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Bruce Springsteen's Big Man

Joe Ferullo | Jun. 20, 2011 NCR Today

When I was a kid, you didn't see many white and black musicians sharing the glory of an album cover. Clarence Clemons broke all that down.

The saxophonist for Bruce Springsteen (who dubbed him "The Big Man"), died this weekend at age 69, after a severe stroke [1]. Obits will remember his talent and on-stage stamina, along with the trademark saxophone wail that punctuated several of Springsteen's best song.

But I'll always remember that album cover.

It was "Born to Run," Springsteen's breakout hit, released in the summer of 1975. Up until that point, musical frontmen were a segregated lot. Session artists of all races and creed had long populated big pop albums, but when it came to the face on the cover, it was a case of black or white. R&B artists like James Brown displayed hot passion; white rock artists from Led Zepplin to The Eagles projected cool -- and the two sides did not mix.

In 1975, disco made things even worse (it always did). It started as a largely urban phenomenon, and was the music of the marginalized (blacks, Latinos, gays), until the very white Bee Gees stepped in and took it away. (Try to find a face of color on the album cover for 1977's "Saturday Night Fever." You won't.)

That's why the photo for "Born to Run" was such a stunner in my Bronx neighborhood. There was a skinny, scraggly-bearded white guitar hero named Bruce Springsteen laughing with and leaning against saxophone-toting Clarence Clemons, like they were the best two friends in the world. Which they were.

And Springsteen was no crazy eggheaded radical we boys from the Wakefield section could quickly dismiss. He was from dilapidated Asbury Park, New Jersey, a blue-collar shore town with a demographic very similar to the outer boroughs of New York.

And he was hanging with Clemons like it was no big deal -- just two buddies sharing a moment, happy to be alive and making music.

That cover has become iconic, imitated by other musicians and even by Bert and Ernie on Sesame Street. ("Born To Add.") There's also a book of outtakes from the photo session, by photographer Eric Meola, called "Born to Run: The Unseen Photos." [2]

But few reviews comment on why that shot became so iconic. It's the brotherhood displayed by those two guys, and the unsaid message it sent to an evolving world thirty-six years ago.

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Links:

[1] http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/obit/2011-06-18-clarence-clemons-obit_n.htm
[2] http://www.amazon.com/Born-Run-Unseen-Eric-Meola/dp/1933784091