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Rockers Open Tour in Support of Kerry

By JON PARELES

PHILADELPHIA, Oct. 1 - Bruce Springsteen began stumping the swing states here tonight to support Senator John Kerry. "We're here tonight to fight for a government that is open, rational, forward-looking and humane, and we plan to rock the joint while doing so," he said at the beginning of the concert he was headlining at the Wachovia Center. The concert, which also featured R.E.M., was one of six simultaneous concerts in Pennsylvania for the Vote for Change tour, a week of benefit concerts in battleground states.

For the next 10 days, million-selling musicians including Mr. Springsteen, Dave Matthews, the Dixie Chicks, Pearl Jam, Bonnie Raitt and John Mellencamp will be headlining concerts in closely contested states. The tour features rock musicians, but the lineups also encompass blues, country and hip-hop.

The tour will reach 11 states and 33 cities, winding up with a concert by 13 of the headliners on Oct. 11 at the MCI Center in Washington. That show, to be televised live on the Sundance cable channel, will also include John Fogerty, Jackson Browne, James Taylor, Keb Mo', Kenneth Edmonds and the hip-hop group Jurassic 5.

The concerts are benefits for America Coming Together, a voter-mobilization effort, and they are presented by the liberal MoveOn political action committee. Some performers, including Pearl Jam and Ms. Raitt, have done benefits for political candidates through the years. But this tour is the first time in his three-decade career that Mr. Springsteen has made a partisan stand.

"These are people who are the best experts at connecting with the American public, people who have had an emotional connection with millions of people for years," said Eli Pariser, the executive director of MoveOn PAC. "Politics is a part of that, and I think it just extends what they do, their art."

"It does take some courage in this climate to stand up and do what they're doing," he continued. "A lot of them have been galvanized by the kind of extremist repressive response that they've seen. They're not going to be silenced."

The Dixie Chicks, who started their part of the tour in Pittsburgh, faced radio-station boycotts and a talk-show furor last year after their lead singer, Natalie Maines, disparaged President Bush onstage.

"We have nothing to lose at this point, so any sort of fear or inhibition is out the window," Ms. Maines said by telephone this week. "We definitely want a regime change, and now that we're getting down to the wire I'm even less afraid to speak out. I just think things are absolutely life or death right now."

"We sort of weeded out the people who apparently didn't know who we were, though we never felt like we were trying to hide what we thought," she added. "Free speech is not free: we paid dearly. But we're more determined and stronger now. And from this point on, what fans we have will be our true fans."

It is a complex enough undertaking to gather rock stars for a one-day event like Live Aid or Mr. Mellencamp's annual Farm Aid. Arranging six simultaneous weeklong benefit tours by such popular musicians is probably unprecedented. There is no comparable undertaking on the Republican side. The musicians are not playing their standard sets; they are including more political songs and collaborating with the others on the bill. The Dixie Chicks sing backup for Mr. Taylor; Ms. Raitt harmonizes with Mr. Browne.

All shows on the tour go to Ohio on Saturday, Michigan on Sunday and Florida on Friday; shows on Tuesday and Wednesday are in Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Missouri. The tour's first show, featuring Ms. Raitt and Mr. Browne, took place on Monday night in Seattle. "It was a very energized, responsive audience," Ms. Raitt said by telephone after that concert. "When we sang Little Steven's 'I Am a Patriot' and the whole audience was standing up, it just brought me to tears. It's more fun to do this than it is to do my own shows. It's just so inspirational, and there's so much at stake."

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