

The Sunday Times, December 2 2018

Donald Trump's most dangerous opponent may not be a politician, but a blue-collar rocker called Bruce Springsteen who shares millions of the same supporters as the Republican president, and also understands what makes grassroots America tick. So Trump should be pleasantly surprised to learn that Springsteen, a long-standing Democrat who campaigned for Barack Obama, believes the Donald is heading for a second term in the White House. The president has a flair for winning over working-class voters that the Democrats can't rival, the singer admits. In short, Trump was born to run, and may be unstoppable.

"I don't see anyone out there at the moment ... the man who can beat Trump, or the woman who can beat Trump," Springsteen says. "You need someone who can speak some of the same language [as Trump] ... and the Democrats don't have an obvious, effective presidential candidate."

It's bad news for Springsteen's party, coming on top of its disappointing performance in last month's midterm elections. Despite running their most expensive campaign ever, backed by Hollywood stars and predictions of a "blue wave" of support across the nation, the Democrats won a majority in the House of Representatives, but failed to make sufficient gains to suggest the party was on track for the White House. In the Senate, they lost seats to their Republican rivals, particularly in places where Trump had paid a visit.

Springsteen agrees the results were disheartening. "Yeah, it was nice to get the House back, but I'd like to have seen a much more full-throated [rejection] of the past two years," he sighs with a shake of his head. "The country is very divided right now — there are a lot of people drinking the snake oil. So it's a very difficult time here in the States."

What the nation needs is oil for troubled waters, he says. "We've come too far and worked too hard. Too many good people paid too high a price to allow this [the fracturing of America that Springsteen fears]."

Could it be that the party needs a new candidate? Someone rather like Trump, with roots in bare-knuckle New Jersey, where the president built his boxing and gambling empire? A multimillionaire celebrity, with no political baggage, who speaks the language of the street and the truckstop, and connects with ordinary people?

Someone, in other words, like Springsteen. After all, he's 69, the age at which Trump declared his candidacy. Like the president, he is a child of the 1940s who fought his way to the top, dodging the Vietnam draft on the way. Trump's brother was a heavy drinker, so was Springsteen's father, prompting both to embrace clean living. Both campaign for combat veterans and rally stadium crowds against the backdrop of the American flag. They even cheer for the same baseball team, the New York Yankees.

Will he throw his bandana into the ring for a last-chance power drive? Springsteen laughs. "No, not in any way, in any form," he says. "I'd be terrible." In any case, he'll soon be "back to my day job" — touring with the E Street Band, including venues in the UK. He will also release a new album, his first for five years: "For lack of a better word, it's a singer-songwriter album — more of a solo record." His fans would prefer to see "the Boss" on stage than on the stump, he says.

Springsteen is sitting in his dressing room. He's looking a little older than the last time we met a couple of years ago, eyebrows flecked with grey. When talking about US politics, he chooses his words carefully, painting a portrait of an America more unequal, more divided, than at any time he can remember.

He's preparing to go on stage at the 960-seat Walter Kerr Theatre for his one-man show: Springsteen on Broadway. It's a 2½-hour marathon that he's been performing five nights a week since October

2017, with every show a sell-out. It will close shortly before Christmas, when a televised version will be shown on Netflix. There will also be an album including the 15 songs he performs nightly.

The Stars and Stripes hangs on one wall of his dressing room and his mirror is covered with old photos, including a picture of the Castiles, the band he joined as a teenager. Of the five members, Springsteen is the only survivor. Bart Haynes, the drummer, was killed in action in Vietnam. George Theiss, the lead singer, died earlier this year from lung cancer. "It's a little strange being the only guy remaining," Springsteen says.

Few musicians have his staying power. The simple reason he keeps going, he says, is that audiences keep coming. His most recent tour, was the top-earning worldwide in 2016, pulling in \$268.3m globally. It was the highest-grossing tour since 2014 for any artist (beating Taylor Swift's 2015 tour, which grossed \$250.1m).

Much of the humour in his stage show is at his own expense. "I've never held an honest job in my entire life," he admits. "I've never done any hard labour. I've never worked five days a week until right now. I've never seen the inside of the factory, and yet it's all I've ever written about."

He strikes a chord with the baby-boomers in the audience when he tells them, to murmurs of recognition, that we may leave our home town, but the town never leaves us. "I'm Mr Born to Run ... My home, New Jersey? It's a death trap. It's a suicide rap, all right? [Yet] I currently live 10 minutes from my home town. Born to Come Back, who'd have bought that shit?" Likewise, he wrote one of his most famous songs, Racing in the Street, at 21, despite having no driving licence and, he confesses, he "hadn't driven round the block".

There's reflective silence as he shares stories of the struggles of daily American life that shaped his music. "My father worked as a 16-year-old floor boy in the rug mill, then went off to war. When he came home, they shut the rug mill down, and he went to work on the Ford Motor plant line in New Brunswick. He worked in the Nescafé plant in Freehold. Worked in the plastics factory in town, he was a truck driver, a bus driver, drove a taxi."

The family toiled to make ends meet. They never ate out or owned a telephone ("No phone, no phone bills"). New York City was only an hour away from where he grew up in Freehold, but it might as well have been on the moon because there was no money to travel, he recalls.

It's these memories of hard times that underlie the less well-known reason he keeps performing — to raise money for good causes. There are plenty of hungry folk across the nation who have benefited from hot meals, or who have had their roof repaired or heating fixed during a bone-chilling East Coast winter, thanks to an anonymous benefactor.

Pressed on the subject, he says: "Hunger in America is still a problem. [We're] in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, so something's wrong there, you know."

Since the Born in the USA tour in 1984, he's donated typically \$10,000 per show to charity, handing over millions of dollars over the years. "I was 34 and looking around where I could be of some small assistance," he says, explaining how it got started. "It was a time when a lot of the steel mills were closing down. I met the head of the local union in the Monongahela Valley [in America's neglected Rust Belt] and he turned me onto a network of food banks that was the beginning of a national network. So we kind of grew along with that. It's just something I've continued doing, and it's not a big deal."

The opioid crisis, blamed for 48,000 deaths in America last year, mainly among the poor and luckless, is “a huge problem in the United States”, he says. Neither party has adequately addressed the poverty that underlies it, nor launched a relief effort on the scale required, he argues. “If you were looking at rescuing some of our inner cities, places where [hunger] is a huge issue, you would need something on the level of a national Marshall Plan. You would need a real serious programme, which never seems to get put together.”

He plays the Stand Up for Heroes benefit concerts, which raise money for wounded combat veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq. “I play the guitar and raise some money. Again, it’s not a big deal, but it’s deeply needed.”

Of course, as well as striving for the downtrodden and dispossessed, Springsteen takes care of himself. The proceeds from sales of 135m albums worldwide, plus touring, merchandise and other spinoffs, have bought him a 380-acre farm in New Jersey, where he and Patti Scialfa, his wife, raise horses. Plus there’s the house in Los Angeles, another in a gated community in Florida and an enviable collection of classic cars and motorbikes.

His children attended a fee-paying school known for demanding standards and a dress code that would have got Springsteen kicked out in his younger days. Evan, 28, graduated from Boston College with a music degree and writes songs while working as a radio producer. Jessie, 26, is a successful showjumper and mixes with the international equestrian elite. Sam, 24, quit college to become a firefighter and a farmer, staying true to his dad’s blue-collar roots. Unconfirmed estimates put Springsteen’s wealth at \$200m or more. He admits in his autobiography: “I live high on the hog, yacht around the Mediterranean and private-plane myself between dental appointments.”

His friends in high places include Barack Obama, who presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom — America’s highest civilian honour — in 2016. Soon afterwards, Springsteen performed a private concert for Barack, Michelle and their staff before they left the White House: an evening of songs and storytelling that evolved into his current Broadway show. The couple remain close friends.

Springsteen has the political connections, he admits, (and is rich enough) to run for office, but insists that good rockers don’t make good politicians, no matter how many records they sell. “At the end of the day, you’re just a musician with a loud mouth.”

A decade ago, he campaigned actively for Obama, staging free concerts and raising funds. With no obvious successor — no Democratic frontrunner with a clear shot at the White House — Springsteen is reluctant to commit to doing the same for the next presidential race. “I don’t know precisely what I’m going to do this time, but I tend to think the more you make yourself available, perhaps the less weight your word carries,” he says, cautiously.

Instead, he’s recently thrown his weight behind citizens’ movements, organised not by the Democrats but by coalitions of activists. They include a young people’s march calling for tighter gun laws, spurred by the Florida school shootings earlier this year, and a women’s rights campaign that drew thousands of protesters to the streets of Washington and cities across America. “We stand with you,” he said in a message from Australia, where he was touring. “We are the new American resistance.”

It may be that Springsteen has grown disenchanted with the direction American politics is taking. Assembly-line workers, single mothers, farmers, truckers, folk from the sawmills of the Pacific Northwest, the trawler towns of Massachusetts and coal mines of Appalachia — Springsteen's people — are feeling anxious these days, he admits. Depressed wages, ever-cheaper imports that undercut American-made goods and the pace of change of the digital age have left millions disillusioned. The gig economy is no substitute for real jobs, they complain, while every day there seem to be more laws and more things being outlawed.

Instead of addressing these concerns, the Democrats at times appear preoccupied with banning plastic straws and ever-tighter controls on struggling smokestack industries. Meanwhile, Trump woos disaffected Democrat voters with promises to drain the swamp of smug politicians and their cronies, and tear up lousy trade deals. In his usual take-no-prisoners style, the president portrays his opponents as privileged East and West Coast liberals with scant regard for the folk in the geographical middle. As a case in point, the Democrats were odds-on to win the governorship of the Midwestern state of Ohio last month, and made the race one of the party's top priorities. They lost after Trump visited the state on the eve of the poll to attack Richard Cordray, the Democratic candidate, calling him "a bad person who will do a terrible job". Trump didn't say what Cordray had done wrong, but the Democrats had talked about renewable energy and showing leniency towards drug offenders.

Perhaps the Democrats should have taken their lead from Springsteen, whose protest song Youngstown focused on more pressing problems, those of Ohio's Rust Belt. A few decades ago, the skies were lit up by blast furnaces smelting iron ore that came ashore from Lake Erie and turning it into steel that fed the nation's manufacturing industries.

It all changed when the steelworks — which had once "built the tanks and bombs that won this country's wars", Springsteen sings — were shut down by faceless bosses who "did what Hitler couldn't do", leaving industrial blight.

Youngstown had started to recover, but then General Motors laid off 2,500 employees, shifting production of its Chevrolet cars to Mexico, where the hourly wage is less than \$3, one-tenth that of its American workers.

In a stirring pre-election speech, Trump reassured a Youngstown rally: "Those jobs [that] have left Ohio — they're all coming back. We're going to fill up those factories or rip them down and build brand new ones." He promised tariffs on imported vehicles to protect local jobs, and described laid-off workers as America's "forgotten men and women". As a result, many Democrat voters switched allegiance, even though the promised tariffs were never imposed and the jobs have yet to return. Is this an example of why Trump is heading for a second White House term?

"I think that there are a lot of reasons people became Trump voters," Springsteen says. "You had severe blows to working people in the 1970s and 1980s as all the steel mills shut down. Then you had an explosion of information technology. These are life-changing, upsetting occurrences. You can find yourself in a country that you may not feel part of, or you feel that your [concerns are] being dismissed. So [you've had] an enormous amount of insecurity and instability. Add to that, someone comes in and plays on your racial anxieties, and blames an enormous amount of this on the 'other' from the southern side of the border, and you're going to have an audience for those views. I basically think that [the problem] is the incredibly rapid pace of change that's occurred in the United States that's gone unaddressed by both administrations, Democrat and Republican."

Would Springsteen back tariffs on foreign imports to help places like Youngstown? "I feel, like most Americans, I'd like to see American jobs stay in the States. I don't believe Donald Trump is the solution. I haven't seen he's somebody with answers. He's kept to a pretty conventional path. You know, tax cuts for the better off. I'm not sure about the power of those tariffs to do what he claims they might do. I don't know

if there is a way to really bring those jobs back and I think that's what's causing so much anxiety to so many Americans."

His undisguised contempt for Trump — he's called him a "deeply damaged man" and a "moron" — has inevitably alienated some fans, a fact he's resigned to and the price, he says, of sticking to his beliefs.

Unusually, Trump has never hit back at Springsteen, even though he hasn't refrained from socking it to other celebrities. After Robert De Niro denounced Trump from the podium at this year's Tony awards ceremony, the president suggested the actor may be brain damaged, tweeting: "Robert De Niro, a very Low IQ individual, has received too many shots to the head by real boxers in movies". But on Springsteen he's maintained a respectful silence, wary perhaps of forcing his voters to choose between the president and the Boss.

The deaths of some of Springsteen's closest friends have recently made him take stock. "Life is finite, and you've got just so much time," he says. Along with the Castiles, two members of his E Street Band are dead: Clarence Clemons, the saxophonist, and Danny Federici, the accordionist. He thinks about them every day, he sighs. "You know, ghosts live among us. They don't ever quite leave us and there's something beautiful and hopeful in that. I enjoy visiting the spirits of my father and Clarence, and my friends and family, which I do on stage each night."

He's now a regular visitor to the Catholic church in Freehold where he was an altar boy. Surprising, given that over the years he has railed against his strict Catholic upbringing. Harsh treatment meted out by nuns at the Saint Rose of Lima primary school in Freehold sowed the seeds of angst that haunts him to this day.

"You get more spiritual as you grow older," he explains. "You're closer to the other world, so maybe that has something to do with it. I'm sort of past the dogmatic religion. That got burnt out of me when I was a kid. But what never leaves you are those eight formative years of Catholic education. I do still find myself drawn to the Catholic church. I visit my small church quite often. I'm not sure whether that's for religious or nostalgic purposes, but I continue to feel the Catholic church's imprint on me rather strongly."

Does he go to confession?" No, he laughs. "I haven't done that in quite a while."

As well as bouts of depression, he's fought a battle with tendonitis, brought on by many years of guitar strumming, had "nerve-wracking" throat surgery and an operation to repair the damaged discs in his neck that were causing numbness down one side. As Indiana Jones is reminded by a friend in the last Raiders film: "Indy, we've reached the age where life stops giving us things and starts taking them away."

All the more reason why Springsteen is determined to stay on top of his game (and keep breathing, he jokes). He works out, though less vigorously than before. "The older you get I find the less you have to do.

A little bit of walking two or three times a week and I still lift weights very moderately three or four times a week, for short periods. That's all it takes for me now. Then [there's] your diet; you can't eat anything you like. I'll have oats and some fruit when I get up, a vegetarian chilli or something for lunch, then a light dinner."

Vegetarian? Is he one? "No, I'm not," he says quickly, perhaps mindful of how that might sound to fans in the Chicago stockyards. "I have a pretty basic diet."

Older musicians than him are still rocking, he points out. "Your Mick Jagger [75] does very well," he says. "So does Paul McCartney [76]. BB King and Chuck [Berry] played into their eighties. I sang with Pete Seeger when he was 90." And longevity is in his genes, he says. His aunts Dora and Ida lived to 92 and 90 respectively, and his mother, Adele, is still active at 93, albeit with Alzheimer's disease.

He's said: "I'm suited for the long haul. I'm interested in what I might accomplish over a lifetime of music making. I would like to have a 70-year-old Elvis reinventing his talents and [seen] where Jimi Hendrix might've next taken the electric guitar."

When he tours in the next few months with the E Street Band, he may have to forgo the energetic knee slides across the stage and crowd surfing that were once trademark features of concerts that stretched to four hours and more. But otherwise he's making no concessions.

It's welcome news for the millions who look back on their lives to the soundtrack of five decades of Springsteen's music. And he has a clear message for those watching him for their cue to ease off the throttle, kick back and retire: "Don't stop ... keep going."

Can we look forward to another decade of rocking?

"Sure. Why not."