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A Guitar Festival Begins With a Trip to 'Nebraska'

By JESSE FOX MAYSHARK

Murders, broken families, lost jobs, last chances and long, late-night drives down dark, lonely Interstates — Bruce Springsteen's album "Nebraska" has something for everyone to feel bad about.

While Mr. Springsteen and his fans have spent the last few months celebrating the 30th-anniversary rerelease of his anthemic 1975 breakthrough, "Born to Run," the New York Guitar Festival has chosen to open its three-week calendar with a tribute to his 1982 cycle of spare, existential folk songs.

In a free concert tomorrow night at the World Financial Center Winter Garden, musicians including Mi-



Bryce Dressner of the National, near right, and Dan Zanes rehearsing for tomorrow's concert version of a 1982 Bruce Springsteen album.

chelle Shocked, the National, Meshell Ndegeocello and Mark Eitzel will perform the entire album, in sequence.

"The first Springsteen record I ever bought was 'Nebraska,'" said David Spelman, the director of the festival, which he founded in 1999. "I was in one part flummoxed by it and in another part fascinated, and really attracted to it."

The New York Guitar Festival includes more than two dozen concerts, seminars and other events at sites around the city. Most will spotlight guitar titans past and present. But while the show tomorrow night will include accompaniment and instrumental interludes from six-string luminaries like Marc Ribot, Vernon Reid and Gary Lucas, the focus will be on Mr. Springsteen's unvarnished album.

"It's probably better for a night like this that it isn't one of the more famous records," said the singer-songwriter Jesse Harris, who will perform the song



"Atlantic City." "Because of the nature of the record, it lends itself to interpretation."

The songs on "Nebraska," recorded as four-track demos, feature just Mr. Springsteen's guitar, harmonica and voice. The title track crawls inside the head of an unrepentant killer (inspired by Charles Starkweather, who murdered 11 people in the late 1950's), and the album rarely strikes a sunnier note. It limns one troubled life after another before concluding with a song that observes dryly, "At the end of every hard-earned day, people find some reason to believe." In the wake of what precedes it, the line sounds more ironic than hopeful.

In interviews, some of the participants promised a range of musical settings. Mr. Harris is bringing a band. Ms. Shocked will add horns to "Nebraska." Mr. Lucas promises a "psychedelic electronic" recasting of "State Trooper," inspired by what he called the song's "stark, doom-laden riff." The country-folk singer Laura Cantrell will sing "Used Cars," backed only by guitar and mandolin.

Reinterpreting Bruce Springsteen in a range of musical settings.

"I'm very curious who will find what and draw what out of these songs," Ms. Cantrell said. "By spreading the songs across very disparate performers, the songs might still retain the dark quality, but it's not going to be unrelentingly bleak."

As a prelude, the Winter Garden is presenting a free miniconcert of songs from the album at 12:30 this afternoon, featuring six local acts chosen from a "Nebraska" battle of the bands at the Bitter End last month.

Mr. Spelman, 39, who organizes and produces music and arts events around the country, said he started the festival to reconnect with the instrument he had played and studied for years — he is a graduate of the New England Conservatory — but then put aside. Inspired by the eclecticism of John Schaefer's radio show "New Sounds" (heard on WNYC, 93.9 FM, nightly at 11), he said, he wanted to showcase the full range of guitar music. With Mr. Schaefer's encouragement and support from sponsors

including D'Addario, which manufactures instrument strings, he put together a jubilee that this year has grown to include 65 guitarists.

"It's kind of ballooned into quite an extravaganza," Mr. Spelman said. Proceeds from the festival, which is nonprofit, go to musical outreach programs in New York City schools.

Besides the "Nebraska" tribute, the opening weekend features an eight-hour "Guitar Marathon" on Sunday at the 92nd Street Y, celebrating 450 years of Spanish guitar. Other highlights include tributes to Delta blues legends, live film soundtrack performances and concerts by Bill Frisell, Daniel Lanois and the classical guitarist Stephen Aron.

"Nebraska" is the second album to get the tribute treatment at the festival, following a 2004 salute to Bob Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks." Over the years it has become an entry

point into Mr. Springsteen's catalog for people — from folk purists to indie-rockers — who otherwise might consider Mr. Springsteen "too popular to be worth listening to," as Mr. Spelman put it. He allows that he was one of them, until he moved to New Jersey seven years ago, and a friend urged him to give the state bard a chance.

At a rehearsal Monday in the Winter Garden's backstage area, Mr. Spelman and about half the performers in the concert felt their way through a handful of Woody Guthrie verses that will serve as a group finale. Mr. Lucas and Mr. Reid traded licks, while Ms. Cantrell shared lines with Jen Chapin, Dan Zanes and Kevn Kinney. Mr. Spelman told the assembled group that he had contacted Mr. Springsteen's management but did not know if Mr. Springsteen would attend the concert. (A spokeswoman for Mr. Springsteen said he was not available for comment.) By closing with a Guthrie song, Mr. Spelman said, the evening will connect "Nebraska" with the Dust Bowl songs that are its most obvious antecedent.

Mr. Reid, the guitarist for Living Colour, said he thought "Nebraska" was Mr. Springsteen's attempt "to look at another side of the American dream."

"The thing about that record is that it's the America we all try to deny," Mr. Reid said. "I wish other artists of his stature took on what he laid down — a solid, unmitigatable statement."

The New York Times

Where the Guitars Are, With Music All Over Manhattan



Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times

Vernon Reid is among the many performers who will take part in the New York Guitar Festival.

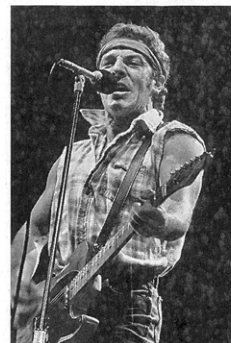
The New York Guitar Festival runs tomorrow through Feb. 8 at various locations. Some events are free, including tomorrow's opening-night concert at the World Financial Center; ticketed events range from \$15 to \$40. For information, call the individual site. A calendar of events is at www.newyorkguitarfestival.org. Here are some highlights:

Tomorrow

'THE NEBRASKA PROJECT: CELEBRATING THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CLASSIC BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN ALBUM,' with performances by Laura Cantrell, Dan Zanes, Meshell Ndegeocello, the National, Mark Eitzel, Jesse Harris, Vernon Reid, Marc Ribot, Gary Lucas, Michelle Shocked and others. Winter Garden at the World Financial Center, West Street, south of Vesey Street, Lower Manhattan, (212) 945-2600, www.worldfinancialcenter.com. 8 p.m.



Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times



Associated Press

Some of the performers in the "Nebraska" concert. David Spelman, director of the New York Guitar Festival, is second from left in the second row. Bruce Springsteen, above, whose album provided the inspiration, may or may not attend.

Sunday

'THE GUITAR MARATHON: 450 YEARS OF SPANISH GUITAR,' with Pepe Romero, Eliot Fisk, Paul O'Dette and others. 92nd Street Y, 1395 Lexington Avenue, (212) 415-5500, www.92Y.org. 2 and 7 p.m., with a break at 5 p.m.

Wednesday

'BLUES FALLIN' DOWN LIKE RAIN: THE MUSIC OF MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT,' with Jorma Kaukonen, Bill Morrissey, Brandon Ross and the Jen Chapin Trio. Merkin Concert Hall, 129 West 67th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3303, www.kaufman-center.org. 8 p.m. Subsequent "Blues Fallin' Down Like Rain" concerts will honor Skip James (Jan. 25), Charley Patton (Feb. 1) and Elizabeth Cotten (Feb. 8).

Jan. 20

DOMINIC FRASCA Compositions for solo 6- and 10-string electric and acoustic guitar by the winner of Guitar Player magazine's first Guitar Hero Competition. The Monkey, 37 West 26th Street, 12th floor, Chelsea, (212) 481-1601, www.themonkeynyc.com. 8 p.m.

Jan. 23

DAVID BROMBERG QUARTET, with Peter Rowan and Tony Rice. B. B. King Blues Club and Grill, 237 West 42nd Street, Manhattan, (212) 997-4144, www.bbkingblues.com. 8 p.m.

Jan. 24

STEPHEN ARON. Works by Chopin and Mendelssohn. The Monkey. 8 p.m.

Jan. 29

BILL FRISELL'S 858 QUARTET, with Jenny Scheinman, Eyvind Kang and Hank Roberts, and Ron Miles and Greg Tardy. Music performed to a new animated film by Jim Woodring. Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall, (212) 247-7800, www.carnegiehall.org. 8:30 p.m.

Feb. 3

DANIEL LANOIS'S 'SILVIO' PROJECT The New York premiere of a new experimental film by Mr. Lanois, featuring him on guitar and Brian Blade on drums. Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall. 8:30 p.m.

Feb. 5

MICHAEL NICOLELLA Classical and electric guitar. The Monkey. 4 p.m.

Feb. 6

MARCO CAPPELLI: THE EXTREME GUITAR PROJECT The Monkey, 8 p.m.

Feb. 7

JULIA SARR AND PATRICE LAROSE Ms. Sarr, a West African singer, performs with Mr. Larose, a French guitarist. Joe's Pub, at the Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, at Astor Place, East Village, (212) 239-6200, www.joespub.com. 7:30 p.m.