



Making the point:
Jon Landau, 1989

JON LANDAU

**IN A BUSINESS FULL OF
DOUBLE-DEALERS, HE IS AN ARTIST MANAGER
KNOWN FOR HIS INTEGRITY.**

By Bill Flanagan

Jon Landau is best known as one of the great rock & roll managers – but that is his third career. ¶ Before he was a manager, he was a record producer. Before he was a producer, he was a music journalist. All three qualify him for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. ¶ Landau was one of the most important and influential of the early rock critics. He started writing about music for his high school newspaper in Lexington, Massachusetts, and continued while he was a student at Brandeis University in the mid-sixties. He wrote for the *Boston Broadside*, the *Cambridge* (later *Boston*) *Phoenix*, and *Crawdaddy*. Landau's byline was in *Rolling Stone* from the very first issue.

As a journalist, Landau was fearless. His critique of Eric Clapton's guitar borrowings with Cream is said to have caused Clapton to faint (a legend too good to fact-check). When his peers were caught up in flower power, Landau had the clarity to distinguish between the substantial and the trendy. He championed soul music at a time when the rock canon was being

formed, celebrated Stax and Motown, and contributed to Aretha Franklin and Otis Redding being accorded the same respect as the Kinks and the Who.

That led to a short but significant career as a record producer. In the same year – 1969 – he captured the threat and muscle of the MC5 on *Back in the USA* and produced the emotionally complex pop of Livingston Taylor's debut. Those accomplishments were warm-ups for his work with Jackson Browne on *The Pretender* in 1976, the finest album by one of the best singer-songwriters of his generation.

Landau's work as a critic and his time as a record producer prepared the ground for the relationship that would define his legacy. In May of 1974 he wrote a personal essay in Boston's *Real Paper* about how his love for rock & roll was rekindled by seeing Bruce Springsteen open for Bonnie Raitt at the Harvard Square Theatre. As he wrote, "I saw my rock & roll past flash before my eyes. I saw something else; I saw rock & roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen."

The review became one of the most famous in rock history. It served to boost Springsteen's position at Columbia Records, where he was in danger of being dropped due to lackluster sales on his first two albums. And it led to a friendship between the musician and the writer that bloomed into a collaboration responsible for some of the best American rock music ever made.

Landau became Springsteen's sounding board. They talked into the night about music, about movies, about what made an artist great. It's fair to say that Springsteen needed someone to collaborate with whose vision was as big as his own. It's also probably fair to say that Springsteen needed to be able to talk to someone as smart as he was.

Landau joined the production team on the LP that became *Born to Run*. It was a good fit. Among the Springsteen albums Landau went on to coproduce were *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *The River*, *Born in the U.S.A.*, *Tunnel of Love*, *Human Touch*, and *Lucky Town*. He coproduced live albums, compilations, and EPs as well. Springsteen was always in charge of making his own records, but Landau was essential in helping Springsteen realize his vision.

After *Born to Run*, Landau also became Springsteen's manager, and played the long game. Springsteen kept performing in theaters when he could sell out arenas, and he stayed in arenas well past the time when he could fill stadiums. Every step forward was considered from all angles, and Landau was never known to make a foolish move.

We on the outside don't know much about how things played out between Springsteen and Landau in private. But all evidence suggests that the rare moments when Landau overtly challenged Springsteen turned out to be game-changers. Springsteen wrote the song "Hungry Heart" for the Ramones, but Landau talked him into keeping it for himself. It became Springsteen's first Top Ten hit.

It was Landau who declared *Born in the U.S.A.* wasn't finished when Springsteen thought it was – insisting it needed one more song to introduce the LP to



JANN S. WENNER

Jon is a man of taste, integrity, scholarship, and soul...who was instrumental in my education and in laying the foundation of *Rolling Stone*.

GREIL MARCUS

From Jon Landau's first column in the first issue of *Rolling Stone*, he was writing from more perspectives than anyone else: as a fan, as a listener, but also as a musician, and as a producer. Reading him, you heard music playing, but also how it was made – for good or ill.

His work radiated authority. For more than fifty years I've tried to parse out the source of that quality, and I think the key may be in his unforgettable review of Bob Dylan's *John Wesley Harding*, where he tied the mood of the album to Vietnam: "Dylan has felt the war." For Jon, musical choices

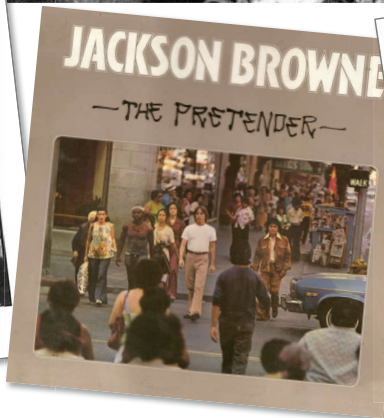
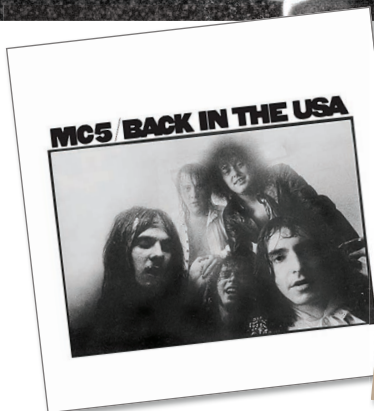
are moral choices. When the wrong choices are made – as he finds all through that first piece, on the debut albums by Cream and the Jimi Hendrix Experience – something is missed. Some chance to speak clearly, to realize a vision, to find one's own soul and share it with the world.

BEN FONG-TORRES

Rolling Stone started up as a San Francisco-based rock & roll newspaper late in 1967. But with Jon Landau on board, it was immediately a national publication as well. Working out of Boston, he helped expand *Rolling Stone* beyond rock, by listening to and writing astutely about the blues, R&B, and country music. Yes, he foresaw rock and roll future in Bruce Springsteen, but he appreciated all that came before.



Rolling Stone's editorial A-team, Big Sur, California, c. 1971. Front row: Tim Crouse, Charles Perry, Ben Fong-Torres, and David Felton (from left). Middle row: Tim Ferris, Andrew Bailey, Grover Lewis, Paul Scanlon, Bob Kingsberry, Jann S. Wenner, Jon Landau, Tim Cahill, Bob Greenfield, and Joe Eszterhas (from left). Back row: Jerry Hopkins, Hunter S. Thompson, and Bob Chorush (from left).



Three of the more famous albums that Landau produced

Top Forty radio. Springsteen, who had written dozens of songs for the album, including six that would in fact turn out to be Top Ten hits, told Landau that if he wanted another song, he should write it himself. But as soon as Landau left, Springsteen sat down and poured his frustration into a new song: "I get up in the evening and I ain't got nothin' to say." "Dancing in the Dark" became exactly what Landau had asked for – the song that opened up Bruce Springsteen's au-

dience and made him an AM radio and MTV star.

Along with his colleague Barbara Carr and the remarkably stable team at Jon Landau Management, Landau has also guided the careers of Natalie Merchant, Train, Alejandro Escovedo, and Shania Twain, steering each according to their talents and ambitions. In a business full of double-dealers, Landau was known for his integrity. He never made promises he could not keep. *(continued)*



"I SAW MY ROCK & ROLL PAST
FLASH BEFORE MY EYES.
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NAME IS BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN."

JON LANDAU

With Bruce
Springsteen,
in 1975 and
(below) 2019



BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

Jon Landau was the first person I met who had a language for discussing ... ideas and the life of the mind. He had the rabid fan's pure love of music and musicians while retaining his critic's ability to step back and analyze the very thing he loved. In Jon, one impulse did not dampen the other. He was a natural, and together we shared a belief in the bedrock values of musicianship, skill, the joy of hard work, and the methodical application of one's talents. These things had resulted in some of our favorite records. Muscle Shoals, Motown, and the Beatles' early recordings showed how revolutionary music could flow from a down-home but disciplined studio approach. That was our plan and who we were.

Jon and I related both as conspiratorial music fans and as young men in search of something. Jon would serve as a friend and mentor, someone who'd been exposed to and held information I felt would augment my creativity and deepen the truth seeking I was trying to make a part of my music. We also had that instant chemical connection that says, "I know you"....

In 1974, I was a young and developing musician. I was interested in forefathers, artist brothers in arms, people who'd thought like this who'd come before. Jon knew who and where they were, in books, in films, and in music. It was all very casual, just friends talking and throwing around ideas about the things that inspired them, moved them, late-night conversations about the things that opened up your world and made you hunger for life. I was moving off my first two records and already developing a new voice. I'd begun to pare down my lyrical style. When we began to work on *Born to Run* together, Jon followed suit with the music. He was a very astute arranger and editor who was particularly excellent at shaping the bottom of the record, the bass and drums. He guarded against overplaying and guided our record toward a more streamlined sound.... We simplified the basic tracks so we could stack up dense layers of sound without lapsing into sonic chaos. It made *Born to Run* simultaneously steeped in rock history and modern. We made dense, dramatic rock 'n' roll. *Born to Run* is his greatest production work on one of my greatest records....

In our quest, Jon became the Clark to my Lewis. In the future we would travel together through more than a little wilderness.... Alongside my wife Patti, my band, and a few close friends, I've shared my mind with Jon more than anyone else.... There is a love and respect at the center of everything we do together.

Born to Run (Simon & Schuster, 2016)



NATALIE MERCHANT

Mr. Landau was my most fierce supporter while taking first steps away from fronting a band toward a career as a solo artist. The fact that he trusted my decisions convinced others in the industry. I'm so grateful to him for that. My story would certainly have been written differently if his hand had not been involved. God bless Jon Landau.

WAYNE KRAMER

Atlantic Records commissioned Jon Landau to write them a report on the MC5's strengths and weaknesses. Landau studied the band, and his report was insightful and knowledgeable. He recommended they sign the MC5....

John [Sinclair, MC5's manager] had been in discussions with all the stakeholders in our sphere, and he concluded that bringing in Landau to produce the album was the best move we could make. After reading his ten-page report and talking with him at length, I liked him. I was impressed with his analysis of the MC5's strengths and weaknesses. He realized that the MC5 was the only group out there to really connect directly with the audience's concerns.... He also saw the deficiencies that we needed to

address. He saw it all.

Landau would come out [to rehearsals] and listen and make suggestions. He and I would sit up in my bedroom and talk about music for hours on end. We talked about the MC5's problems and strong points.... Landau once said that he thought Fred [Smith] and I should be referred to in the same way that Carlos Santana or Pete Townshend were. That we were every bit as good as our contemporaries, and better than most. I didn't disagree....

We talked through the group's challenges in great depth.... He was trying to get us to think for ourselves; to move past the groupthink that we were accustomed to.... There were issues that I'd never addressed because of our band's boundless camaraderie.... Landau didn't have the constraints that we did. He was hired to produce a record, and he spoke up....

Landau forced me to see the reality of how the MC5 went about the business of creating music.... He believed the band could be the greatest American hard-rock group of our time, but we needed to face our weaknesses and fix them.

The Hard Stuff (Da Capo, 2018)



FROM LEFT:
Landau at the
age of 21, 1970;
Kicking back with
Wenner in 1976.

The great artist/manager relationships in rock & roll are rare and they are misunderstood. The collaborations between Bob Dylan and Albert Grossman, Neil Young and Elliot Roberts, or U2 and Paul McGuinness were, on some level, good cop/bad cop routines. The artist is always the good cop. The artist says, "I would love to write a song for your movie" or "Of course, I will sing at your charity concert" or "I'd be delighted to come to your birthday party," and the manager gets him or her out of it. This leads to the illusion that the manager is the boss. It allows people who might be expected to know better to say, "John Lennon really wanted to sing on my record, but that bastard Brian Epstein wouldn't let him."

The truth is that in any manager/artist partnership that passes the twenty-year mark, the artist is calling the shots. The manager is advising on, proposing to, covering for, and executing the artist's wishes. If things go south, the manager takes the blame. If things go well, and the manager is good at his job, the artist gets all the credit.

Also the truth: Jon Landau has been very good at all his jobs. And now he joins his most famous client in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

JACKSON BROWNE

Working with Jon on my album *The Pretender* opened up a lot of new musical territory for me. I learned by watching him work with the session players, many of whom I had worked with before – and some who he had always wanted to work with – to create dynamics I hadn't realized could be in my songs. He showed me that the recording studio was actually the second stage of the writing of a song.

His ability to talk about what was being said in a song was something I hadn't encountered before, or since, really, except for those times when Jon has generously taken the time to talk with me about my work.

He hired Greg Ladanyi, who was then a second engineer, to mix *The Pretender*, recognizing his talent, and his "workable intelligence" – a phrase he used to describe the quality needed to be an effective collaborator in the creative process.

Once when I was seeking his advice, I asked him how you could tell who did what on a recording. He told me if it didn't come out well, it was the artist. If it came out great, it was the producer.