

Exhibit Review: “Springsteen: His Hometown”**Curators: Melissa Ziobro and Bernadette Rogoff****Open through December 2020 (Museum currently closed because of COVID-19; check website for updates)****Monmouth County Historical Association, Freehold, New Jersey****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v6i2.219>**

It is hard to decipher who has been more productive in the past decade, Bruce Springsteen or the community of writers and scholars who study him and his work. Since his 2016 *The River Tour*, the 70-year-old music legend has written a 500-page autobiography, produced and starred-in a Broadway show, and released his sixteenth studio album (*Western Stars*) with an accompanying film. Around the same time, music critic Peter Carlin and CUNY literary critic Marc Dolan both released massive Springsteen biographies, McGill University began publishing *The Boss: An Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies*, and Rutgers University Press released *Long Walk Home*, an anthology of recent Springsteen scholarship.

Public historians are also embracing the resurgence of work on Springsteen’s life and legacy. In November 2019, the Monmouth County Historical Association (MCHA) in Freehold, in conjunction with The Bruce Springsteen Archives and Center for American Music at Monmouth University, opened its exhibit “Springsteen: His Hometown.” This is not the first time a museum has devoted an exhibit to Springsteen. For example, in 2009, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum staged an exhibit titled “From Asbury Park to the Promised Land: The Life and Music of Bruce Springsteen.” In 2012, this exhibit moved to the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. While this earlier Springsteen exhibit covered his impact on American music and culture, the MCHA exhibit focuses on his connection to the town, and the larger central Jersey shore region, that informed so much of the Boss’s work.

The title of the exhibit borrows from Springsteen’s 1985 single “My Hometown,” the record-setting seventh top-ten single from his album *Born in the U.S.A.* The song describes

Springsteen's childhood in Freehold and tells a story of racial unrest and post-industrial decline. We learn about the "fights between the black and white," the "white washed windows and vacant stores," the closing of textile mills, and the loss of jobs. "My Hometown," with its references to the lost hopes of the 1970s white New Jersey working class, is a signature part of the Springsteen songbook.

The MCHA exhibit captures this history well. It is the brainchild of Melissa Ziobro, a history professor at Monmouth University with a breadth of experience in public history. What started as a small student-organized project at the university library has grown to over 150 items from The Bruce Springsteen Archives and Center for Music and the Springsteen family's personal collection. Ziobro curated the first floor of the exhibit, an area devoted to Springsteen's music career and dedicated fan base. The artifacts on display include his mother Adele's scrapbook devoted to Springsteen's career, original concert posters from his early bands, and the 4-Track recorder he used to record his album *Nebraska*.

One of the more entertaining pieces is an undated Adele Springsteen letter to Bob Spitz, a member of her son's management team, asking if she could obtain five copies of his album *Greetings from Asbury Park* to give to friends. Adele writes, "we have more than 5 friends, but we want them to go out and buy them so the sales will go up." On the landing between the first and second floor, patrons can fill out a card describing their favorite Springsteen memory. The MCHA will eventually deposit these cards in the Springsteen Archives. As visitors learn more about the artifacts through well-written and informative labels, a Springsteen playlist fills the room with music from different parts of his career.

The second floor takes a deep dive into the history of Freehold, Asbury Park, and the greater central New Jersey region. The content is standard fare for a county historical society, and

much of it coincides with the Freehold Borough's centennial, but the Springsteen story, as told by MCHA curator Bernadette Rogoff, brings these local places to life. One room traces Springsteen family history in Monmouth County back to the 17th-century through original manuscripts from the MCHA collection. This room includes a Civil War guitar that belonged to a soldier who served in the Civil War with one of Springsteen's ancestors. Another second floor room covers Springsteen's education, Catholic upbringing, and his long association with the Jersey shore. It includes objects and images related to Springsteen's school, his parish, the rug mill that employed his father, and the office where Adele worked. In a third room, visitors can sit down and watch a documentary film on the history of Freehold with a particular emphasis on the places where the town intersected with Springsteen's life.

Ziobro, Rogoff, and the MCHA team have built an impressive exhibit to one of New Jersey's greatest sons. If you are a Springsteen fan, the \$15.00 admission fee is well worth the price. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the MCHA to temporarily close, but at the time of this publication, it is still scheduled to run through December 2020.

John Fea
Messiah College