

# NO NUKES AWAKENS 'POLITICAL' SPRINGSTEEN

Inspired by Jacques Cousteau, driven by Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt, starring Springsteen, CSN and more, September 1979's **MUSE/NO NUKES** concerts set about hipping the world to the catastrophic dangers of atomic energy. As a film and audio of The Boss's landmark sets nears release, its organisers and performers recall an Indian Summer of rock'n'roll idealism: "It wasn't the typical narcissistic rock star vibe."

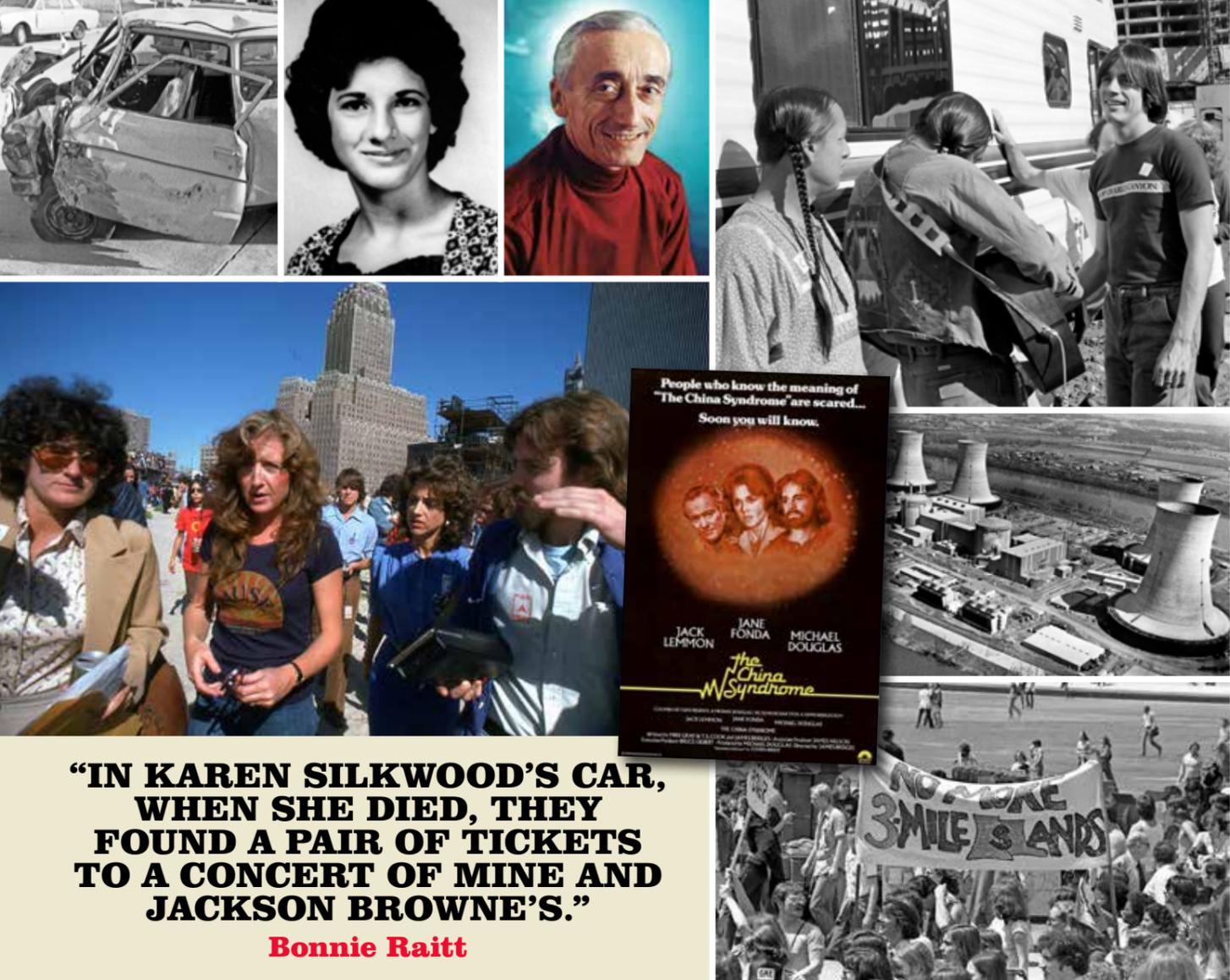
Interviews: **BOB MEHR** • Portrait by **RICHARD E AARON**

**Jackson Browne:** My [activism] was a natural outgrowth of becoming more interested in the world. I'd read a book called *Eco-Catastrophe*, by Dr Paul Ehrlich. That, and a book that Linda Ronstadt gave me about the firebombing of Dresden. It became clear to me that a society without justice was not tenable.

The people in the civil rights movement were involved in the anti-war movement, and when the environmental movement emerged it was the same people – all of whom were concerned with justice, in this case environmental justice, and building a sustainable future. I started doing benefits with [activist/concert promoter] Tom Campbell. Sometimes it was about preserving the forests, or focusing on Native American concerns, as well as environmental things. ➤

Ebet Roberts/Getty Images, Getty (2)

"That was one of the favourite shows that we ever did": (main) Bruce Springsteen on-stage at the MUSE No Nukes benefit, Madison Square Garden, New York City, September 21, 1979; (top) MUSE co-founder Jackson Browne performs at Battery Park City No Nukes Rally, September 23, 1979; the Battery Park City crowd.



## “IN KAREN SILKWOOD’S CAR, WHEN SHE DIED, THEY FOUND A PAIR OF TICKETS TO A CONCERT OF MINE AND JACKSON BROWNE’S.”

**Bonnie Raitt**

Tom’s the one that introduced me to the issue of nuclear waste and the danger of nuclear containment. Part of the problem is the waste lasts so long. I can never remember if the half-life is 28,000 years or 128,000 years... but does it matter? That’s a long time either way.

**Bonnie Raitt:** Being raised a Quaker in California, our family was steeped in a lot of peace activism and the ban the bomb movement. Even as a kid the whole idea of the nuclear threat was an issue I was aware of. As the ’70s wore on, the whole issue of uranium mining and environmental racism against the Native American community was becoming prevalent. By the time ’77, ’78 came around we started to do a whole string of concerts and rallies at nuclear plants around the country.

**Graham Nash:** In 1977, I was at a dinner with Jacques Cousteau. I asked him, “What do you think the biggest problem facing humanity is?” I’m expecting a fish-related answer (*laughs*) or something to do with oceans. But he looked at me and said: “Nuclear police.”

**JB:** Cousteau did this gathering that was attended by a lot of musicians and people in Hollywood. The point he made was that nuclear power required such stringent safeguards that it would foment a police state. And there was also the fact you can’t really protect the population from the waste or contamination anyway.

**BR:** All that dovetailed into the first part of 1979 and the case of Karen Silkwood [the anti-nuclear whistleblower who died under mysterious circumstances in 1974]. Her family

approached me to do a concert. In her car, when she died, they found a pair of tickets to an Oklahoma City concert of mine and Jackson Browne’s. They knew we were some of her favourite artists and asked us to do a benefit to raise funds to bring a suit against the Kerr-McKee corporation to prove she was murdered. Organising that concert kind of became the germ of the No Nukes work.

**JB:** John Hall [singer with the band Orleans] and [activist] David Fenton had an idea of doing a really big concert to get the word out on the nuclear issue. What happened between when we started planning the concerts and actually doing them was The China Syndrome – the Jane Fonda and Michael Douglas film about a nuclear meltdown – came out, and the Silkwood thing was being written about by Howard Kohn in Rolling Stone and then the Three Mile Island accident [a radiation leak in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in March 1979] happened almost all at once. Suddenly this issue felt much more urgent.

**BR:** I think Three Mile Island really scared the pants off everybody, as did The China Syndrome and the Silkwood story. The blinders were off and people knew the implications.

**GN:** Out of that, Bonnie and Jackson started MUSE [Musicians United for Safe Energy] and invited me to join the board. The plan was to do a No Nukes show at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

**JB:** I’d never been on the board of anything. But we had a meeting with Tom Campbell and

Bonnie and Graham about doing a concert. James Taylor said he wouldn’t join the board, but he would play. Then we got the Doobie Brothers to commit. They were like the biggest band in America and had a bunch of hit records. Then it was like maybe we should do two nights or three nights. Then we got Bruce Springsteen, which was huge.

**Bruce Springsteen:** I was searching around for some way to connect what I was doing musically with some tangible action... What I wouldn’t have done is offer the power of my band casually. Because that was something I believed in and was very serious about.

**JB:** We added Tom Petty and a bunch of other people – Carly Simon, Ry Cooder, Peter Tosh, Chaka Khan. Eventually, we had to hold six nights at Madison Square Garden, and ended up doing five shows there.

**BR:** One night turned into two, turned into three and more – people were all climbing all over each other to be part of this show. It snowballed.

**JB:** I should point out, though, that not one person I asked actually did it (*laughs*). I asked the Eagles and that was no. I asked Linda Ronstadt, that was no. I asked Bob Dylan – no. I asked Stevie Wonder – no. I asked Fleetwood Mac – no. So I stopped asking. Clearly I’m no good at this (*laughs*). It was not that anybody disagreed with the cause. They didn’t have the time or it didn’t correspond to their schedule. Maybe some people were weirded out by being part of a big organised thing like that. Bob [mentioned] the controversy over [The Concert For Bangladesh]



Now let the music keep our spirits high: (opposite, clockwise from top left) Karen Silkwood and her wrecked car; Jacques Cousteau; Jackson Browne with Native Americans at No Nukes; Three Mile Island; protest in Washington DC, April ’79; Bonnie Raitt meets the press at No Nukes; The China Syndrome movie poster; (this page, from left) the E Street Band’s Clarence Clemons and Roy Bittan, Tom Petty, Springsteen, Browne and Rosemary Butler at Madison Square Garden, September ’79.

### DRAMATIS PERSONAE



● Jackson Browne: singer-songwriter, MUSE [Musicians United for Safe Energy] co-founder



● Bonnie Raitt: singer/guitarist, MUSE co-founder



● Graham Nash: Crosby, Stills & Nash, MUSE co-founder



● Danny Goldberg: co-director/producer No Nukes film



● Bruce Springsteen: leader of Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band, No Nukes headliner



● Little Steven Van Zandt: E Street Band member, No Nukes performer

and whether the money got to where it was supposed to go. He was leery of that. Linda didn’t do it, because she didn’t want to complicate things for Jerry Brown [the Governor of California], ‘cos she was dating Jerry. But everyone was fundamentally in support of the cause.

**GN:** The truth is we had a headliner for each of the shows except the last one. And Jackson and Bonnie knew that me and David Crosby and Stephen Stills weren’t talking to each other at that point. I thought about it and I realised the nuclear problem was a far bigger problem than any issues David and Stephen and I were having. So I called them and asked if they would [reunite] and do the show and they said ‘Absolutely’. So we had CSN as the headliner for the final night.

**JB:** We were sorta looked at askance by the liberal left establishment. When the shows were announced, the Village Voice ran something that said, “Oh I can’t wait to see the cocaine bills... these are the worst people to come in and get involved in a serious fight like this...” They were clearly contemptuous of rock’n’roll. And you realise that’s the problem with people who’ve been activists their whole life. They don’t see the value of new people coming into the struggle and helping with whatever they have to offer. But we were determined.

**BR:** There was a lot of terrific grassroots organisations doing important [anti-nuclear] work, but the press wouldn’t cover them. We had learned by watching Joan Baez and Bob Dylan and The Staple Singers go to the rallies and marches in the ’60s. We knew that the press shows up for musicians. That gives you an opportunity to highlight the other side of the issue – other than the corporate side or the government side. Which is also why we decided to make a film of the concerts.

**Danny Goldberg:** I was a publicist working some of the artists. David Fenton thought there should be a movie made about the shows and the effort. He suggested that I take the lead on trying to put a movie together. Why anyone thought I could do a movie, or why I thought that... I dunno. But Jackson gave me the nod. The goal was to create a larger public awareness for the issue through these rock artists. The only way to get a movie funded and distributed was to have it be about the music and performances, but include enough about the issue so that people understood the situation.

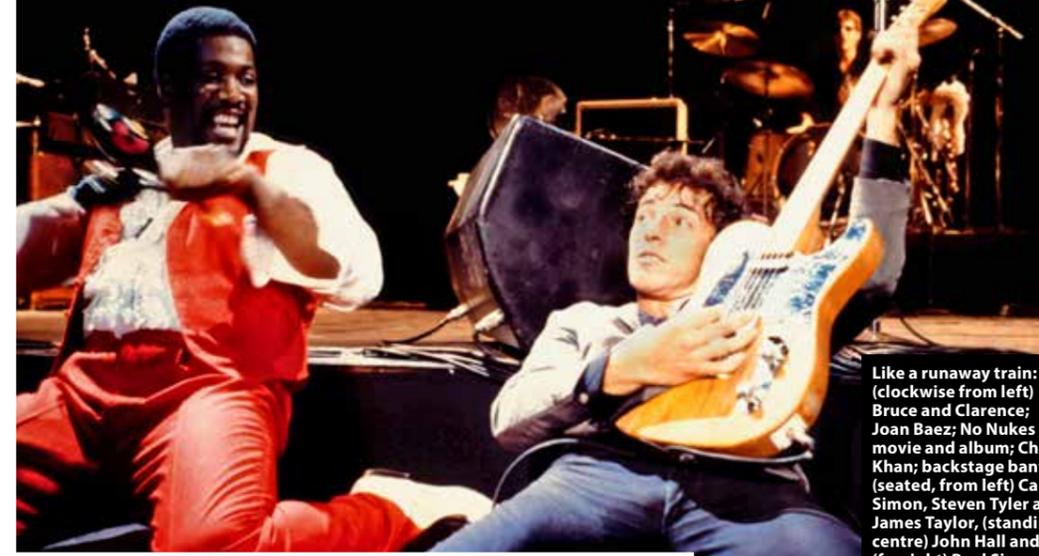
**JB:** We talked to several film-makers and chose Barbara Kopple because of her credentials as a documentarian, like [1976 strike portrait] Harlan County, USA. She brought in Haskell Wexler – another great film-maker, an Academy Award winning cinematographer – to help shoot it.

**DG:** Actually, John Avildsen, who was best known for directing [huge-grossing 1976 boxing drama] Rocky, was the first name that popped up. He wasn’t as enthusiastic about it being a concert doc with politics in it. He preferred to reverse the ratio. Avildsen dropped out. Barbara was there for the shooting. But eventually Julian Schlossberg, [Anthony Potenza] and I ended up co-directing and co-producing the film.

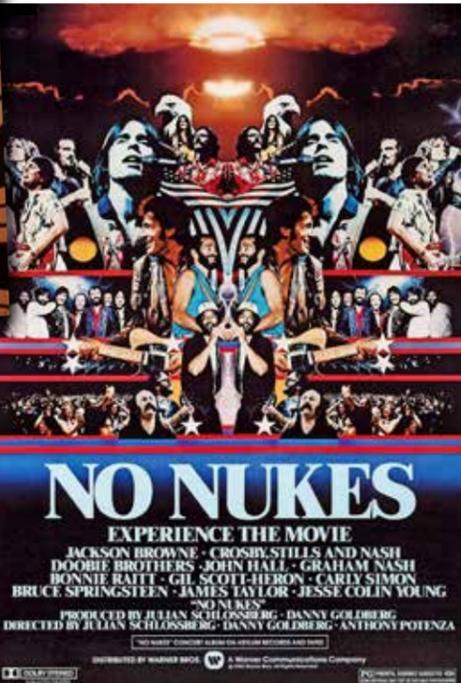
**JB:** The whole thing was a lot to organise. Just to take care of all these bands, and the logistics. There hadn’t been a lot of these kinds of shows at that point – there was Monterey, Woodstock, Bangladesh. But Tom Campbell did a tremendous job coordinating everything. I think the only mistake we made is there were people who wanted to do it and we didn’t put them on, like Aerosmith and Blondie. We could’ve had a night that represented a whole different part of rock’n’roll that was in so many ways more street level. I didn’t know about some of that until it was all over. You’re telling me Aerosmith want to do this? Why not? Steven Tyler actually showed up at some of the gigs and was in the finales. He was there and was into the cause.

**DG:** Bruce Springsteen was one of the headliners and people really remember his performances. But Tom Petty was also fantastic. He played on two nights. He was kind of a victim of the “Brooooc!” chants. Bruce was really in the ascendancy then. I think one of the nights Bruce headlined was his 30th birthday and the shows were in his backyard, obviously.

**Tom Petty:** It was our first time in an arena that size, and we hadn’t played in a year. We flew ➤



Like a runaway train: (clockwise from left) Bruce and Clarence; Joan Baez; No Nukes movie and album; Chaka Khan; backstage banter (seated, from left) Carly Simon, Steven Tyler and James Taylor, (standing centre) John Hall and (far right) Paul Simon.



**"I WAS SEARCHING AROUND FOR SOME WAY TO CONNECT WHAT I WAS DOING MUSICALLY WITH SOME TANGIBLE ACTION."**

**Bruce Springsteen**



The bigger issue: (from left) David Crosby, Graham Nash and Stephen Stills forget their differences and reunite, Battery Park City, September 23, 1979; (top, from left) David Bowie and Springsteen, backstage at MSG; longtime anti-nuke campaigners Pete Seeger and Jane Fonda at the rally.

in for two days, rehearsed, and went to play with Elvis in Memphis – or that’s what I called it... I remember, Jackson Browne said, when we were going up, “Well listen, now, if you think they’re booing you, they’re not. They’re just saying ‘Broooooo.’” I said, “Well, what the hell is the difference?”

**JB:** There was a moment where they weren’t saying “Broooooo,” they were really booing. There were people who actually booed Chaka Khan. There were people in Bruce’s audience that hated disco. It wasn’t like Chaka Khan was a disco singer – she’s one of the most gifted singers in the history of singing, goddammit. And she came out and got a ration of New Jersey ignorance. I’m sorry... but there’s no other word for it.

In fairness, Bruce was having a moment. For those of us that had been listening to him all along, you share in the triumph of that. His fans were a very big part of that event. Ahh, I don’t mean to call it New Jersey ignorance. But I think anyone who boos anyone on stage should be taken out of the room. Fuck that shit.

**BR:** Really though, the camaraderie of the shows was wonderful. The joy for us was not only hanging backstage but sitting on the side of the stage and watching each other play. It was peer pressure – you wanted to impress your peers! It really elevated all of our performances. I think

everybody was on their A game. I was afraid that I hadn’t had enough sleep and I was going to choke vocally. But you’re just lit from within in those situations. The oxytocin in that room was off the charts.

**BS:** That was one of the favourite shows that we ever did. I liked working with all those different people. The thing about the Nukes show was we only played an hour; and it was fun (laughs) because you could go like a runaway train in an hour.

**DG:** It wasn’t the typical narcissistic rock star vibe. It was a semi-party atmosphere, but not a decadent one. It was more idealistic – the coming together of music and politics. That hadn’t been the case for most of the ‘70s. That had almost become passé after the war in Vietnam ended. This was a rebirth of that spirit.

**GN:** It was an amazing set of concerts, and afterwards we did a rally at Battery Park for a quarter of a million people. In my mind, when I think of shows I’ve done, there’s Woodstock, No Nukes and possibly CSN singing Happy Birthday a cappella to Bill Clinton at The White House. Those are the first three I think of where I go, “That was pretty good. We did all right.”

**JB:** We recorded all the shows and a couple of record companies wanted to put it out. One of

them was the label I was on [Asylum]. I didn’t want to use my position to put this on my label. But David Geffen called me up said, “You’re doing this wrong. You *should* be getting this for your label – you’ll have greater success and more influence with the company that puts it out.” So [Asylum] got it. It was a triple album and they agreed to do it for a nominal fee, they weren’t trying to make money. The thing they said was we want to put it out for Christmas, while the event is still fresh in everyone’s mind. The shows were in September, and the record had to come out in November, which meant we spent the next couple months just working non-stop.

**DG:** It had more value as a Christmas release. And also we needed the advance to pay for the first stage of making the movie. We used the record advance to pay for the editing. Then later we made a separate deal with Warner Brothers pictures to release the film.

**GN:** Jackson and I spent a lot of time mixing the record without a break – we had to get it out. And Jackson, God bless his cotton socks, he might leave for an hour and take his kids to school, but then he was there the other 23 hours a day mixing the record.

**JB:** We had an expression called “MUSE feet”, ‘cos you were literally on your feet so long every day

that your feet would swell up. It was a pretty hands-on process and we did a lot of this work at Graham’s studio in Hollywood. We had a tight deadline and we somehow made it.

**BR:** I don’t think Graham and Jackson slept for months. Luckily we had youth and righteousness on our side.

**JB:** The film came out about six months later. It has a lot of great performances in there – a lot of treasures, like James [Taylor] and Carly [Simon] doing Mockingbird. But because it was shot on film and that cost a lot of money, they thought, “Well let’s just shoot one or two songs and that’s enough of that artist.” The only person whose entire set got filmed was Bruce. And now that’s coming out, which is great, because it’s totally worthy of being seen.

**DG:** Bruce was deeply interested in the filming process. He came into the editing room more than any other artist. He would sit there and comment on every single shot. It’s interesting looking back because No Nukes is the first political thing Bruce ever did. That began his role as someone who weighed in on politics.

**BS:** Roulette, a portrait of a family man caught in the shadow of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, was the first song we cut [for *The River*, 1980]. The MUSE concerts... had been

our entrance into the public political arena. Roulette was written and recorded shortly after those shows.

**Steven Van Zandt:** It was also sort of my first engagement with politics too... Jackson Browne became a lifelong friend and a kind of political mentor, in a way. Everything I was interested in, he’d already been there. I’d get to some Indian reservation in the middle of South Dakota, four hours to the nearest airport, and they’d say, “Oh, you just missed Jackson – he was here last week” (laughs).

**JB:** We haven’t put out the original No Nukes film on DVD. I feel like it would be a disservice to the movement to only portray it in retrospect, something that happened once upon a time in a universe far, far away. We’d have to figure out how to make a new film that would provide information about the movement and what’s happened in the last 40 years. You have to continue to tell the story. I mean, No Nukes succeeded in that there were no new nuclear plants ordered from that point on. We thought we had dealt a serious blow to the nuclear power industry. And the rest of the fight was about shutting the plants down. And it still is. It’s not over.

**BR:** There’s 92 nuclear plants still operating, and there’s 21 that have shut down. After the

Fukushima [Japanese nuclear plant] disaster in 2011, we did another No Nukes show – but all along the way we’ve kept our efforts going. Jackson and myself and Graham in particular, we’ll add a dollar onto our concert tickets and donate that and do profit sharing with all the No Nukes-affiliated groups. We continue to talk about it and fund it with our touring and private donations.

**DG:** Looking back, it’s one of the few movements that people like me have been involved in that haven’t ended in disappointment or heartbreak – unlike the spread of guns, or global warming. It was a successful movement that’s somewhat forgotten, maybe because it wasn’t as cosmically important as civil rights or feminism or gay rights. But it is an example of something that actually worked – the combination of grassroots organisation, of public opinion, of progressive elected officials, and the creative community all coming together. At a time when it’s easy to become demoralised, it’s always good to remember the few victories that we’ve had.

*Tom Petty interview from Musician magazine, 1981; Bruce Springsteen quotes from Peter Ames Carlin’s Bruce, and Bruce Springsteen’s Born To Run, also from Creem, 1981. Special thanks to Backstreets magazine. Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band: The Legendary 1979 No Nukes Concerts is available on DVD, Blu-ray, CD and vinyl from November 19.*

Fred W. McDarragh/Getty Images, Ebet Roberts/Getty Images, Getty (4), Camera Press (2), Alamy (2)