

BY JENNIFER FINN

The House *That* Bruce Built.

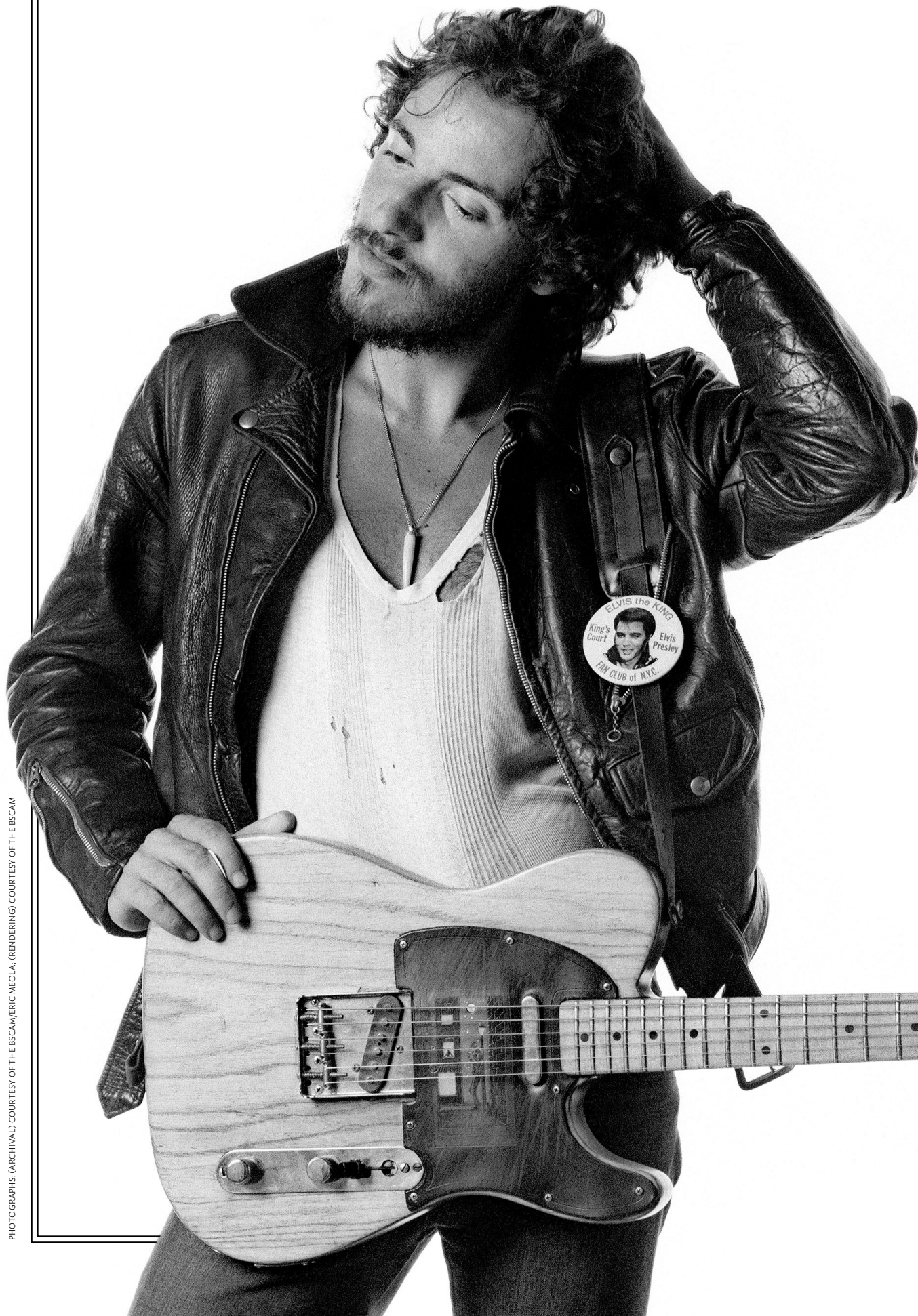
Sparked by fervent Springsteen fans and brought to life by a small-but-mighty team, an institution for American music rises at the Jersey Shore.

At first glance, the striking new \$50 million, 30,000-square-foot Bruce Springsteen Center for American Music, its immense glass windows glinting on a corner of Monmouth University's West Long Branch campus, might not immediately conjure its namesake New Jerseyan. Is it a match for the onstage presence of a world-class rocker-slash-preacher



LONG WALK HOME
The new Bruce Springsteen Center for American Music opens June 7 at Monmouth University in West Long Branch.

PHOTOGRAPHS: (ARCHIVAL) COURTESY OF THE BSCAM/ERIC MEOLA; (RENDERING) COURTESY OF THE BSCAM



who can casually hold any roaring stadium of 50,000 fans in the palm of his hand? Sure. Yet to a passing motorist, it might less readily evoke the other Springsteens: the shy singer-songwriter from Freehold, who wrote in his memoir of feeling “barely visible” most of his young life; who, just a few years ago, politely declined an offer for a Parkway rest stop in his name; and who, back in 1975, living mere minutes down the road and on the cusp of finishing *Born to Run*, mailed a handwritten apology to his “landlordess” for the late rent on his blink-and-you’ll-miss-it bungalow.

But on a late-winter hard-hat tour of the active construction site, about 100 days out from the center’s historic opening on June 7, Melissa Ziobro, director of curatorial affairs, brings the sprawling

of pieces, eventually coming to Monmouth in 2011, where it was housed in a tiny Cape Cod cottage on campus and nurtured by director Eileen Chapman, whose tenure as caretaker was the longest in its history. Named Springsteen’s official archive in 2017, the house had a distinctly informal spirit. Guests often dropped by unannounced to take a tour and peruse ephemera (albeit under Chapman’s watchful eye, and not without gloves). When out-of-towners on Springsteen pilgrimages inquired about other local landmarks—say, the Stone Pony, or rock photographer Danny Clinch’s gallery—she’d sometimes drive them there herself in her silver Ford Explorer. Due to a never-ending stream of donations, space became so scarce

“Fans had done an amazing job assembling this [collection]. It felt sinful to let this thing grow mold.”

—BOB SANTELLI, founding executive director of the Springsteen Center

exterior down to earth and its carefully chosen details into sharp focus.

The building’s main entranceway, partially hidden from street traffic, is—what else?—a boardwalk, modeled after the Boss-haunted landmark in Asbury Park, roughly five miles south. The architects “wanted to use every square inch of the property to do some type of thoughtful storytelling,” Ziobro says, motioning to the area where a meadow of indigenous grasses will, come spring, replace the snow-dotted dirt. The facade of the building, she explains, is a nod to industrial New Jersey. It’s made of steel, site project manager Timothy Blake later adds, that’s been rusted and weathered “to a point where it builds this permanent patina.”

Like its eponymous artist, the Springsteen Center carries a long and storied past. It began in 2001 as a fan-based collection of donated memorabilia and grew to thousands

that even the bathroom was utilized for storage, with a mountain of boxes piled high in the tub.

Whatever the center may lose in scrappy charm as it evolves into a major institution, it will gain many times over in scope and scale across its exhibitions, public programming, education initiatives and research archives. “We made it very accessible for people—and we’ll continue to do that, but in a much different way,” says Chapman, who, along with founding executive director Bob Santelli, accompanied Springsteen on his very first hard-hat tour of the building. His reaction: “My mind is officially blown.”

The Springsteen Center in this newly expanded form, which officially broke ground in fall 2024, is helmed by Santelli, a music historian, journalist, educator and veteran music-museum curator whose long résumé includes the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, the Woody Guthrie Center



BORN IN THE U.S.A. The Springsteen Center celebrates not just Bruce and the E Street Band but music across American history. At left, the center’s national traveling exhibit, “Music America: Iconic Objects from America’s Music History,” is currently on view in Boston.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN CENTER FOR AMERICAN MUSIC (3)



THE WEIGHT
Bruce Springsteen with Mavis Staples (center), Jackson Browne (left) and John Mellencamp at the American Music Honors in 2024.

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A Center of Gravity

Bruce Springsteen opens up about the new Center for American Music at Monmouth University.

BY JENNIFER FINN

New Jersey Monthly: Thank you for taking the time to talk so close to embarking on the American leg of your *Land of Hope and Dreams* tour! Why was it important to you that the Bruce Springsteen Center for American Music take this broad approach, rather than just focusing on you and your work?

Bruce Springsteen: Well, I was a little ambivalent at first, you know? I mean... the way the whole thing happened in the beginning, if I'm correct, was: the Asbury Park library had been collecting magazine articles and different things, and they began to build up an archive, and...they needed someplace else, and Monmouth University generously said that they would provide a place. So it ended up over in a small office over at Monmouth University. I don't know if you've ever been over there, but it was kind of a tiny little shack...

NJM: Yes! It was so charming.

BS: ...where they had a ton of my stuff tucked into it. And I think Bob [Santelli] suggested the idea of trying to build a [new] building that would house my material. I was a little hesitant at first. I'm going, like, "Gee, I don't know, a building, my own stuff, my name on it—what if I do somethin' really stupid and embarrass the building? I'm still alive; who knows what I might do?"

NJM: [Laughs.] You would never!

BS: [Laughs.] So I was just a little hesitant. And then I think we began to mention that it might be something that was dedicated more to the overall story of American music, and that appealed to me a little bit more. And I said, "Well, that might be nice"—having someplace that was an educational center, where the students could go to, and children from outside of the university. And

Photograph by Danny Clinch

in Tulsa, and music education programs at the White House.

"I always dreamt that there should be a major Smithsonian museum on American music," Santelli says. "We have them on art; we have them on history and science. Music is our most important cultural resource, and...we have nothing?! I said that until, in essence, Washington gets its act together, we'll house the story of American music, and we'll do it in a very 21st-century way, with programs, traveling exhibitions, and the collection of American music stories to use for educational purposes."

Those traveling exhibitions began in 2019 with "Springsteen: His Hometown," a collaboration with the Monmouth County Historical Association in Springsteen's hometown of Freehold; curator Ziobro, also the university's director of public history, had started it as a project in her museums and archives management class. Currently, a *Born to Run* exhibit is on view in Passaic County, and a national traveling exhibit, "Music America: Iconic Objects From America's Music History" (which launched in 2024, ahead of America's sesquicentennial this year) recently relocated to Boston, where it will remain until August.

"We have been very active with public programs, and we will only accelerate once we open," Santelli says. "So this is the staging ground—but America is our proving ground."

More than a decade ago, while serving as founding executive director of the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles, Santelli received a call from Chapman about the fan-based collection, which had outgrown its home at the Asbury Park library and was "not in good shape," he remembers. "I worked for a museum. I knew what a collection is and how it should be handled, and that wasn't happening. Fans had done an amazing job assembling this. It felt sinful to let this thing grow mold." Monmouth's library, however, declined to take it.

"So I pulled rank and went to the president," recalls Santelli, a distinguished alum and former faculty member who, by that time, had extensively covered the E Street Band as a journalist and edited Springsteen's 1998 book,

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it could be a place where people could come and begin to learn how the history of American music influences and affects the history of America itself. And then they'd have a spot for my stuff, if anybody was interested and wanted to go and see what made my own work and the influences that were very important to me when I was putting my own work together.

[If you look at] what was going on in...America from the '70s through the second half of the 20th century to now, that was sort of the world that I was interested in documenting: the effects of postindustrialization on a large part of the American populace, and how it affected their lives...and continues to do so today.

I said, "Well, it might be a place where you could go and see how my music was very deeply connected to the times." And also, just someplace that was fun, [where] people could see some of the inspirations: how I came out of the Jersey Shore, and the effects the Jersey Shore had on my creative experience. And so...I said, "Well, okay, let's give it a try. Let's do it."

NJM: You've written and spoken about how you were always drawn to music in which the singers sounded "simultaneously happy and sad, hopeful and resigned"—songs like the Drifters' "Under the Boardwalk," "Up on the Roof;" music that was marked by, in your words, "a deep longing" and "a casually transcendent spirit" that made you feel like the "whole world opened up" to you. I love that, and I see it as one of your great strengths and "magic tricks": your melding of sorrow and joy, kind of sitting with them as two sides of the same coin. And I'm curious if you think there's something distinctly American, or even distinctly New Jerseyan, about that specific combination in music?

“...a wonderful educational center for people who are interested in the broader connection between American music and American history.”

BS: Well, that was the life I was living. The life I was living was the Drifters' "Under the Boardwalk" and "Up on the Roof." I had a little apartment above the shoe store...where I lived on the third floor, and I would climb out my window and sunbathe on the tarred roof [laughs] on Cookman Avenue in Asbury Park when I was 20 years old. And so those songs were very important to the beginning of my emotional life and my emotional connection to music.

But then also...in my teens, I grew up through some of the most influential years of my life in the '60s, so that brought a certain social consciousness into my music. And so those things together were very, very influential, in the beginning, of the structuring and building of the kind of music and the parameters of what I wanted my music to contain. Both of those things were very, very central.

And if you look at the E Street Band, the E Street Band does two things very well. One is, it's one of the few bands that really communicates joy, you know? Playing "Rosalita" or "Out in the Street" or "Hungry Heart." And there's a lot of bands that communicate cool, there's a lot of bands that communicate anger, but there [were] not a lot of modern rock bands at the time who communicated joy, which was an enormous part of the music of the '50s and '60s. And so I've always been proud of that side of my band that can speak to that part of people's lives. It's a very essential part of music.

And then at the same time, we can take on tough subjects and delve into them pretty seriously....As far as the boundaries of the music that the band can



BLINDED BY THE LIGHT
A 240-seat, state-of-the-art, Dolby Atmos-certified theater will double as a performance and event space.



PROMISED LAND From left: director Eileen Chapman, Springsteen, executive director Bob Santelli, Monmouth president Patrick Leahy and curatorial affairs director Melissa Ziobro at the building site.

Songs. "I said, 'I have to tell you: Library of Congress, Smithsonian, they're calling me....They want me to introduce them to Bruce Springsteen...and I'll be damned if I'm the guy who—New Jersey's favorite son, his legacy is gonna move to Washington, D.C.? It needs to stay here!'"

After the collection had been saved and moved into the small archive house on campus, Santelli began dreaming even bigger, envisioning a more consequential institution in Springsteen's name taking shape at Monmouth.

He eventually pitched the idea to Springsteen's longtime manager, Jon Landau, who he wasn't sure would be on board. Landau's reaction, to his surprise: "You've gotta tell Bruce."

Santelli flew to Jersey and drove out to Springsteen's home in Colts Neck. "I just remember Jon saying, 'Okay, Bob, tell him!'" he says. So he started talking.

"He didn't say anything," Santelli recalls fondly. "And Bruce is relatively a quiet guy. I couldn't tell whether he was thinking about what he was going to have for lunch, or [his] next song, or this," he muses. "I just kept going, explaining,

because I had this vision. And at the end, he said, in so many words, 'Bob, I'm honored; I appreciate that—but I don't want it to be [all] about me.' He said something to the effect of, 'I'm a chapter in this ongoing story of American music. If you could broaden it so that I'm part of it, but we tell a bigger story, I'd be more comfortable with that.'"

How about, Santelli suggested on the fly, the Bruce Springsteen Center for American Music? Bruce was quiet again, listening.

"And then he says, 'Well, let's go see where you want to put it,'" Santelli recalls. He mimics Landau's jaw dropping. "I couldn't believe it."

He and Landau got in their respective cars, Springsteen hopped on his motorcycle, "and we have this little procession" to Monmouth, Santelli says. "I'm going, *Holy crap—he's serious!*"

When they arrived on the campus, Santelli pointed out the spot where he'd imagined the building.

"That'll do," Springsteen said, and got back on his motorcycle. "Well, Bob," Landau said, turning to Santelli, "get started!"

Back at the construction site, our trio donning hard hats, safety glasses and neon-yellow vests, Ziobro points out the 240-seat, Dolby Atmos-certified theater where visitors will see a 20-minute documentary by Springsteen's longtime filmmaker, Thom Zimny. The film will explore New Jersey as a musical "microcosm of America," Springsteen's vast American music influences; and how he has become the "poster boy" for American music, particularly in Europe, where "so many fans see him as the representation of this country, or what they want this country to be," Santelli explains. The theater will also function as a performance space for events like the center's annual American Music Honors. Springsteen's longtime former sound team helped to make the space "absolutely perfect for live music," Chapman says.

On the first floor, the American Music Gallery will examine our country's music history from the Colonial period to the present, beginning with indigenous music that existed prior to European contact in what is now North America, Ziobro explains.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN CENTER FOR AMERICAN MUSIC (3)

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draw on and create, I'm very proud that the band has such a wide emotional bandwidth that we can bring to our audience.

It's funny—we were in rehearsal the other day, and I said, "Okay, we're gonna go out, it's gonna be kind of a political tour, very serious,"...I sequenced all these serious songs. I said, "Wait a minute. Where's the fun?" 'Cause no matter how serious we're gonna be...fun, joy, exhilaration are an essential part of people's lives. And I always want us to be able to address those things.

NJM: That's lovely. Speaking of social consciousness, the first rotating exhibit at the new center is "Chimes of Freedom," which will explore protest songs across American history, including your most recent one, "Streets of Minneapolis," and go all the way back to what is the archive's oldest handwritten lyrics of yours, an anti-war song called "All Man the Guns" that you wrote during the Vietnam War when you were 18 or 19. Do you have any recollection now of writing that song?

BS: Yeah, I do. Yeah, I remember that song really well. We had the [band] Steel Mill at the time, and Steel Mill was operating during the early '70s, which was really still the '60s, you know? The '60s really rolled over into the early '70s. So I was writing in Asbury Park, which had recently had the racial uprising, and Vietnam was still raging on. It was...coming into people's living rooms on television every night, and it was an enormous, enormous issue. One of our first benefits we did was at a small theater in Red Bank...to send folks down to the anti-Vietnam War benefit in Washington. We were probably 19 years old. So that was a very ongoing and central issue in my own life and in every young man's life, because the draft was still in [effect], and I wrote that song—probably my earliest song addressing the Vietnam War. But I remember that song very well, and us playing it, right like it was yesterday.

“...people could see some of the inspirations: how I came out of the Jersey Shore, and the effects the Jersey Shore had on my creative experience.”

NJM: That's incredible. And there will be oral histories accessible in the center that focus on people like Bart Haynes, your first drummer in the Castiles, and Walter Cichon, from Freehold, [both of whom died in the Vietnam War]. The center's curator, [Melissa Ziobro], noted how it's very gratifying to be able to tell their stories, too, and ensure that people like that are more than just footnotes in history, which is wonderful.

BS: Yeah, that's really satisfying. The thing that I love about the center now is like, yeah, they have my stuff there, and that's great, and if people are interested, they can go and see it. But it takes on and will take on the entirety of American music, its influences, and will be a wonderful educational center for people who are interested in the broader connection between American music and American history. That really sort of convinced me to do it...The building itself is gorgeous; the architect did a wonderful job. It's really an amazing place. It'll be a wonderful place to go. They'll have all these interactive services. I think... [for] young kids who walk in, not knowing much about me or much about the history of American music, it'll really be a wonderful, eye-opening and valuable afternoon. And so I'm excited to just be a part of it, that's all.

This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

"Bruce himself said, 'Look, I don't want you to build a shrine to me. You can use my name, my story, my legacy as a springboard to tell broader stories about American life, history and culture,'" Ziobro says. "There's something for everybody. We grab them with the music and use that as a prism through which to explore broader themes in American life: technology, activism, gender, race, class." There are artifacts (costumes, instruments) and interactive elements (a song bar, a touchable U.S. map). Artists span from Bob Dylan to Beyoncé, Frank Sinatra to Sabrina Carpenter, and Woody Guthrie to Whitney Houston.

A gallery for rotating exhibits will kick off with "Chimes of Freedom: Protest, Politics, and the Power of Song," which examines American music and activism. "We want to start conversations with folks, wherever they are on the political spectrum, about how music has been used as a force for change for 250 years," Ziobro says—from "Yankee Doodle" to Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" to Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue," all the way up through Springsteen's "Streets of Minneapolis."

Upstairs, the focus is on Bruce and the E Street Band. One room traces his life and career by the decade. Another, wall-papered with handwritten lyrics, spotlights his songwriting process. ("It's like you stepped inside his notebook," Ziobro says. Originals are on display behind glass, "so you can see the cross-outs, and how the lyrics morph with time.") Iconic artifacts include his distressed jeans and crumpled red hat from the *Born in the U.S.A.* cover, his leather jacket from the *Born to Run* cover, and the recorder he used to make *Nebraska*. In one space, guests can plop onto bleacher seating and take in curated footage of Springsteen's live performances. In another, interactive instruments are accompanied by audio from band members: Steve Van Zandt when you pick up a guitar, Max Weinberg when you sit down at the drums.

While there will be a modest admission fee for the exhibits, an archival suite will be open to the public by appointment. There, visitors can explore menus of curated, digitized archival content such as handwritten lyrics, oral histories



GREETINGS
The "Springsteen: His Hometown" exhibit in Freehold in 2019 began as a class project at Monmouth University.



GROWIN' UP
Bruce with his sisters Pam (center) and Virginia; a draft for the lyrics of "Last Man Standing," an emotional centerpiece of Springsteen's 2023-24 concerts.

and pages from Springsteen's mother Adele's lovingly kept scrapbooks. Larger groups and families can book listening booths; serious researchers will reserve time in a private room.

Leading up to its grand opening on June 7, the center is producing four celebratory concerts. Two at Monmouth's Pollak Theater will highlight local music (late May) and indigenous music (June 3). A set of shows on June 4 and 5, "Music America: The Songs That Shaped Us," at the university's OceanFirst Bank Center, will feature nearly two dozen artists, including Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi, Kenny Chesney and Rosanne Cash.

Racing toward the finish line, Santel-

li's team is "the little engine that could," he says. He's assured them: "There's a light at the end of the tunnel, and it's not a train." Early one recent morning, Ziobro was sitting on the floor of Santelli's office in sweats, trying to write a blurb "on the history of the intersection between race and music in America for 250 years in 150 words." This is not, she laughs, a nine-to-five job. "It's kind of all-consuming." In Santelli's temporary off-campus home, which doubles as a staging area, he wakes to a sea of priceless artifacts, including Springsteen's old surfboard and a drum set from one of his early bands, Earth.

"It's all very emotional," Chapman says, her voice catching. "And I know [Bruce] is very pleased." 🍀

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