



Bruce Springsteen, center, with his top album, "Born to Run," was at the pinnacle of pop music, along with Elton John (1974's top pop artist) and the influential Emmylou Harris.

Pop Music

Springsteen on Top of the Rock Pile in 1975

BY ROBERT HILBURN

● Bruce Springsteen, whose powerful, passionate "Born to Run" album and fiery, sensual concert appearances summarized the pulse of the rock 'n' roll tradition so boldly and convincingly, was the pop music artist of 1975. The album (Columbia PC33795) also reigns at the top of the year's 10 best.

Already a cult/media hero through his promising "Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J." and arresting "The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle" albums, Springsteen's "Born to Run"—a more overtly aggressive and commercially potent rock-based work—was greeted by critics with such unanimous enthusiasm that many writers followed up their original reviews with reflective pieces denying they had been the victims of a massive Columbia Records promotional campaign.

Part of the strength of Springsteen's albums and concerts is they reflect a reuniting of the various factors that comprise the total rock experience. Ever since its birth in the mid-1950s, rock has been fragmented into various subcategories (e.g. country-rock, folk-rock, jazz-rock, pop-rock) that, despite moments of individual merit, offer only a glimpse of the full, original rock impact.

In "Born to Run," Springsteen, both in his choice of themes and in the intensity of his musical execution, shows he has the spirit and vision required to bring the fragmented forces back together. The result, both on record and on stage, was the purest example of rock emotion and urgency in years. In his best moments, Springsteen is as emotionally stirring as any rock performer who ever stepped on a stage.

But Springsteen was not an isolated high point in a better-than-average year in pop. Elton John, who was named the pop music artist of 1974 in these pages, continued to be a dominant figure in pop music during the past 12 months.

Not only were John's "Captain Fantastic & the Brown Dirt Cowboy" and "Rock of the Westies" the first albums ever to

enter the national sales charts at No. 1, "Captain Fantastic" was the English pop-rock star's most consistent and artistically satisfying album since "Tumbleweed Connection" in 1971.

Besides his work on records, John also made the year's most dramatic concert appearances locally by becoming the first pop attraction since the Beatles to play the 55,000-seat Dodger Stadium and by returning to the Troubadour, the West Hollywood club in which he made his U.S. debut in 1970, for a series of benefit performances.

Bob Dylan also had another strong year with two of the year's finest albums ("Blood on the Tracks" and "The Basement Tapes"). Also, his Rolling Thunder Revue offered (at least on the East Coast) a fresh, informal, celebrative alternative to the sometimes too rigid, too coldly impersonal big-time rock concert structure in America.

Springsteen, John and Dylan are among four artists from the 1974 list of top albums to repeat on the 1975 list. The fourth is the Eagles. Missing from the list for the first time since 1972 (when he was named pop artist of the year) is David Bowie.

Joining Springsteen's "Born to Run" on the list of 10 best albums are works which vary greatly in style and ambition, but share a common vitality and strength that places them above the hundreds of others released during the year. When the same artist or group has two albums of special value, they are counted as a single entry. The nine other choices:

The Band's "Northern Lights/Southern Cross" (Capitol ST 11440)—After nearly four years of virtual semi-retirement in the recording studio the Band, once widely heralded as America's premier rock group, returns to reclaim its position of leadership. The album looks at some of the complexities, ironies and, indeed, disappointments of this "restless age" in a way that updates the exploration of the American spirit and heritage

that the group began in its original, classic "The Band" album in 1969.

Bob Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks" (Columbia PC33235) and Dylan's/Band's "The Basement Tapes" (Columbia C2-33682)—Though last year's "Planet Waves" was a more daring and personal work, "Blood on the Tracks" is a powerful, rewarding and comfortable document that adds substantially to Dylan's enormous list of achievements. The 10 songs represent a variety of styles (folk, blues, rock) and themes (tenderness, sarcasm, humor) that we've associated with Dylan's work over the years. "The Basement Tapes" was recorded in 1967 but only available until now in bootleg form. The fact that it remains such a vital, engaging collection again points up the art of Dylan and the Band. When you realize an 8-year-old album can still sound so tasteful, it makes you wonder what the rest of rock has been doing all this time.

Eagles' "One of These Nights" (Asylum TE 1039)—There is such exceptional range and quality—both in terms of the writing and vocal/instrumental performance—in this album's best moments (e.g. "Lyin' Eyes," "Take It to the Limit," "The Thrill Is Gone," "Hollywood Waltz") that it represents still another significant, convincing step forward for one of America's best rock groups. The album's themes touch primarily on the emotional side-effects of search, setback and disillusionment.

Emmylou Harris' "Pieces of the Sky" (Reprise 2213)—Harris has the distinctive personal vision and warm, human interpretive style that not only touches those who hear her music but stands a good chance of influencing others in the way Gram Parsons—the legendary force behind the Flying Burrito Brothers and the whole country-rock movement—influenced her. The album's "Boulder to Birmingham" was one of the year's most inspired musical moments.

Janis Ian's "Between the Lines" (Columbia PC 33394)—A tasty, intelligent, engaging album that should be a model

for all who work in the often bland "easy listening" area of pop. The heart of the album revolves around the ache of living with disappointments, the series of emotional setbacks that enter one's life during school days and can reappear afterwards. Contains "At 17."

Elton John's "Captain Fantastic & the Brown Dirt Cowboy" (MCA 2142) and "Rock of the Westies" (MCA 2163)—In the main challenger to "Born to Run" for album of the year honors, John and lyricist Bernie Taupin trace their lives from early childhood aspirations through the doubts and frustrations of their first songwriting ventures. While "Rock of the Westies" lacks the artistic purpose and detailed craftsmanship of "Captain Fantastic," it introduces John's new band with an appealing demonstration of highly infectious, fervently energetic, good-time rock 'n' roll.

John Prine's "Common Sense" (Atlantic SD 18127)—In his brilliant first album, Prine told us eloquently about some of the known factors of the human experience: the neglect of old folks, loneliness, the unnumbered victims of the military. Now, he has moved boldly into some of the more complex, less obvious areas of the human condition. This is his most uneven album, but also his most daring.

Roxy Music's "Country Life" (Atco SD 36-106) and "Siren" (Atco SD 36-127)—There is such an undercurrent of despair and helplessness in much of Roxy's music that the group's concerts have been described as a "cabaret for psychotics." But there is also a bit of humor and irony in the music that suggests a certain lighter, "nothing is as bad as we make it seem" commentary. In the more highly recommended "Country Life," Roxy touched rather generally on themes of finding purpose and acceptance in one's life. The emphasis was on those who seemed out of step with the norm. In "Siren," the focus is more specific: romance and its accompanying traumas.

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On Top of Rock Pile

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Neil Young's "Zuma" (Warner Bros. MS 2242) and "Tonight's the Night" (Warner Bros. MS 2221)—In the year's strongest artistic recovery, Young deals with bearing up under the despair and disillusionment that followed a broken romance ("Zuma") and the drug-related deaths of two friends ("Tonight's the Night"). "Zuma" is the more disciplined and accessible album, but both deserve a place on the list.

While there were many worthy works from several veteran artists and several noteworthy new arrivals (e.g. Patti Smith, Manhattan Transfer, Natalie Cole, among others) that could quickly fill a list of honorable mentions, let's turn to some albums colleagues Dennis Hunt and Richard Cromelin felt deserve special attention and then look at some of the year's most overlooked albums.

The albums chosen by Hunt for special notice were, alphabetically, the Average White Band's "Cut the Cake," KC & the Sunshine Band's "KC & the Sunshine Band," Manhattan Transfer's "Manhattan Transfer," Minnie Riperton's "Adventures in Paradise," Neil Sedaka's "Sedaka's Back" and "The Hungry Years," Temptations' "House Party," Frankie Valli's "Closeup" and Grover Washington Jr.'s "Mister Magic."

Cromelin's list of 1975's best albums included John Cale's "Slow Dazzle," Leonard Cohen's "New Skin for the Old Ceremony," Jackie DeShannon's "New Arrangement," Ian Hunter's "Ian Hunter," Patti Smith's "Horses," Steely Dan's "Katy Lied," 10 c.c.'s "Original Soundtrack" and Bob Marley & the Wailers' "Natty Dread."

My own nominations for the year's most overlooked albums include the Frankie Miller Band's "The Rock," Elliott Murphy's "Lost Generation" and Loudon Wainwright III's "Unrequited."