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A photographer's Springsteen encounter



By Wicked Local Photo by Mark Thomson

One of photographer Ron Pownall's images is included in the new book about Bruce Springsteen called 'The Light in Darkness.'

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By Debra Filcman / somerville@cnc.com
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Somerville -

A few years ago, a photo of Bruce Springsteen ran in my newspaper's arts section. *The* photo, really. I clipped it out and tacked it to my cubicle wall. It's followed me to at least three cubicles in two different cities.

It's in black and white, and beautiful even on years-old, yellowing newspaper. It shows a tank top-clad Bruce caught in a dramatic moment — his knees bent as he leans toward the audience, eyes wide, mouth agape, soaked hair matted to his forehead. His guitar is slung across his chest with his left hand on the neck and as he picks with his right. It was taken during a show at the Worcester Centrum in 1984. I always imagined it was taken by a fan, not just someone trying to make a buck.

Fast forward to a few weeks ago when Lawrence Kirsch let me know a contributing photographer for his new Springsteen book, "The Light in Darkness," hailed from Somerville, where I'm now the editor of the Somerville Journal. Imagine my surprise when that photographer turned out to be Ron Pownall, whose photo had stared back at me each workday for years.

Pownall's had a distinguished career as a rock 'n' roll photographer. He's shot album covers, posters, T-shirts, designed tour programs and functioned as a photo archivist for musicians like

Aerosmith, Boston, The J. Geils Band, to name just a few.

On the phone weeks later, I wasn't letting him off the hook without sharing his favorite Springsteen story. That's when his voice perked up.

"Oh, I have a neat story that shows what a nice, down-to-Earth guy he is," Pownall said.

It was 1977 and he was hanging out backstage after shooting Springsteen's show at the old Music Hall in Boston. He mentioned he had to drop off a package at the airport — storyboards for a tour program he was producing that needed to get to Aerosmith's management in New York.

"Bruce said, 'Hey, man, I'll take it down for ya,'" Pownall said.

Pownall protested at first, but Springsteen was still insisting later that night at the Cambridge Hyatt.

"He delivered it the next day," Pownall said, with a hint of laughter in his voice. "He's just a very human, very delightful guy."

A framed, poster-sized print of the photo in my cubicle greeted me when I walked into Pownall's studio a few days later. It was for sale: a mere \$3,500. It's one of Pownall's favorites, too. He likes it so much, in fact, that he's stopped licensing the image for commercial use — it's now only available to collectors.

Eventually I had to ask what I'd been wondering all along. "I'm a total fan," he responded. It started in 1974 when he first saw Springsteen at "a little 800-seater in Providence," at the urging of guitarist David Landau, his friend and brother of Springsteen's manager Jon Landau.

"It was before he was really of any notoriety. David said, 'You've gotta see this guy my brother knows,'" Pownall said.

From that point on, he called Springsteen's office anytime he wanted to shoot a show and his management would provide credentials. But the culture changed and access started drying up in the 1980s. When that '84 Centrum show came around, they offered him tickets instead, and Pownall walked away with some of the best Springsteen photos he'd ever taken. He showed up with equipment strapped to his ankle, and finally risked shooting from the eighth row, center — a location he still remembers 25 years later — about halfway through the

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show. The better photos, he said, came from a better angle. He wasn't shooting straight up from directly in front of the stage.


"It was also probably a little exciting," he said smiling, shaking his head. "Bruce saw me — I'd known him for 10 years at this point."

Before I left his studio, Pownall grabbed a small, framed photo of Aerosmith. The band was sitting around a table in their managers' office, pouring over storyboards. It was taken a few weeks after Springsteen had delivered them.

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