

Soundtrack Studies

Music makes the grade with scholars

By KAREN WING

At age 18, Bruce Springsteen was a community college dropout living on the New Jersey shore. Thirty-eight years later, he was the subject of a serious academic symposium offered by Penn State and attended by more than 300 educators, journalists and historians from all over the United States, Europe, Canada, Japan and Australia. Little wonder he's called the Boss.

Featured speakers of the early September event, "Glory Days: A Bruce Springsteen Symposium," included critic and Springsteen biographer Dave Marsh; Barbara Hall, novelist, musician and creator of the television show "Joan of Arcadia"; photographer Frank Stefanko; Pittsburgh musician Joe Grushecky; and E Street Band members Danny Federici and Vini Lopez. Paper presentations covered everything from working-class ethos to Springsteen's role as a narrative poet.



Debra L. Rothenberg/rothenbergphoto.com

Dr. Jerry Zolten, associate professor of communication arts and sciences and American studies at Penn State Altoona and a critically acclaimed producer and author in the American roots music genre, points out that sometimes academia steers clear of artists who are still performing, because, “in a sense, the legacy is still in process.” But because Springsteen has been producing meaningful work for decades, Zolten added, “it’s not in the least premature to consider his legacy now.”

Judging from the more than 150 paper submissions for the symposium, which came from 33 different states and eight countries, as well as media attention—national outlets such as the Associated Press, New York Times, MSNBC, MTV and CNN Radio covered the event—many agree.

Focus on Artists and Genres

Mark Bernhard, senior conference planner for Penn State’s Conferences and Institutes, created and championed the concept of a Springsteen conference, and he believes additional artists—living or dead—or music genres could be featured in a series. “This is a concept that can be replicated,” he said. “There’s an opportunity for Penn State to work with other partners and to collaborate with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.”

Added Dr. Gary Miller, associate vice president for Outreach: “Popular music is one of the defining elements of our culture. It deserves serious study.”

Bernhard and Zolten have tentatively planned, for 2007, a symposium on Black gospel music. Not only has there been a proliferation of independent gospel labels over the last few years, but “African American religious music and gospel music in particular has had an enormous influence on American music and rock ‘n’ roll,” said Zolten, author of the well-received book “Great God A’Mighty! The Dixie Hummingbirds: Celebrating the Rise of Soul Gospel Music” (Oxford University Press, 2002).

Online Pop Music Course Proves Popular

Another venue for the academic study of popular music has been a survey course, offered online by the Department of Integrative Arts through Penn State’s World Campus, the University’s Distance Education program. What started with 45 students in the fall

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semester of last year has grown to an enrollment of 1,000 this year.

“What you study in most music schools is very limited and focused on the history of Western European fine art or classical music,” said Bill Kelly, head of integrative arts. “Typically, there is little opportunity to study the music that is indigenous to America—our own musical heritage—especially in the popular idiom. Pop culture has had enormous influence on everything we do. It’s crucial that we create courses so the legacy isn’t lost.”

Miller credits Kelly’s academic expertise and Penn State’s pioneering relationship with Napster—which gives students access to music online at no additional cost—for the course’s success. “The final piece was the universal access available through World Campus,” he added. “The technology allows us to take an unusual course and make sure every campus has access through online delivery.”

Kelly anticipates that over the next five to 10 years, his department and the World Campus will offer an entire series devoted to a comprehensive look at popular music.

Penn State will be making a lasting contribution to the Boss bibliography with a postconference publication and proceedings. Who’s next—will it be Bob Dylan? Jimi Hendrix? “There are many legends that deserve recognition,” said Zolten. ■