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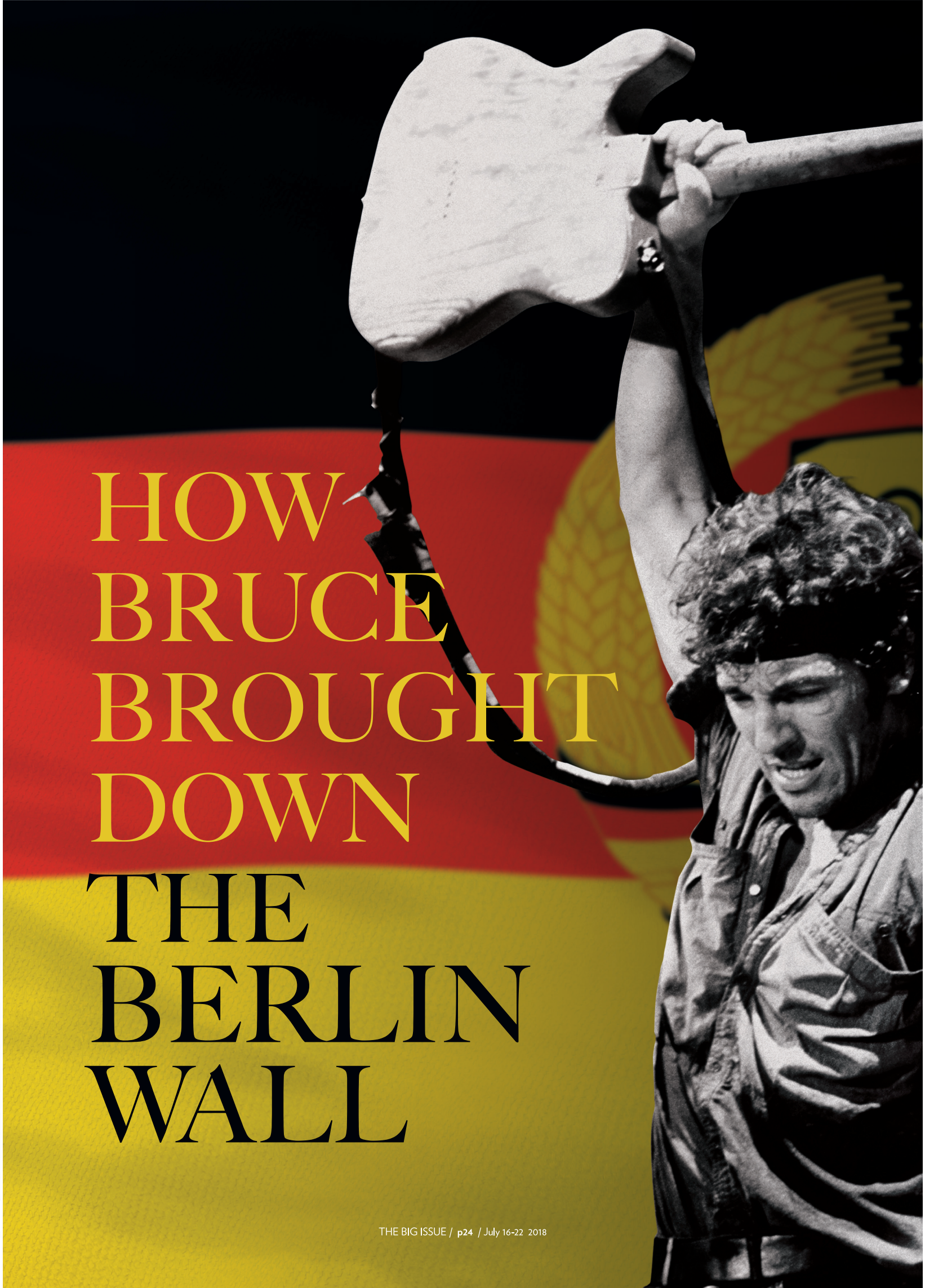
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Revolution rock: how Springsteen tore down
the Berlin Wall and changed history





HOW BRUCE BROUGHT DOWN THE BERLIN WALL

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It's 30 years since Springsteen played East Berlin. More than two per cent of all GDR adults were there, and just over a year later the Wall came down. With Europe in turmoil once again, Malcolm Jack visits the site of the historic show to relive the glory days of a cultural hero

On the evening of July 19 1988, an all but forgotten patch of the once-divided city of Berlin – the tipping point between the Communist East and liberal West – was scene to arguably the most unifying open-air rock show of all time. That night, Bruce Springsteen and his E Street Band at the peak of their peerless powers helped bring down the Berlin Wall, end the Cold War and save the world through the invigorating, liberating, life-altering power of pure, unfiltered rock'n'roll. Or so a theory goes.

That concerts ever took place at the Radrennbahn Weißensee in north-east Berlin is difficult to envision today. Distinguished only by a wonky-looking socialist relief of some sportsmen on a wall beside the boarded-up ticket offices, the entrance to the largely derelict German Democratic Republic-era cycle track stands shrouded in graffiti, weeds and overgrown grass. The gates which once saw hundreds of thousands of excited young East Germans rushing through hang rusted and sagging on their hinges. In the corner of the field where a huge stage stood, now there's a football pitch where some kids lazily kick a ball in the hot afternoon sun, oblivious to the dramatic events that unfolded here 30 summers ago.

For some it was the spark that lit a fire of demand for reform in the dry tinder of the failing communist state, culminating 16 months later in the tense night of November 9 1989, and the eventual opening of the border. Others dismiss such fanciful notions, and soberly point to Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and the much bigger conflagration of events igniting east of the Iron Curtain.

One thing all agree on is that Springsteen's show at Weißensee, the first in East Germany by an artist of his stature, enriched and transformed countless lives – the vast majority had never seen a rock musician before, far less one of the greatest. With 30 years of hindsight, it is undoubtedly a moment worthy of much greater recognition in music history.

"When we were playing our regular shows in West Germany, Bruce said to me, 'When are we playing East Berlin?' About a month later there we were."

That's the basic account by Springsteen's longtime manager, producer and friend Jon Landau of events that led to Checkpoint Charlie allowing into East Germany New Jersey's true blue-collar hero whose songs of freedom, escape and self-empowerment were as life-affirming as they come. A star whose tidy blue-jeans-clad backside alone – enshrined in rock iconography



Born in the GDR: The gig that changed attitudes for a generation of East Germans (Photo by Mehner/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

after being superimposed over an American flag on the cover of 1984's 30 million-selling album *Born in the U.S.A.* – could scarcely have represented a more threatening symbol of capitalist decadence and swagger.

In short, Bruce wanted to do the gig and, as part of an ultimately misguided bid to placate the youths with a string of shows by visiting Western rock stars that year, East German authorities wanted Bruce to do it too. Scarcely a few weeks after the idea was first proposed, Springsteen was behind the Iron Curtain, jeans-clad butt and all. Being driven around in a Lada.

"It was a short one-hour tour through East Berlin," remembers Conny Günther, today the Berlin bureau manager and culture correspondent of *The Economist*, but back then 28-year-old Conny Rudat, Springsteen's East German translator and chaperone for the day on a quick sightseeing sojourn. "That was with Bruce and his girlfriend from the E Street Band, Patti Scialfa," Günther recalls. "She is his wife now, but this was when they had just started getting together, it was still secret.

"What I really liked," Günther remembers fondly, "it was not like I was explaining to them sights in East Germany, but they also asked me questions. And I thought 'why are they interested in my little life behind the Iron Curtain?' I underestimated foreigners in general, but with Springsteen in particular it quickly became clear, he's not just a rock star coming and playing then he's off again, he was very interested."

East meeting West proved to be a learning experience for all involved. "It may sound corny," Landau tells *The Big Issue*, "but the feeling among us was that this place just wasn't working. And with Gorbachev's influence in the general European atmosphere at the time, it seemed like change was a real possibility – although none of us had any idea

OVER THE PAGE >



Springsteen said he'd never seen a bigger crowd than on that July night in East Berlin (Mehner/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

what the change would be and how soon it would come."

Other Western rock stars including Bob Dylan, Depeche Mode, Joe Cocker and Bryan Adams had already played East Berlin in 1988, and yet Springsteen's draw proved more enormous than anyone imagined. People travelled from all over East and even West Germany to be there. Officially 160,000 tickets were sold, but many more fans showed up, and in the end authorities had to do something practically unheard of in such a tightly controlled society – throw open the gates. It's estimated that at least 300,000 and maybe as many as 500,000 packed the Radrennbahn that July evening – around 2.5 per cent of all adult GDR citizens. It wasn't just the biggest crowd Springsteen has ever played for, but as he acknowledged in his 2016 autobiography *Born to Run*, "The largest single crowd I'd ever seen... I couldn't see its end".

Some fans waved homemade American flags despite the risk of reprisal from security services. The mood was tense but expectant. The scene was set for something epic.

"It was under a world microscope that we walked into that town and played that show," E Street Band guitarist Nils Lofgren tells *The Big Issue*.

Tempers had frayed backstage on discovery that, unknown to Springsteen, the whole thing had been billed as a concert for solidarity with Nicaragua, such was the East German authorities' stubborn insistence on putting a socialist spin on everything. "I remember the whole dressing room was laid out like an army barracks," Lofgren recalls. "There were these drab-coloured tents, there was a lot of political figures around. It was a very politically run thing."

Lofgren's most vivid memory of the performance was Springsteen's short address to the enormous crowd, delivered around halfway through a typically marathon set, straight after a rousing *Born*

in the U.S.A. and over the hopeful opening strains of a cover of Bob Dylan's *Chimes of Freedom*. "It's nice to be in East Berlin," Springsteen began, in creaky but carefully calibrated German. "I want to tell you that I'm not here for or against any government, I have come to play rock'n'roll for the East Berliners, in the hope that one day all barriers will be torn down."

Learned phonetically from a translation by his German tour bus driver – and dramatically tweaked and re-learned mid-show after all involved got spooked at the potentially grave consequences of Springsteen saying the highly charged word "Wall" – his short dispatch was met with a spine-tingling roar. In his must-read book *Rocking the Wall: The Berlin Concert that*

"It gave people a picture of the world the GDR could be"

- Sabine Wendt, concert-goer

Changed the World, Erik Kirschbaum calls those two sentences "one of the most under-appreciated anti-Wall speeches ever made", more important even than those of Presidents Kennedy and Reagan. A man accustomed to the power of simple words, Springsteen had just spoken some of the most potent of his life.

"Bruce made a beautiful speech where he talked about breaking down barriers," Lofgren remembers, proudly. "Which of course is in a lot of his songwriting – some of the greatest songwriting with political commentary. Even more than political, but just a human commentary."

Landau was confident that Springsteen had struck the right tone. "I knew when

Bruce showed me the text that it was a pitch-perfect statement," he says. "Not too specific about the government, but very specific about the need for greater communication among all people on the ultimate journey to freedom. It was magic and I knew it would reverberate."

To assess just how much those words and that show reverberated among East Germans, you need to ask a few of them. Their responses don't always quite fit with the romantic version of events.

I meet Springsteen's translator Günther in the bright atrium of Berlin's Bundespressehaus, part of the shiny new political district which has sprung up by the River Spree behind the restored Reichstag since reunification, not far from where the Wall once ran. She has great memories from her short time with Springsteen and reminisces about it happily. Yet she cautions that it's a very Americanised view to assume that it had to be one of their cultural icons who helped bring down the Berlin Wall – an achievement also often erroneously attributed to others such as Michael Jackson (who played West Berlin a few weeks before Springsteen), and, absurdly, David Hasselhoff (the *Baywatch* hunk in trunks was a big star in Germany, but he performed by the Wall only after it had started to be torn down).

"Of course there is a much, much broader aspect to it," Günther insists. She agrees, however, that the East German regime's surprisingly naive choice to admit Springsteen and other Western artists blew up in their faces. "They thought they could calm people

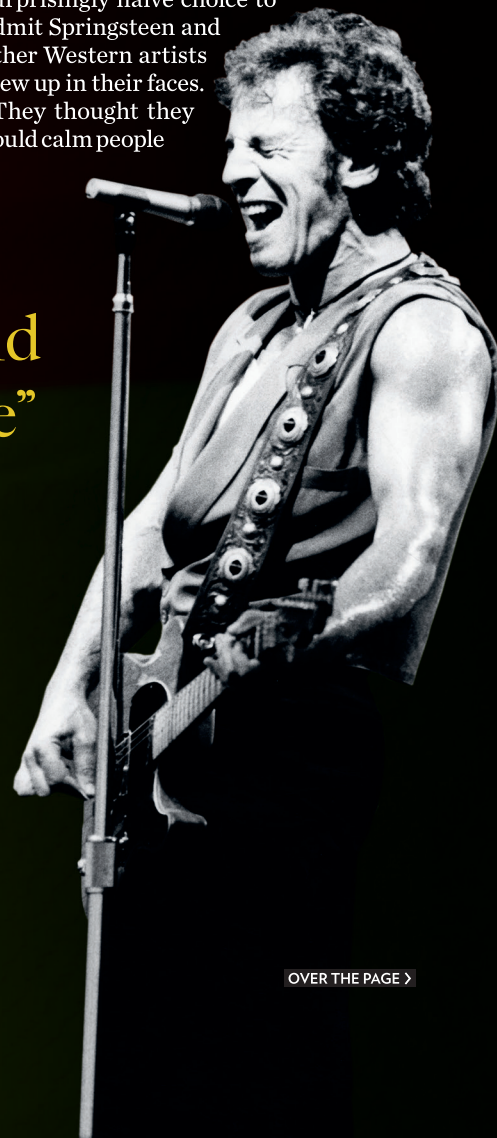


Photo by Scherhauber/ullstein bild via Getty Images

OVER THE PAGE >

down, but in fact they created more desires and more longings," she says. "Not only for more bands here in the East, but also to go to West Berlin and to go to somewhere like England. In a way it backfired."

Igor Hartmann was a 20-year-old production manager for East German state TV in 1988, and is still in television today. He was part of the broadcast team working on the Springsteen concert, shoddy but nonetheless compelling footage of which was beamed almost live into homes right across the country, meanings scarcely a single young East German didn't know at least something about it.

He shows me around the derelict remains of the Radrennbahn on a sunny Saturday afternoon, a site he hasn't revisited in 30 years. "To say that the music helped to overcome the Wall? To be honest, not me," he shakes his head, despite his thrilling fly-on-the-wall proximity to events. "No. I think that music was important for fleeing your life and finding your niche."

"The main force was that people felt unsatisfied," Hartmann adds. "People were less and less satisfied with their way of living. Berlin always was kind of an island, because when things got better it was mostly for Berlin. In terms of people unsatisfied, it was mostly in the rest of the country, like the rallies which started in Leipzig, not in Berlin."

It's worth noting that both Günther and Hartmann had unusual jobs that placed them both backstage, and not out there among the surging throng of young East Germans. Such as Sabine Wendt – today a senior executive for the VisitBerlin tourism bureau, but in 1988 just a normal 17-year-old East German schoolgirl from the Weißensee neighbourhood, who sneaked in to the



No surrender: East Germans got a taste of life beyond the Wall (Herbert Schulze/ullstein bild/Getty)

"To be in that throng for four hours, sanctioned by your own corrupt government, I can't imagine what that was like for them"

- Nils Lofgren, E Street Band



The ties that bind: (from left) Nils Lofgren, Patti Scialfa, The Boss, Steven Van Zandt, Max Weinberg and Garry Tallent in Berlin in 2016 (Frank Hoensch/Redferns)

concert with her older brother when they heard a rumour that tickets were no longer being checked. Like many present, Wendt's next experience of being among a huge, tense and expectant crowd would be during the popular protests on the streets of Berlin in the final days before the Wall cracked.

Does she think the Springsteen show changed things? "Definitely," she responds. "Because it gave the people, it gave me, the picture of the world the GDR could be. It gave us a feeling of how the world, or how life could be."

"Music concerts and travelling, these were the things that we really, really missed," she continues. "All these things like food and clothes was nice. But the thing that really gave us the power to fight against the government or the system was the travelling, to be able to be allowed to travel and to listen to music and to celebrate things. This way of being free and to express yourself."

"This concert changed something in our minds and our hearts. It had nothing to do with the revolution on the street and with Gorbachev. But with something that changed in our attitudes and our understandings and our feelings."

"Rock'n'roll is a music of stakes," writes Springsteen of the East Berlin show and its place in history in memoir *Born to Run*. "The higher they're pushed, the deeper and more

thrilling the moment becomes. In East Germany in 1988, the centre of the table was loaded down with a winner-takes-all bounty that would explode into the liberating destruction of the Berlin Wall by the people of Germany."

Nils Lofgren is less cryptic. "Do I think it helped? Of course I do," he asserts. "To just be in that throng for three hours, four hours, and know that you were allowed out there – you were sanctioned by your own corrupt government, and you were free for those few hours. I can't imagine what it was like for them. To get to be in this colourful, wild band in front of that crowd, with all kinds of colours and placards. It felt like all of a sudden we just inserted our little moment of freedom. And that was very powerful."

"For myself," states Landau, "I believe we came to East Berlin at a time when Bruce's show was on fire, he did a great show, and tried to do something constructive for the people who attended."

And if Springsteen really did help to achieve everything some claim he did? Well, it would just have been another day's work for The Boss. "Bruce always inspires and if he inspired some to think larger thoughts about the future," Landau contemplates, "well, that's his job."

@MBJack



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