

## Title:

What Bruce Springsteen Taught Me About Writing

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## Summary:

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the release of Bruce Springsteen's groundbreaking album Born to Run. Columbia Records is celebrating by re-releasing the disc with lots of audio and video goodies including interview material of Bruce discussing the writing of this seminal work. I'm a fan, so you can imagine I've been gobbling up this stuff like Thanksgiving came early! What's hitting home for me is hearing about how Springsteen's back was really up against the wall whi...

## Keywords:

## Article Body:

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the release of Bruce Springsteen's groundbreaking album Born to Run. Columbia Records is celebrating by re-releasing the disc with lots of audio and video goodies including interview material of Bruce discussing the writing of this seminal work. I'm a fan, so you can imagine I've been gobbling up this stuff like Thanksgiving came early! What's hitting home for me is hearing about how Springsteen's back was really up against the wall while he was creating this album. His record label was considering dropping him so he knew he had to make something happen. When people ask me "how do I know if my work is good enough?", I think of Springsteen because surely he wasn't asking that when he was trying to figure out what to write. The answer could have been "it's not" if he had asked someone at his record company. He had to work and learn for himself how to tell if his work was good enough. This is what I learned from how he did it.

## 1.) Learn From the Great Ones

In the summer of 1974 Springsteen could have been lamenting the fact that his first two albums had not been successful and he was living in a tiny house in New Jersey while the country was in the throes of a severe economic depression. But he wasn't. He was focused on his songwriting. "I had a record player by the side of my bed," he wrote in his book, Songs. "At night I'd lie back and listen to records by Roy Orbison, the Ronettes, the Beach Boys, and the other great

'60s artists. These were records whose full depth I'd missed the first time around. But now I was appreciating their craft and power." Notice he wasn't saying "There's no way I can create songs like that!" Instead he was considering "what can I add to the conversation?" He was getting inspired and educated at the same time.

## 2.) Aspire to Be Great Yourself

In an interview about Born to Run, Springsteen says he knew his record company was about to drop him. He added, "I knew I had to write something great." Springsteen didn't have to write something great. He could have folded up his tent and said, "they don't like me, I'm just gonna stay in Asbury Park and play where people appreciate me and that's it." But he didn't do that. He also didn't ask whether he was good enough. He simply challenged himself to go beyond himself--to be great. Ask yourself: what are you writing right now and is it challenging you to be great? What would it take for you to start thinking this way?

## 3.) Find Trusted Ears for Feedback

Yes, it is hard to know on your own whether you're on track with your writing. That's when you recruit your own inner circle of readers whose ears and eyes you trust. Jon Landau became one of those trusted pairs of ears for Springsteen. They became friends during the writing of Born to Run and Bruce often sent Jon, then a Boston music critic, tapes of the work as it progressed. When the work stalled, Landau was the one who came in and helped Bruce put it all together. Who can be those ears or eyes for you? Try to keep the inner circle small. If you have too many opinions showered on your work it may cloud your creative judgment.

## 4.) Try Something Different

Most of the songs on Born to Run were written on piano--this from a guy known for his raucous Fender guitar. But writing on piano gave Springsteen new ideas and presented new opportunities for him to explore. It also gave the album an amazingly emotional and intimate vibe that I find intoxicating. What can you do differently that can inspire a leap to your next level? Set your novel in 1905 instead of 2005? Write from the point of view of the opposite sex? Be a little creative with your non-fiction? Take a chance. No effort is ever wasted even if you're writing badly--you can still learn from what you've done wrong.

## 5.) Think Local, Write Global

One of the changes Springsteen made with Born to Run was that the characters in

his songs were "less eccentric and less local" than the ones on his previous albums. The people in Born to Run "could have been anybody and everybody," he says. "When the screen door slams on 'Thunder Road', you're not necessarily on the Jersey Shore anymore. You could be anywhere in America." And it's true. Millions of people connected with--and bought-- Born to Run. I sought the same kind of connection for my novel. Though the family in All I Need to Get By is African-American, I've had readers of all races tell me how they have seen themselves in one or more of the characters and how they related strongly to the book's family issues. Touching people in this way is key to developing an attentive audience. How can you open up your work to a larger audience while still being true to your story?

If you still have doubts, think of this quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson:  
"Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong. There are always difficulties arising which tempt you to believe that your critics are right. To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires...courage." Be courageous for yourself and your writing. Your own Born to Run may be waiting to come out.

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