

Bruce Springsteen's *Letter to You*: New and recycled songs

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Letter to You, recorded in 2019 and released last October, is Bruce Springsteen's 20th studio album. Featuring new and recycled material, the album was recorded with the E Street Band playing live in the studio, achieving at times the band's signature wall of sound, which alone would be worth giving the album a listen.

In the more recently written songs on *Letter to You*, Springsteen faces aging and the deaths of friends with honesty and taste. While these are not the best songs of the artist's extensive career, for long-time fans they are meaningful and often moving. The older songs, some from very early in his career like "If I Was the Priest" and "Janey Needs a Shooter," provide stark stylistic contrasts to the newer material and offer listeners some of the best moments on the album.

The album's opener, "One Minute You're Here," establishes the themes of death and loss. The music on this one is affecting, spare with softly swelling keyboards and single-note piano fills. "One Minute You're Here" also features some of the more musical lyrics of the newer songs.

*I thought I knew just who I was
And what I'd do but I was wrong
One minute you're here
Next minute you're gone*

In the title track, "Letter to You," the full band joins Springsteen for a heartfelt, if less than poetic, account of a letter. Springsteen has said that the letter is his body of work as addressed to his fans, and when seen in this light the idea of the song is moving, his body of work being what it is. But with a lyric filled with abstractions and the band simply strumming through a chord progression, this song does not inspire.

*In my letter to you
I took all my fears and doubts*

*In my letter to you
All the hard things I found out
In my letter to you
All that I've found true
And I sent it in my letter to you*

According to SpringsteenLyrics.com, the next track, "Burnin' Train," was first recorded in 1993, a year after the dual release of his albums *Lucky Town* and *Human Touch*. Musically and lyrically, the song calls out from that period, with its driving rhythm guitar and images of his lover's body in a song of abasement and redemption.

"Janey Needs a Shooter," a song written in 1972, is out of place and entirely welcome on this album. Featuring the rangy, imagistic lyrical style that placed Springsteen among those dubbed "the new Dylan" in the early '70s, the song's dynamic structure inspires the E Streeters to meld into their potent manifestation as one of the tightest and most forceful bands in rock history. Springsteen's older, deepened voice attacks the lyrics successfully, pairing well with their dark overtones.

*Well Janey's got a doctor who tears apart her insides
He investigates her and silently baits her sighs
He probes with his fingers but knows her heart only
through his stethoscope His hands are cold and his
body's so old
Janey turns him down like dope*

"Janey" is one of the high points on *Letter to You*, and its conjuring of an earlier Springsteen proves poignant on an album that looks back in grief and gratitude.

"Last Man Standing" was recorded in late 2019, after the death of Springsteen's bandmate George Theiss from his first band, The Castiles. Here the lyrics are alive in their evocation of young men playing gigs in

union halls and “black leather clubs along Route 9,” and the song walks that tightrope Springsteen walks well, looking back without falling into cheap sentimentality.

*Lights come up at the Legion Hall
Pool cues go back up on the wall
You pack your guitar and have one last beer
With just the ringing in your ears*

The album remains wistful in two of the next several tracks, “The Power of Prayer,” an affirmation of lasting love, and “Ghosts,” a tribute to departed bandmates, particularly those from the Castiles. “Song for Orphans” is another old song revisited, a rambling six-versed ode to the spark of youth that Springsteen saw prematurely extinguished, particularly by drugs, but also by a world that does not nurture that spark:

*Well how many wasted
Have I seen signed “Hollywood or bust”
They left to ride the ever ghostly Arizona gusts
Cheerleader tramps
And kids with big amps sounding in the void
High society vamps
Ex-heavyweight champs mistaking soot for soil*

The last of the old songs on the album, “If I Was the Priest,” features a moving musical performance by Springsteen and the band, and Springsteen’s vocals do the song justice, but the outrageous and suggestive lyrics hark back to the loose and funky performer of his youth, qualities he has long since left behind.

“Rainmaker” could be mistaken for a song about Donald Trump, but in fact was written no later than 2003, suggesting Springsteen had George W. Bush in mind. The song is strong musically and lyrically, with bracing violin strokes like those that characterized songs on Springsteen’s 2002 album *The Rising*. Springsteen’s writing here shows him at his political best, with a keen eye for hokum but also for the underlying conditions that can make hokum effective.

*Rainmaker, a little faith for hire
Rainmaker, the house is on fire
Rainmaker, take everything you have
Sometimes folks need to believe in something so bad, so bad, so bad
They’ll hire a rainmaker*

Unfortunately, to say the least, Springsteen is not always at his political best. For decades now he has been a spokesperson for the Democratic Party and,

during this year’s Super Bowl, he was featured in an ad for Jeep in which he preached platitudes on behalf of the political “center.” These things have erosive artistic consequences.

The last track on the album, “I’ll See You in My Dreams,” expresses love for a lost partner and perhaps alone among the newer songs on “Letter to You” stands on its own as a beautiful song, without requiring one to be a Springsteen fan.

*I got your guitar here by the bed
All your favorite records
And all the books that you read
And though my soul feels like
It’s been split at the seams
I’ll see you in my dreams*

While Springsteen’s *Letter to You* is addressed to his fans, there is much here for others to enjoy. An uneven artistic effort, the album has no bad tracks, and the good tracks manage at times to come near the heights of classic Springsteen.



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