HAPPENING! Something you

NEED to hear! There are many very listenable bad records that hold your attention because they are not dull. They have been written, constructed, arranged and produced in a way that holds the ear. It may not be art, but it's admirable craft. We didn't have that. When I listened back to what we'd recorded, my final judgment was: WE WERE DULL! I knew some of the songs I had written weren't dull—they'd raised a shitstorm—but the records we were making of those songs were.

After a quarter century of success, Jon and I had to acknowledge that *we* no longer knew how to make our records. The art of production had simply moved its center, and our ideas and techniques were no longer current, ear-friendly, exciting or competent. We were now much better singers, songwriters, performers, managers than we were record producers. So be it. Who's next? We were both still hungry to make great records. We'd now have to open our very closed little universe and find out how to do that.

Several years previous Donnie Ienner, then president of Columbia Records, had told me Brendan O'Brien, producer of Pearl Jam and Rage Against the Machine, was interested in working with me. His name, among a few others, now came up again. Jon and I scheduled a meeting between Brendan and myself at my home studio in New Jersey. We'd talk, I'd play him a little of what I had and we'd see where it was going to go. The day came. I met Mr. O'Brien, a youngish-looking man in his thirties. He was sane, easy to talk to and be with, without pretension and confident. I ran by him some things I had, recent recordings, old demos, new demos. He focused on a few songs, said he'd come up just to make sure "I was still me" and informed me that I was, and we went on to plan another meeting and a recording date in his home base of Atlanta. There we'd give each other a full audition, but before that date arrived, a beautiful, sunlit fall day would blossom over the tristate area.

On September 11, 2001, I came down from bed and walked into the kitchen, and one of the women who worked in our home told me a plane had flown into the World Trade Center. Remembering a small plane had once flown into the Empire State Building in a heavy fog, my first thought was, "Poor bastard." I figured a misguided, inexperienced pilot had flown his Cessna or whatever way off the mark. There was just one thing. As I sat at our sunny breakfast table, the skies outside could not have been clearer. There couldn't have been a visibility problem. Curious, I went into the living room and turned on the television. Smoke was billowing from one of the Trade Center towers, and as I watched, another plane flew into the second tower. This was not a Cessna but a full-size passenger plane. I learned that so was the first, and shortly thereafter came the report that one had also flown into the Pentagon. We were under attack. I sat, like the rest of the country, transfixed by a television screen, where the unimaginable was occurring, feeling like anything, truly anything, could or might happen next. We were untethered and skimming across deadly and absolutely unpredictable waters as I saw the towers fall, such an impossible and confounding event that the newsman on the scene could not conceive of what he was witnessing and did not report that that was what was happening.

In the late afternoon, I drove to the Rumson–Sea Bright Bridge. There, usually, on a clear day the Twin Towers struck two tiny vertical lines on the horizon at the bridge's apex. Today, torrents of smoke lifted from the end of Manhattan Island, a mere fifteen miles away by boat. I stopped in at my local beach and walked to the water's edge, looking north; a thin gray line of smoke, dust and ash spread out due east over the water line. It appeared like the smudged edge of a hard blue sheet folding and resting upon the autumn Atlantic.

I sat for a while, alone, the September beach empty beneath the eerie quiet of silent skies. We live along a very busy air corridor. Planes are constantly flying just off the Eastern Seaboard on their way to Kennedy and Newark airports, and the low buzz of airplane engines is as much a part of

the sound tapestry at the Shore as are the gently crashing waves. Not today. All air traffic grounded. A deadly *On the Beach*, science fiction–like quiet unfolded over the sand.

After a short while, I headed home to join Patti and pick up our children from school. As I drove over the gravel of the beach club parking lot, I hesitated before pulling into traffic on Ocean Boulevard. Just then a car careening off Rumson–Sea Bright Bridge shot past, its window down, and its driver, recognizing me, shouted, “Bruce, we need you.” I sort of knew what he meant, but . . .

On the way home, trying to put the morning in context proved almost impossible. All I was brought back to was myself in gym clothes on our high school soccer pitch as someone came running, shouting across the parking lot from the school cafeteria. I remember my face pressed up against a chain-link fence as I heard, “The president’s been assassinated, Kennedy’s been shot.” I pulled in front of Rumson Country Day School, where a crowd of parents with that same jittery silence running through them were picking up their children. I met Evan, Jessie and Sam and took them home.

Monmouth County had lost one hundred fifty husbands, brothers, sons, wives, daughters. For weeks, the long black limousines pulled up to churches, and candlelit vigils were held in the neighborhood park. In Rumson, a town full of Wall Street commuters, almost everyone knew someone who lost somebody. A benefit was held at the Count Basie Theatre, where local musicians met and played to raise funds for many of the surviving families. Here I was introduced to the Jersey Girls, who would soon do so much to push the government to be openly accountable for the events of that day; their efforts would lead to the formation of the 9/11 Commission. The nation owes them a debt of gratitude.

*The Rising* had its origins in the national telethon we were invited to be a part of the week after September 11. I wrote “Into the Fire” for that show

(it remained incomplete, so I performed “My City of Ruins,” the song I’d written a year earlier for Asbury Park). Of the many tragic images of that day, the picture I couldn’t let go of was of the emergency workers going *up* the stairs as others rushed down to safety. The sense of duty, the courage, ascending into . . . what? The religious image of ascension, the crossing of the line between this world, the world of blood, work, family, your children, the breath in your lungs, the ground beneath your feet, all that is life, and . . . the next, flooded my imagination. If you love life or any part of it, the depth of their sacrifice is unthinkable and incomprehensible. Yet what they left behind was tangible. Death, along with all its anger, pain and loss, opens a window of possibility for the living. It removes the veil that the “ordinary” gently drapes over our eyes. Renewed sight is the hero’s last loving gift to those left behind.

The telethon seemed a small way to give thanks for community protected and preserved to the people and their families who take that burden on as part of their everyday lives.

I didn’t sit around wondering about whether I should or should not write about this day. I just did. I went down to Atlanta with “Into the Fire” and “You’re Missing.”

Brendan brought a fresh power and focus to the band’s sound and playing. He didn’t comment on the subject matter; he just said, “These are good. Now go home and write some more.” I knew from the beginning if I was going to continue to write thematically, my songs could not depend on simply being tied to the event. They needed an independent life, a life where their internal coherency would be completely understood even if there’d been no 9/11. So I wrote rock music, love songs, breakup songs, spirituals, blues, hit songs, and I allowed my theme and the events of the day to breathe and find their place within the framework I created. I went home, searched my book for unfinished songs and continued to write.

“Waitin’ on a Sunny Day” I’d had for a year or so, and it found its place within this new material. We recut “Nothing Man,” a song I’d had since ’94 that, along with “Secret Garden,” had been a part of my “Streets of Philly” album. It captured the awkwardness and isolation of survival. “I don’t remember how I felt . . . I’d never thought I’d live . . .” “Empty Sky” was the last song I wrote. My art director had sent me a photo of clouds in an empty sky and in a few days, sitting on the edge of my hotel bed in Atlanta, I had the song. For “Worlds Apart” I wanted other voices, other situations than just American ones. The Eleventh was an international tragedy. I wanted Eastern voices, the presence of Allah. I wanted to find a place where worlds collide and meet. My old friend Chuck Plotkin assisted me in getting the voices of Pakistani Qawwali singers, Asif Ali Khan and his group, onto “Worlds Apart.” “Let’s Be Friends” . . . beach music! “Further On” . . . the band tearing down the house. “The Fuse” . . . images of life at home during wartime immediately following the Eleventh.

The record rises to the house party of “Mary’s Place,” party music with the blues hidden inside. I wanted some of the warmth and familiarity of *The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle*, a home place, the comfort music and friendship may bring in a crisis. “The Rising” was written late in the record as a bookend to “Into the Fire.” Secular stations of the cross, steps of duty irretraceable, the hard realization of all the life and love left behind . . . the opening sky. “Paradise,” written late, was a study of different impressions of an afterlife. In the first verse, a young Palestinian suicide bomber contemplates his last moments on Earth. In the second, a navy wife longs for her husband lost at the Pentagon, the absence of the physical, the smells, the human longing for a return to wholeness. In the last verse, my character swims deep into the water between worlds, where he confronts his lost love, whose eyes are “as empty as paradise.” The dead have their own business to do, as do the living. Finally we circle back around to “My City of Ruins,” the soul gospel of my favorite sixties records, speaking not just of Asbury but hopefully of other places and other lands. That was my record.

Our band was built well, over many years, for difficult times. When people wanted a dialogue, a conversation about events, internal and external, we developed a language that suited those moments. We were there. It was a language that I hoped would entertain, inspire, comfort and reveal. The professionalism, the showmanship, the hours of hard work are all very important, but I always believed that it was this dialogue, this language, that was at the heart of our resiliency with our audience. *The Rising* was a renewal of that conversation and the ideas that forged our band.

For the next year, the E Street Band crisscrossed the nation trying to contextualize the uncontextualizable. Perhaps the physical and psychic horrors were beyond music and art's ability to communicate, explain, heal or even comment upon. I don't know. Coming from a place that had been hit so hard, speaking to firemen who served at Ground Zero, ships' captains whose ferries crossed Sandy Hook Bay bringing back survivors, their decks inch-deep in ash, and my own desire to use the language I learned as a musician to sort through what was in my own head turned me to writing those songs. First, you write for yourself . . . always, to make sense of experience and the world around you. It's one of the ways I stay sane. Our stories, our books, our films are how we cope with the random trauma-inducing chaos of life as it plays. When that guy yelled out, "Bruce, we need you," that was a tall order, but I knew what he meant; I needed something, someone, too. As I drove home on that lonely day to find my children, my wife, my people and you again, I turned to the only language I've ever known to fight off the night terrors, real and imagined, time and time again. It was all I could do.