

SEA OF SOUND



'HOW I LEARNED TO STOP ROLLING MY EYES AND LOVE STADIUM ROCK'

Notes to self:

1. Concerts shouldn't be held in sports venues.
2. Never pay more than \$10 to see an artist who hasn't put out a good album in 25 years [The Seeger Sessions notwithstanding].
3. No women in the E Street Band.
4. Steve Van Zandt is a jackass.
5. I might be a misanthrope.

On Monday, I drove to the Palace of Auburn Hills for Bruce Springsteen. "I know it could be lame," I told my friends, "but it's worth a try. He's playing with the original E Street Band, after all."

But bad times awaited.

Inside the doors, ticket-takers rifled through fans' purses and backpacks before tearing their ticket stubs, just like an airport security team.

Not that the crowd minded; most of them looked like corporate employees who hadn't seen a rock 'n' roll show since REO Speedwagon's last reunion tour. Nor did they mind shelling out \$8 for a beer, or \$20 for a program, or \$120 for a comfortable chair on the main floor.

I sat in the nosebleed section, squarely behind the band and 60 yards back. It was tough to see the back of Bruce's head without binoculars, but the enormous flat-panel screens encircling the stage came to my aid. It felt like watching a DVD — but instead of my living room, I was in a stadium

At 58 years old, Bruce still has energy and vocal power. Bruce performed for about two hours. Not bad, but disappointing for a guy who used to play for three or four hours every night. I spent most of that time in my chair, glaring at the fist-pumpers in the front row and wondering if Bruce had sunken to the level of John Mellencamp. (He hadn't.)

On his "Live/1975-1985" box set (Sony's attempt to cash in on the Springsteen bootleg phenomenon), Bruce accompanies "The River" with a weighty narrative about his high school years, when he constantly fought with his father and narrowly avoided the Vietnam draft.

On Monday night he abandoned such stories for political tirades: "Over the past six years, we've seen the truth get spun into lies, and the lies get spun into truth," he said. Really, Bruce? In the past six years? Is that when it began?

Every 25 or 30 minutes he'd bring me to my feet with a classic song, like "Night" or "Promised Land." The group finally hit their stride during "Badlands." It was energetic and uncomfortable and dirty, just like in 1978, when Bruce was still working-class.

See, for about five years, beginning with the release of 1975's "Born to Run," Bruce Springsteen was unparalleled in American music.

Sure, he's also responsible for atrocities like "Secret Garden" and that horrendous recording of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town."

Those can't be excused. But as far as I'm concerned, songs like "Racing in the Street" and "Candy's Room" were worth the 25 years of garbage that followed them.

Still, like Bob Dylan said, most people will only pay to see a legend once. Count me among them.