

CONCERT REVIEW

Springsteen promotes folk music, values

Concert inspired by Seeger, New Orleans

By **Curtis Schieber**
The Columbus Dispatch

Wednesday, May 31, 2006

Bruce Springsteen celebrates people and places that are gone in his newest album *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, which provided most of the raw material and spirit for his current tour, which arrived in the Germain Amphitheater last night. With troubled clouds as his background and a simple ballroom reminiscent of the Band's *Last Waltz* set as his stage, Springsteen charged the songs and their subjects as if tapping the electricity that never quite materialized in the heavens.

Instead, he looked to the souls in aged songs such as "John Henry," "Jacob's Ladder" and "Erie Canal" -- most of which owe their common currency to folk singer Pete Seeger -- for their inextinguishable spirit and sturdy values of hard work, faith, pride and compassion.

They are many of the qualities that have marked the singer-songwriter's own protagonists from the beginning, from Crazy Janey and Mary Queen of Arkansas forward, they have been frequently fallible and sometimes heroic. A die-hard humanist and default folklorist, Springsteen began to cast his net wider than his New Jersey backstreets with albums such as 1982's *Nebraska* and 1995's *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. *The Seeger Sessions* is an epiphany, a discovery that his characters have hundreds-year-old soul-mates.

If the album found his revelation academic, its tone a bit nostalgic, last night's concert gave it the fire of conviction fanned by communal joy. With the help of 15 friends, Springsteen created the single-minded passion of a hootenanny, the hypnotic abandon of a gospel revival and the good times of a barn dance. Song after song, the group presented a rich amalgam of traditional styles that could have only been born in this country. The album and especially the tour is as much evidence of Springsteen's cultural patriotism as his commitment to the nation's ideals.

Fresh from the New Orleans Jazz And Heritage Festival, the ensemble looked to the Crescent City for much of its musical influence. Propelled by zydeco, Cajun, blues, traditional jazz and boogie-woogie, the traditional material rose like a phoenix from the devastation of New Orleans' culture, the source, Springsteen said for nearly all of this country's indigenous music.

Which also led the singer to one of the evening's few blatant political statements during Blind Alfred Reed's "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live," in which the singer inserted original verses criticizing President Bush's appearance in a devastated New Orleans.

"We Shall Overcome," the evening's acoustic-delivered and emotional highlight, had its roots in the Civil Rights movement, but its sentiment, especially as delivered last night, was starkly hopeful.

The album and tour are clearly attempts to recapture values which Springsteen believes can be forwarded by an appreciation of traditional culture, not to mention liberal politics.

But outside a few pointed lyrics here and there, Springsteen let the material speak for him in its admiration of American qualities if not lost, then forgotten, including compassion, a sense of fair play and respect for the labors of



ADAM CAIRNS | DISPATCH
Bruce Springsteen acknowledges the crowd last night at the Germain Amphitheater.

the worker.

With an awe-inspiring conviction, he reacquainted an audience of aging fans with a community many seemed to have forgotten. He did it by connecting, not preaching, and entertaining as a peer, not dazzling. And he left the feeling that he was bolstering his own optimism, as well.

Copyright © 2006, The Columbus Dispatch