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REMEMBERING CLARENCE CLEMONS

MIKE APPEL

Interview by CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS photographs by BARBARA PYLE

Mike Appel, who managed Bruce Springsteen and his band from the early- to mid-1970s, calls Clarence “the member of the E Street Band that I was closest to.” Their bond extended to later years, the two men reconnecting long after Appel and Springsteen’s acrimonious post-*Born to Run* split. In 2011, Mike shared with Clarence his vision of the Big Man entering E Street Heaven: “Can you imagine me actually saying this to this freaking guy, a week or two before his actual death?”

You were working with Bruce initially as a solo artist; when you met Bruce, though, he and Clarence had already connected. Do you recall your first meeting with Clarence?

It was with the other musicians as well—with the other guys who would become the E Street Band. As I met everybody—when it was decided that Bruce would, in fact, have a band—I met Clarence.

It caused something of a division into camps: John Hammond, Sr. and I were on one side

[seeing Bruce as a solo artist], and my partner Jimmy Cretecos and Clive Davis were on the other side. Bruce was headed to the Clive Davis side as well, because he wanted to have a band, not just his own little acoustic thing. Bruce wanted a real band that he toured with all the time, that he could count on all the time.

I said, “Oh, my God, you don’t need that—with lyrics like you’ve got, you just stand up there and rattle them off and the whole world’s gonna bow down!” That’s what John Hammond said, too, but we were out-voted because Bruce was literally the deciding vote. He said, “Nah, I want the band.”

So, I lost. I gave in to that one [laughs]. And so did John Hammond. You gotta make concessions along the way... in the end that’s what Bruce wanted, and that’s what he got. And so that’s when I met Clarence.

In terms of Clarence’s role in the band, at what point did you see the indispensable character up there that he became?

Well, it came pretty early. It got stronger

and stronger over time, because Bruce would use their connection more and more as the stage show developed, but it came quickly. And Clarence’s *ability*... here’s a little story.

Early on, in 1972, I got the band to play Sing Sing Prison. I called the warden up and I told him, “Bruce Springsteen, the Columbia recording artist, would like to come up and entertain the prisoners.” It worked for Johnny Cash, you know, Folsom Prison and all that stuff. So I figured, what the heck, it might work for us as well. We talked about that [in *Backstreets* #90], but I don’t think I gave you the full picture of how crucial Clarence was that day.

We went through one of the most intense searches that I ever went through, a pat-down to end all pat-downs, and we finally get inside the prison, we set up all our sound equipment. My partner Jimmy Cretecos was handling the sound duties, and he was having problems—there was no sound. We couldn’t get the system to work. This forced Jimmy to walk constantly up and down the aisle, and now the prisoners are starting to get antsy.



Rehearsing for the *Born to Run* tour, July 1975.

Now, Jimmy was a very slender guy with long, flowing, strawberry blond hair hanging down his back, and he wore these tight jeans... so every time he walked from the stage to the sound console, all these catcalls and whistles came up from all the prisoners, because he was the closest guy to a woman in this place. It was embarrassing. And the more you can't get the sound... you're being frustrated by that, and this guy has to keep walking back and forth, and the prisoners just don't let up.

One of the prisoners says to me, "How come there's no girl dancers with Bruce?" I said, "Well, the warden told us we couldn't have any." (Which was absolutely true. I went through a checklist with the warden and he said, "You can't have any girl singers. No girl dancers. That's it.") So this guy says, "Fuck the warden." This is where these guys are at. And now they're starting to stomp on the floor and really get angry.

And Clarence—just out of the blue, Clarence starts to play. He's not playing into any system or any microphone, he's just up there on stage, and he starts blowing his saxophone. Instinctively, Bruce and the rest of the band join him. And they ride this thing for 45 minutes to an hour. The sound *never comes back on*. These guys did an hour show, completely instrumental, no power.

You don't know what an hour is like when you can't sing a word, you can't *say* a word, you gotta just keep playing. Only Springsteen could get away with this kind of shit. He walks on water. I mean, he just does. He did even then. But Clarence was the one who provoked the whole thing; it was him who got the band started and the whole ball rolling.

Clarence was absolutely the star up there. Nobody told him, nobody said anything—he just started. God knows what could have happened. There could have been a prison riot. It would have been like one of those James Cagney movies, the prisoners end up getting machine-gunned. For an instant I actually gave that a thought: God almighty, this could really turn terrible if we don't get our act together here. Not to mention the fact he's a black man—the guys in the prison are 90 percent black, and the rest is Latino. Us, the sound crew, we're practically the only white guys in the prison. So Clarence really saved the day for us—he saved my ass.

I'm curious how you think race affected things, especially in those early days. Norman Seldin talked about the repercussions of breaking the color barrier. Did that affect your ability to get gigs for Bruce and the band?

Well, with Clarence... first of all, we never played much down south, so we didn't face that. We never faced anything like that at all. But remember, in the '70s, our crowd was

Right: Photographer Barbara Pyle shot the E Street Band's passport photos for their first European tour, supporting *Born to Run* in the fall of 1975.





college kids and college campuses. And those kids weren't into that. There was no real problem with a black guy—in fact, it was *cool* that Bruce Springsteen had this big, obvious black guy playing saxophone. And Clarence is an active guy—he says things during the night, Bruce plays off him, tells stories—so it became this very cool thing. Clarence became an enormous (no pun intended) asset. Race really never entered into it, as far as being a problem.

Once Bruce put that band together, all of a sudden your job must have gotten a lot more complicated. You're not just dealing with one guy anymore. What was your relationship with Clarence like?

We took care of so many things for Clarence, on a personal level and a business level. Clarence called me Boss a long time before Bruce was labeled with that moniker. Clarence would call me every time he and Vini got into fights, because Clarence liked to smoke pot, and Vini couldn't stand that. It drove him nuts. Or Clarence would call me and say, "I got something from child support..." because he didn't pay his child support payments or something like that, and he'd call me so I'd run to the bank and get money to him [*laughs*].

Having five wives tells you a little bit about Clarence's head when it comes to women. I mean, my God, did you have to marry them all? [*laughs*] He married so many of them, it's like, "Clarence, did you not learn from the first and second experience?"

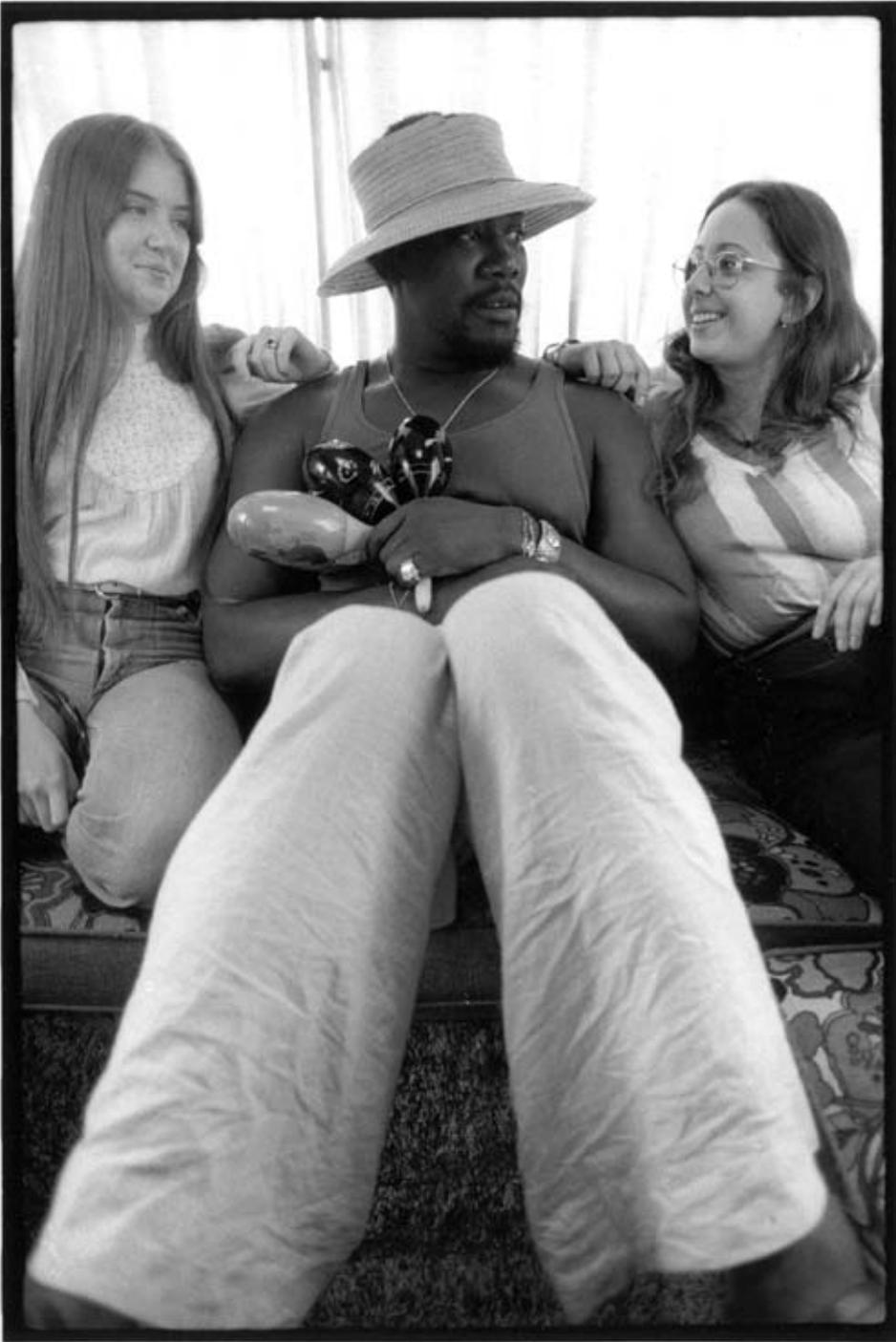


Well, he's a romantic!

He's a romantic [*laughs*]. That's absolutely true, so who am I to tell him? But he was always a little bit all over the lot in his personal life when I was handling them, and we had to especially watch him, because if he didn't make a child payment one or two times, he could end up getting locked up. And I'd be the one to have to bail him out!

I'll never forget when Danny Federici got picked up for speeding. I was in bed in a hotel down in Richmond, Virginia, and I get a call—because, you know, they're allowed to make one call. Vini's on the phone, and he says to me, "We're all in jail."

I said, "What? You're all in jail?" He tells me where they are, I get there and walk in and I see them all behind bars, the entire E Street



Band. Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, here they are, ladies and gentlemen! [Laughs]

First thing I said: "I don't know who these guys are!" When I said that, you should have seen those guys, they went bananas! They figured I was crazy enough to walk out on them. Of course we bailed them out, and everybody went to the hotel. But it was just so funny—you should have seen their *faces*. When I think about things like that, it's just the great joy of my youth.

What about recording with Clarence? There's the sense that improvisation wasn't really his thing—there's the story about the "Jungleland" solo, which was really a Bruce creation, right?

Well, right, that wasn't like I just played the track for Clarence and he just winged it. Obviously "Jungleland" is his most famous solo, and for good reason—but a lot of people don't realize the degree to which Bruce Springsteen was responsible for that solo. I sat in the control room while Bruce literally stood *right in front of Clarence* and went through it. Bruce was guiding him: "Hit this one... no, no, hit that one..." That kind of stuff.

We kept going through it and going through it, and I kept putting Clarence on different tracks. And then we tried to piece all that together so he could see: "Here's what you do, Clarence, you do this, and then you go over here and you do this..." I would go through maybe 16 saxophone tracks until he got the

idea, and then we'd go back out and he'd piece it together. Clarence goes out and he does it, he gets it: "Okay, I play this part now... okay, I got it."

Then he goes through the whole thing. And finally it's this fluid thing—as he plays it, not something I'm piecing together through some technological bullshit or editing—and it ends up being the thing on the record that *makes* that record, musically. It's his signature solo, and it'll be there ever more.

And even if Clarence wasn't the most improvisational kind of player, he's the type of guy, you throw some chords in front of him he'll start to play something—a harmony line here or a harmony line there—and what he is, he's a master of never screwing up. Never playing a note where you say, "Oh, God, what did he hit *that* note for?"

What else comes to mind when you think about Clarence back then?

In the old days on the 747s they used to have these bars in the back, and an electric piano too, and Clarence would go back there and play. Danny or Roy would start playing, and Clarence would bring his saxophone and open it up and start playing—the whole plane would come back there and listen to them play. That's a fond memory. That's how it was for the *Time* magazine interview.

The *Time* interview was on a plane?

Oh yeah, that's how it happened. At first—we'd just gotten *Newsweek*, and everybody was saying to get *Time* was an incredible coup, but Bruce didn't want to. The possibility of doing two covers in the same week, can you imagine? He's still like, "No, no, no, I don't want to do it, it's all silliness and a waste of time."

I said, "You know what? I just got a vision. I got a vision of Danny Federici, Clarence Clemons, Steve Van Zandt, Garry Tallent, and the rest of your band members going up and seeing you on the cover of both of those... can you imagine what they'd think? 'We made it! This is it! We've done it! We're guys from Asbury Park, nobodies, and here we are!'" I get really animated when I tell him this, and I say to him, "Hey, if we get the opportunity to do that, are we gonna take that away from these guys? We're not gonna do it? We're not gonna follow through?"

When I told him about the band, that bothered him, that we would be screwing the band. So that appealed to him. But he was still iffy, so I said, "You know what? I got a great idea. Why don't we have the interview for *Time* on the airplane flying to Los Angeles? It'll take us six, six-and-a-half hours to get out there, it'll be great, it'll be informal, they can talk to the other band members, it'll be all over the place." Of course, Clarence was all over the place.

So that was all at, like, 40,000 feet.

That is what happened on that plane out to Los Angeles. Jay Cocks, who conducted the interview, had a great time, and Bruce had a great, easy time. It was totally informal. They talked to me, they talked to Jon Landau,

they talked to Clarence, everybody's floating around... this is what actually used to happen when we were flying around together. No pressure—it was like rolling off a log.

All these years later, you reunite with these guys... in the last issue, we had that picture of you, Landau, and Springsteen all together in Buffalo [in 2009], and smiling. What was it like to see Clarence again?

He was the member of the E Street Band that I was closest to. The first time I ever came back, after my hassles with Bruce—this is some years back, now, maybe ten years ago—I went backstage; the minute he sees me, Clarence just stares along with all the other E Streeters. But then he turns to me—he's in this big white suit

and a little Charlie Chan white hat—and he puts his fist over his heart, and he just thumps it, you know? Like he's sharing the love of the moment when he finally sees me. It was the kind of thing where we didn't have to see each other for years, and yet whenever we did it's like I never left.

In fact, he started to talk to me about some hassles he had with Steve Van Zandt! I said, "What hassles could you *possibly* be having with Steve Van Zandt? At this late date?" And he said, "Yeah, he's using my masseuse backstage, but he wants me to pay 100 percent of her bill." I said, "You're right, nothing's changed." [Laughs]

But it's funny, when Bruce invited me up for that Buffalo show... a car comes to pick up me

and my son. It takes us to Newark Airport, and we get on the plane. All of Jon Landau's management team is there. Brian Williams, he's on board with his wife. And of course, everybody in the E Street Band—except for Bruce, he was going to fly out of Boston.

So we're all on the plane, flying up to Buffalo, and then Clarence gets up. He just stands up with a champagne glass in his hand and says to everybody, "If it wasn't for Mike"—and of course this in front of Jon Landau and all those people, and it was embarrassing—"If it wasn't for Mike Appel, none of us would be on this plane." And everybody started clapping. I was like, "Oh, jeez, did you have to say that in front of all these people?" He could have just said it to me on the side and I would have said, "Hey, great, thanks for the compliment." But that's Clarence. He just gets right up.

You stayed in touch after that, didn't you?

Yeah, the next year he called me and he said, "I'm in town, I'm over here at the hospital in Manhattan, I'm going to have surgery on my lower back, why don't you come by?" So I did, and there he was in the hospital, laid up, this big giant guy, and all his little nurses running around trying to help him. I said, "What are you gonna do here?" and he said, "Well, I'm gonna have two of my lower vertebrae fused." Oh, God, I'm holding my back while I'm talking, I feel the pain. But he went through that, somewhere around the end of 2010, and he thanked me very much for coming by to see him. And then he said, "I'll be in touch."

I thought, "He ain't gonna be in touch, what the hell could we do with each other?" You know what I mean? I just didn't give that a thought for a second—until he called me again. In May 2011, he wanted me to join him for dinner in Asbury Park because he and Nick Mead, the *Who Do I Think I Am?* director, they were gonna have a party for that, to celebrate the opening. So I joined them for dinner, and that's where I really struck up with Clarence again.

He said to me, "You know, Mike, I'd like you to come down and work with me." Down to Singer Island in Florida. Clarence is the kind of guy who doesn't think you have a life—he must think I'm just collecting royalty checks, just sitting on my duff somewhere and I'll only be too happy to do something like that. But I said to him, "Well, what do you have in mind?" And he said, "Well, I'd really like you to come down and we can take it from there." So he kept me in the dark about what he wanted me to do. In any case, I flew to Florida to meet with him.

Nick Mead was there, and of course [Clarence's] wife Victoria was there as well, and all this workout equipment, because he's always trying to do something with his back.

This is at Clarence's house?

Yeah, a big condo apartment. We must have been 19 or 20 stories up, and you look down and you see all these sharks in the water. It was a real beautiful sight—a great view, to say the least. And he said, "Mike, I'm writing this three-act movie of my life with Nick Mead,



BARBARA PYLE PHOTO



Hand in hand: reconnecting with Appel in Buffalo, NY, before Clarence's final full concert with the E Street Band at the end of the Working on a Dream tour. November 22, 2009.

we have the beginning and the middle but we don't have an ending." So he wanted me to come up with the ending. And he was serious.

And you thought there was nothing you could do together....

Oh, just wait! So I said, "Clarence, you're going to have to give me everything you got... all your notes you and Nick went through, the book you wrote with Don Reo." And he said, "Okay, it's right in my bedroom." We go into his room, and sure enough he grabs a box of books, he gives me one. He says, "You're my guy. I want you to go and finish that third act."

Clarence clearly felt reconnected with you.

There's no question about it. And I had let him hear the songs from my musical [*In the Shadows of the King*], which also helped. Finally I flew home, and after I went through all the papers and the book and everything, after I thought about it for a while, I called him back. I said, "I think I have an ending for you."

He says, "What is it?"

I said, "It's death."

"Death?"

I said, "Yeah, death. What I see here is this: you're on stage, I see you going through this laser tunnel, and all the greatest dead saxophone players that ever played the horn will appear out of the darkness—you know, guys like Charlie Bird [Parker], Coleman Hawkins, John Coltrane, maybe Dexter Gordon. And there'll be a light, like everyone says they see when they have a near-death experience. You're going to be following that light, and as you do, you're going to start to hear music getting louder and louder and louder as you go through this tunnel. And then when you get to the place where the light is the brightest and the music is the loudest, you'll see the mighty E Street

Band and Bruce playing their collective hearts out. And you'll notice that you're conspicuously absent from the bandstand; however, when Bruce sees you, he'll call you out and you'll join him, and the audience will erupt in tumultuous applause. After all, Clarence, this is E Street Heaven. This is E Street Heaven."

Can you imagine me actually saying this to this freaking guy, a week or two before his actual death?

How did he respond?

He and Nick loved the idea. They wanted me to come down and put all the final dialogue together. And just as I was about to make the arrangements to fly down to see him, Clarence calls to tell me his hand is giving him trouble. He goes, "Mike, I can't even play, my hand is bothering me. I talked to Bruce about it, and he's helping me. Bruce says he wants me to go see a surgeon in California and he's the best." I said, "Okay, okay, I can postpone it, I don't have to come down tomorrow."

And that's the last time I talked to him, that's how fast everything happened. The hand operation, the stroke, the coma, and that was it. I mean, that guy didn't spend any time with some long-protracted illness, it was boom, boom, gone. All of a sudden I heard people saying Clarence Clemons had a stroke... in fact, some people even said that he died.

I said, "How could that possibly be? What are you, crazy? I was just on the phone with this guy, he had a hand problem, he wasn't gonna die."

So that was my send-off with Clarence. And it's funny I would be involved in his life at all, let alone to the extent I was. Jesus, it was like the last moments, I had no idea he had only weeks to live, obviously. I was seeing him in May, and within 30 days, all of these meetings with him, back and forth to Florida and all

those telephone conversations, speaking with him in June...

And the next thing you know, you're back in Florida for a memorial service.

That was it. We had the wake, and the whole thing was just odd. Even though Clarence lived down there and I guess that's why the wake was there, I would much rather have seen it in New Jersey, where the band's roots are. It was an awkward day. Bruce made his speech, you know, his eulogy, and it was great—very sincere. I think he tried to be as honest as he possibly could, and he gave Clarence a great sendoff. And Jackson Browne and the band played, and Nils Lofgren had a song he wrote, "Miss You C." I mean, it was all very nice, I can't say anything bad about it, but it was surreal—like, is this really happening? All these people I don't often see... What are we doing down in Florida right now? I don't go to Florida that often, what the hell am I doing down here? I'd like to go somewhere and just shoot the breeze with Clarence and have a drink and then let him walk off into a haze.

And for me the extra smack upside the head came when I saw Nick Mead —when he sees me, he says, "You know, Clarence wanted you to manage him again." I said, "Are you kidding me?"

Can you imagine the political hassle that would have caused? [*laughs*] Does Clarence take anything like that into consideration?

Of course, I couldn't have done it. I really don't have the time to do that anymore, I'm focused on my own creativity; so that can't happen, and it would have never happened.

And yet there would have been something wonderful about that.

Oh, it would have been a great, fun thing for sure. That's for sure. 🐾