

Reviews

Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters, edited by Jeff Burger (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014. 432 pages).

The published interview was not invented by music journalists—it was a staple of *Paris Review* and *Playboy*, to cite two antecedents before *Rolling Stone* came along in 1967—but this somewhat peculiar literary subgenre has always had a special significance in rock & roll. It emerged as a culturally distinctive magazine feature in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which is to say the moment when rock & roll became *rock*, when it shifted from a largely unselfconscious form of musical expression to a more cerebral, avowedly artistic, one. As in so many other ways, we mark our years AD: After Dylan. In its inaugural issue, *Rolling Stone's* first interview subject was Donovan. But the patron saint (or, perhaps more accurately, sinner) of the form was Dylan: charismatic, elliptical, endlessly quotable. For musicians, journalists, and readers, the interview became an arena wherein the intellectual seriousness and philosophical ramifications of rock could be staked out and elaborated—generally free from the scrutiny of those (academics and other old people) who might regard the enterprise with amusement or ridicule.

By the time Bruce Springsteen came along in the mid-seventies, the rock interview had already become a fixture not only of *Rolling Stone*, but also sister publications *Creem* and *Circus*, which were eagerly received by adolescents like myself as bulletins from faraway worlds that were simultaneously the locus of our inner lives. A not-quite-modest pronouncement from a reigning superstar would become a proposition we would ponder, test, and adopt as our own. We could learn to talk like the heroes we—for a season, at least—had wanted to be.

What made Springsteen different at the tail end of this formative moment in the mid-seventies was his striking unpretentiousness, even

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innocence. For journalists schooled in such matters—and many of them were—he seemed to embody the very ideal of Antonio Gramsci’s instinctively Marxist “organic intellectual,” an uncorrupted voice of the working-class articulating the agenda for a better day. Journalists flocked to Springsteen, many of them finding their own ideals validated in an industry that had long since mastered the art of commodifying dissent. Forty years later, even as the market for dissent has gotten noticeably smaller, they continue to do so.

Jeff Burger’s edited anthology *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters* is the latest in a string of books that have collected interviews with Springsteen. In 1993, John Duffy published *In His Own Words*, largely a set of quotations rather than actual interviews, which was reissued in 2000. In 1996, Parke Puterbaugh published *Bruce Springsteen: The Rolling Stone Files*, a collection of pieces that had appeared in the magazine. Both of these books belonged to larger series that included volumes on other musicians. More recently, Christopher Phillips and Louis P. Masur—the former the editor of the highly regarded *Backstreets* fanzine, the latter a historian and the author of a fine book on the making of *Born to Run*—issued the 2013 anthology *Talk about a Dream*, which is likely to become a canonical text, as it features the work of well-established writers such as Springsteen’s biographer Dave Marsh, *L.A. Times* critic Robert Hilburn, and Phillips himself, all of whom played a major role in establishing what might be termed the legendary Springsteen.

Burger’s volume is a somewhat alternative collection, befitting the status of its Chicago Review Press imprint. There’s some overlap between *Springsteen on Springsteen* and *Talk about a Dream*; for example, both books include Springsteen’s 1996 conversation with Judy Wieder of *The Advocate*, a gay magazine, in which Springsteen acquits himself well, even ahead of his time in some respects, coming out strongly in favor of same-sex marriage. Many of Burger’s pieces come from smaller magazines, especially from the United Kingdom, where Springsteen says many of the same things

he does for more mainstream publications. What makes Burger's book distinctive and valuable is that it includes a number of Springsteen's own writings. Selections include Springsteen's 1999 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction speech, his hilarious 2005 speech inducting U2, and his strikingly candid and intimate 2011 eulogy for Clarence Clemons, among others. As such examples indicate, the weight of the book leans toward conversations in the last 20 years, which makes this often less familiar material for serious Springsteen scholars. Burger is also an assiduous editor who usefully and unobtrusively corrects the misstatements of his subjects and adds welcome brief contextual remarks in brackets.

The question this and the other books pose is whether it is possible to say something new about a man whose life has been as exhaustively documented as any in the last half-century. By now, the master narrative of Springsteen's life seems set in cement: a prodigy emerges from the mist, breaks through to mass success, gets enmeshed in star-making legal machinery (every savior must have his trial), ascends to the very summit of celebrity, and not only lives to tell the tale, but takes his place as a beloved global village elder whose counsel is sought by presidents and sages, all while never losing his common touch.

There are a few novel accents to be found in Burger's volume. One is the depth of Springsteen's familiarity with the prevailing music of any given time: the bands, many of them now obscure, which he references in discussions. It is also striking that, despite a struggle with his manager Mike Appel that always seemed relatively bitter to me (an idea I probably absorbed from Dave Marsh's 1979 biography *Born to Run*), Springsteen repeatedly affirms that he was never all that discouraged about the outcome, believing he would prevail. His affirmations of Appel's dedication in the late seventies, and at Springsteen's Hall of Fame induction ceremony two decades later, are notable for their sense of fairness, even generosity.

The solidity of the narrative of Springsteen's life is of course due in no small measure to Springsteen himself. His early ingenuousness aside, he quickly mastered the rules of this game, and plays it with consummate skill. And there are times when one wonders if he plays it a little *too* well. Pronouncements like "Your chances of having a violent altercation are relatively small, unless you watch television, in which case you'll be brutalized everyday" (interview with Neil Strauss, 1995, 197) or "I believe that the war on poverty is a more American idea than the war on the war on poverty" (interview with David Corn, 1996, 216) do not have the ring of spontaneous conversation that these conversations are supposed to represent. An air of calculation hovers over Springsteen's remarks, less as a matter of commerce or an effort to inflate his celebrity than evidence of a hammered-out, consistent ideological vision that might be termed communitarian big-government liberalism.

Perhaps because of the demographics involved—most of Springsteen's interlocutors have been white men of the same age as he was at the time of the interview—the tensions, even contradictions, in this vision have gone under-explored. To his credit, it's Springsteen, not an interviewer, who observes that for all his charitable work and talk about community in the eighties, the fact remained that as an artist on tour he was merely passing through the places he visited (Springsteen also makes parallel observations about his relationships until his marriages). One waits in vain for a question about the overwhelmingly white character of his audience, notwithstanding the fact that a string of African-American artists, among them the Pointer Sisters, Donna Summer, and Aretha Franklin, have performed his songs. Or how he thinks women relate to the preoccupations about autonomy that characterize so much of his music. These are not 'gotcha' queries; one imagines Springsteen might have had interesting things to say about these issues.

But all this is probably beside the point. For the dedicated fan, reading an interview with Springsteen will always be an exercise in

irresistible frustration: the reader cannot help but turn to it in the hope of meeting an invisible man who only materializes on a stage, playing the role of the everyman rock star. The second-hand fragments I pick up from these collected interviews are of a Springsteen who procrastinates over things he doesn't want to do, who forms intense but temporary attachments, whose standards can be punishingly difficult to meet if you happen to work for him. Yet I crave these fragments to further my efforts to piece together a complex human being, one who has mastered the art of revealing himself through both song and speech.

Jim Cullen

Ethical Culture Fieldston School, New York

Outlaw Pete by Bruce Springsteen, illustrated by Frank Caruso (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014, 56 pages).

Long before *Outlaw Pete* appeared in print, Simon & Schuster's advance notice styled it as both a picturebook for children and an illustrated text for adults, comparing it to *Go the F**k to Sleep* and *Goodnight iPad*. Newspapers similarly hailed the book, sight unseen, as one for children and adults, with the *Los Angeles Times* (August 28, 2014) likening it to Keith Richards's *Gus & Me*, also forthcoming, as another children's book by a rock star. Although the author of *Outlaw Pete*, Bruce Springsteen, and its illustrator, Frank Caruso, equivocate when they describe the book's genre, you can't have it both ways. Either a picturebook is appropriate for young children or it must be consigned to that deservedly maligned category of the "coffee-table book." In *Outlaw Pete's* Afterword, for example, Springsteen writes that he's "not sure this is a children's book." He goes on to say, however, that "a six-month-old, bank-robbing baby is a pretty good protagonist," which is true and goes some distance in explaining why Caruso, who illustrates books for children and produces and designs children's television shows, came up with the idea to turn a song from *Working on a Dream* (2009) into a picturebook. Primarily a cartoonist/graphic novelist, Caruso uses mixed media techniques to illustrate *Outlaw Pete*, backgrounding fairly cartoonish figures with everything from acrylic on canvas to sepia-toned drawings. While the illustrations suit the text in the main, they quite often look like someone has propped images from a graphic novel in front of the walls of an art gallery. The text is, of course, the lyrics to Springsteen's song "Outlaw Pete," and therein rests the problem.

Caruso told the *Los Angeles Times*, "When Bruce wrote 'Outlaw Pete' he didn't just write a great song, he created a great character," a sentiment Caruso repeated in his rather simpering interview with *The Daily Show's* Jon Stewart. A six-month-old bank-robbing baby does make a great character,

and the first eight images in the book feature a rather adorable diapered child in a 10-gallon hat and kerchief (no gun in sight). Springsteen was notably quiet during that segment on Stewart's show, but he has gone on record as saying that the song was inspired by a picturebook his mother read to him: *Brave Cowboy Bill* (Kathryn and Byron Jackson; illustrated by Richard Scarry [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950]). Like Caruso's young Outlaw Pete, Scarry's Cowboy Bill is a child, but Bill stays a child throughout, whereas Pete turns into a jaded twenty-five-year-old horse thief and murderer by the end of the first quarter of the book. Whereas Bill's adventures are lively but childishly benign, Pete stabs bounty hunter Dan and the story wraps around an image of his impaled body for several pages.

However, Springsteen's "great character" and the Jacksons' "brave Bill" have one important feature in common: they inhabit two of the most insidiously exploitive texts about First Nations peoples now in print. Both give the heinous *Little House on the Prairie* series a run for its money in terms of racism and offensiveness. Consider this page from *Brave Cowboy Bill*:

After lunch that cowboy looked for a band of painted Indians who were after scalps and loot.

BANG! He shot away their bowstrings, so they couldn't even shoot. He took all their feathered arrows, and their tomahawks and bows. And he made them smoke a peace pipe, sitting down in rows. "We'll be friends," he told them firmly.

All the Indians said, "We will." Because no one EVER argues with the daring Cowboy Bill.

Like the series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, this book needs to be removed from children's hands; this sort of stereotyping needs to be put to rest. The question those of us who work with children and their books must ask ourselves is 'Can a Native child see herself or himself in positive and realistic ways in these texts?' In the case of *Brave Cowboy Bill*, the answer is clearly no.

In the case of *Outlaw Pete*, I agree with Dave Marsh, who writes in the liner notes that this is not a book for children. The illustrations of Dan's death were enough to make my four-year-old granddaughter comment: "Grandma, I don't think this book is for little girls." Well, I don't think it's for grown-up girls either, especially if they're Indigenous. Bruce Springsteen is one of the most socially-conscious writers and thinkers I've come across, therefore I was shocked when I first heard the song, wondering how on earth he could justify his commodification of the "young Navajo girl" and her sovereign lands. I was horrified when I saw the words joined to Caruso's illustrations, in which a grizzled old outlaw attempts to redeem himself by appropriating what looks to be a teenage girl before settling "down on the res." I'm aware that the song's chorus offers an existential questioning about the nature of one man, and I believe that Caruso did well in giving the chorus double-page spreads that make that questioning quite compelling. But at the end of the day, given the sexism and racism that underpins this song and book, when he asks over and over "I'm Outlaw Pete! I'm Outlaw Pete! I'm Outlaw Pete! Can you hear me?" I have to wonder why anyone would listen or care.

Roxanne Harde
University of Alberta, Augustana

Leading the Life You Want: Skills for Integrating Work and Life by Stewart D. Friedman (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review, 2014. 256 pages).

Stewart C. Friedman's *Leading the Life You Want: Skills for Integrating Work and Life* presents a new volume in a long-running genre of management-focused, self-help books. Friedman begins with the premise that modern life is challenging and time consuming. People struggle to find ways to meet the demands placed on them by their jobs, families, and other commitments. Moreover, most people are unable to prioritize and manage all these areas of their lives. To be successful, Friedman argues, modern people need to develop skills that lead to "4-way wins." These 4-way wins are achieved when people find success in the areas of "work or school; home or family; community or society; and the private realm of mind, body and spirit" (4) and are built upon the principles of being real (knowing one's authentic self), being whole (acting with integrity) and being innovative (acting with creativity). Friedman's argument is that to achieve wins in each of these four areas, individuals need to develop skills to reinforce these three main principles. His book is dedicated to identifying, building, and using these skills. Friedman presents an accessible work that shows readers what they are doing wrong in their lives while affirming that they do have the ability to find success and happiness. The book is replete with the requisite management aphorisms, sayings, tag lines, and other mantras that, though tedious at times, succinctly summarize many of his main arguments.

Where Friedman's work differs from management self-help books is in his use of exemplars to illustrate his points. Rather than rely solely on theory, he profiles six people as examples of how readers can best organize and manage their lives so that they can achieve 4-way wins. Most relevant to this review is Friedman's profile of Bruce Springsteen. Friedman draws on Springsteen's life to illustrate tips and lessons about how to be a better person. Specifically, Friedman notes that Springsteen has unwittingly

followed the steps to personal happiness and success that his book expounds.

The discussion of Springsteen's life is short but effective. Friedman is a good writer and storyteller and, as someone not well familiar with Springsteen's background, family life, or working relationships, I found Friedman's selected vignettes entertaining and readable. Over the course of the chapter, he uses Springsteen's successes and failures throughout his career and family life to showcase that his methods will lead to the successful integration of one's work, family, spiritual, and community life.

For Springsteen aficionados, I suspect this book will be somewhat of a disappointment. Friedman condenses a 40-year career into a mere twenty pages. And, after stripping away the management jargon, readers are left with a fairly straightforward summary of Springsteen's life and a collection of generic, self-affirming stories peppered with interesting tidbits. Readers seeking new information about the Boss should turn elsewhere. Those looking to gain personal insight from Springsteen's hard-won life lessons will find this book of value. Overall, Friedman succeeds in crafting a straight-forward, sometimes schmaltzy, chapter about a working-class boy made good. His chapter serves as an appropriate introduction for those interested in integrating Springsteen's life and art into the world of management studies.

William M. Foster
University of Alberta, Augustana