

30 years later, ranking the 12 tracks of 'Born in the U.S.A.'

Posted At : June 4, 2014 11:47 PM | Posted By : John Hansen

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Some people called Bruce Springsteen a sellout for delivering 12 radio-friendly hits (seven became top 10 singles) on "Born in the U.S.A.," which hit record stores on June 4, 1984. Others, including his producer/manager Jon Landau, said it didn't have enough singles ("Dancing in the Dark" was written in order to fill this perceived gap).

On the campaign trail in 1984, Ronald Reagan ignorantly and memorably labeled Springsteen's anti-war title track as a beacon of hope, but it's one of the most brilliant downer records of all time. (Although depressing music can be uplifting if you're in the right mood, Reagan wasn't looking at it from that perspective.)

Deep yet accessible, crystal-clear yet misinterpreted, downbeat yet worthy of foot-tapping ... regardless of how cynical you want to be about its creation, "Born in the U.S.A." is 12 tracks of pure spun gold.

Here are my rankings of the songs, as seen 30 years down the road, along with a memorable line from each song off the top of my head (And it's a true test of my memory, as I chose not to spin the album in advance of writing this post):

1. "[Downbound Train](#)" (side 1, track 5) -- This is my third-favorite song of all time, behind only my No. 1 tracks from Camera Obscura and Belle & Sebastian. I love the way the life of the protagonist, Joe, starts off bad in the opening track, and gets progressively worse. In the final verse, he experiences something positive, only to find out he was dreaming. Great stuff.

Memorable line off the top of my head: "She just said, Joe, I gotta go. We had it once, we ain't got it anymore."

One more memorable line off the top of my head: "Now I work down at the car wash, where all it ever does is rain ..."

2. **"No Surrender"** (side 2, track 1) -- This is one song on the record that puts the lie to the notion that it's relentlessly downbeat (at least lyrically). "No Surrender" is a positive tune about not giving up, and although it seems to fit best with young adults getting ready to take on the cruel world, it can apply to anyone who feels like an underdog in their particular lot in life. In that sense, it's like a better version of Tom Petty's "Won't Back Down."

Memorable line off the top of my head: "Maybe we could cut someplace of our own with these drums and these guitars."

3. **"Bobby Jean"** (side 2, track 2) -- This is a prime example of how Springsteen universalized personal experiences, turning a heartfelt collection of lyrics into an album that aimed for the top of the charts. I always hear this as a song about lost love – and I think that's how we're supposed to take it – but Springsteen actually was inspired by his friendship with bandmate Stevie Van Zandt.

Memorable line off the top of my head: "I'm calling one last time, not to change your mind, but just to say I miss you, baby. Good luck, goodbye, Bobby Jean."

4. **"I'm Goin' Down"** (side 2, track 3) -- I love the combination of the relentless riff, the fast vocals (Are they sped up kind of like "Hungry Heart," or is that my imagination?) and generally downbeat lyrics (although not at the wanting-to-jump-into-a-pool-filled-with-razorblades level of "Downbound Train").

Memorable line off the top of my head: "I go to put my arm around you, and you give me a look a-like I'm way outta bounds."

5. **"Dancing in the Dark"** (side 2, track 5) -- Even the unapologetically synthesizer-driven track that Springsteen and the E-Streeters cranked out to appease his producer's desire for a first single is pretty darn good. And it's timeless, although the video of Springsteen doing dance moves with Courteney Cox during the opening leg of the "Born in the U.S.A." tour is a wonderful blast of nostalgia.

Memorable line off the top of my head: "I take a look in the mirror. Wanna change my clothes, my hair, my face."

6. **"Glory Days"** (side 2, track 4) -- Springsteen's songs don't have to be about deep ideas to be great (although he has plenty of those too). This one's about running into an old high school buddy and throwing back a few beers. Since this song is about nostalgia, it's weird to feel nostalgic about it. Kind of like trying to understand a time-travel movie, I shouldn't try to overanalyze "Glory Days."

Memorable line off the top of my head: "... but I probably will."

7. **"My Hometown"** (side 2, track 6) -- Surrounded by hook-laden tracks, "My Hometown" asks a listener to ... well ... listen. A bit of a throwback to the "Nebraska" album from a couple years prior, it gives details about small-town race conflicts and the steady decline of a once-booming local economy.

Memorable line off the top of my head: When Springsteen mentions putting his young son behind the wheel and telling him "This is your hometown," it's a goosebump-inducing

callback to earlier in the song, when he was the kid.

8. ["I'm on Fire"](#) (side 1, track 6) -- This one feels like a thematic throwback to his 1970s tracks that chronicled relationships with Mary (or Wendy, or Sandy), only it strips all the narrative away and thereby enhances the emotions of a guy in lust.

Memorable line off the top of my head: "... cut a 6-inch valley through the middle of my soul."

9. ["Darlington County"](#) (side 1, track 3) -- This is a perfect road-trip song, because it's about a road trip. It especially plays well when I drive through a little strip of Darlington County, S.C., on the way to my folks' place in North Carolina.

Memorable line off the top of my head: "I see Wayne handcuffed to the bumper of a state trooper's Ford."

10. ["Born in the U.S.A."](#) (side 1, track 1) -- The title track ranks low on my list only because I've heard it so many times, and in so many contexts. My buddy Trevor put it on a Fourth of July mixtape of subtly anti-American-government songs, paired with the "Team America: World Police" theme. But I've also heard it incongruently blasted at sporting events. And it also works in its original meaning: A song about the horrors of an American kid being shipped off like a chunk of expendable meat to 'Nam.

Memorable line off the top of my head: "Went down to see the V.A. man. He said, 'Son, don't you understand?' "

11. ["Working on the Highway"](#) (side 1, track 4) -- It's absurdly catchy, but since we're getting lower on this list, I have to admit that this one doesn't have as much thematic or narrative depth, or a compelling point-of-view on its own topic. I'd venture to say it's the second-most-upbeat track (behind "No Surrender"), as it lauds the nobility of blue-collar work, like the main character of "Office Space" did in the final scene: "Fresh air and bucks."

Memorable line off the top of my head: "Workin' on the highway, layin' down the blacktop, workin' on the highway, all day long I don't stop."

12. ["Cover Me"](#) (side 1, track 2) -- Something has to rank last, and even though this is a perfectly serviceable pop-radio tune (indeed, it was the second single, following "Dancing in the Dark," which was purposely written to be the lead-off single), it doesn't go much beyond being a pop-radio tune.

Memorable line off the top of my head: I guess I'll have to stick with the chorus on this one. "Come on in and cover me."

How would you rank the 12 tracks from "Born in the U.S.A.?"