

Reviews

Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture, edited by William I. Wolff (London: Routledge, 2018. 222 pages).

Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture is an edited collection comprised of thirteen essays. The essays are subdivided thematically into three sections: Politics, fear, and society; Gender and sexual identity; and Towards a rhetoric of Bruce Springsteen. In sections two and three, the essays are further divided by brief, editorial "Dialogues" that pose questions, suggest links between the essays, and provide context. The collection is edited by William Wolff, assistant professor of communication studies and digital media at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. The contributors span a wide spectrum, and the book presents itself as an interdisciplinary volume offering perspectives on and approaches to Springsteen from the disciplines of musicology, journalism, sociology, psychology, literary studies, theology, and communications, among others. The editor has also included some fan writing in this collection, asserting that, together, scholarly and non-scholarly writing help to provide a "more nuanced understanding of an artist" (i). *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music* is particularly timely, the editor asserts, because it appears at a moment when Springsteen's "contemporary work is just beginning to be understood in term of its impact on popular culture and music" (i).

Part one of the collection includes four essays concerned primarily with Springsteen and politics. Jonathan Cohen's piece, "Lost in the flood: Bruce Springsteen's political consciousness and the Vietnam War, 1968-2014" focuses on biography and argues that Springsteen was politically engaged much earlier and more substantially than is commonly thought, and that even as his songs seemed to coalesce around issues of class in the

1970s and 1980s, it is Vietnam and veterans that stand “at the core of his musical politics” (17).¹ Sara Gulgus’s essay, “Youngstown,” provides a striking counterpoint to the other pieces in the volume, focusing on the punk band You Are the War That I Want’s critical response to Springsteen’s song. Gulgus describes how “Fuck You Bruce Springsteen (an Ode to Youngstown)” challenges the Boss’s romantic-elegiac account of an unemployed steelworker in an attempt to “shift the city’s association from one of declining deindustrialization to one of reinvigorating post-industrialization” (32). Karen O’Donnell offers a theological take on Springsteen in her contribution, “Our Lady of E Street: The Boss’s Virgin, 2002-2014,” tracing Springsteen’s relationship with religion in his post-9/11 songs through his various invocations of Mary: from “Mater Dolorosa” to “Mary, Mediatrix” to, ultimately, Mary as a “liminal figure inhabiting the space between the natural and supernatural” (45). Part one of the collection concludes with Jason Stonerook’s “‘This turnpike sure is spooky’: Springsteen and the politics of fear,” in which he focuses on songs in Springsteen’s oeuvre that illustrate fear and anxiety, real and imagined – over the Cold War, the economy, the government/authority, terrorism, etc. – in the context of a liberal society.

Part two of *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music* focuses on gender and sexuality and includes four essays and one “Dialogue.” Pamela Moss’s essay, “*American Beauty* nomads?: Ontological security and masculinized knowledge in uncertain times,” addresses the “meaning of being American” in the aftermath of such troubling events as 9/11, Abu Ghraib, and Hurricane Katrina. Moss, via a feminist materialist perspective, deconstructs a small collection of Springsteen songs that are nominally about “norms of trust and order” but in fact can be shown to reveal –

¹ Jonathan Cohen, who serves as the managing editor of *BOSS*, recused himself from any editing of this review.

though an examination of the subjects (and in particular, the feminine subjects) that emerge through the song lyrics—“indecision, edged with doubt” and ambiguity (74-75). The remaining essays in Part two are prefaced by a one-page “Dialogue” entitled “Springsteen and Women,” which draws the reader’s attention to the tensions between fan and scholarly interpretations in the three essays that follow. Nadine Hubbs blends feminism and musicology in her piece “The Promised Land: Springsteen’s epic heterosexuality, late capitalism, and prospects for a queer life.” Hubbs juxtaposes the “larger-than-life drama of heterosexuality” (91) at the heart of songs like “Born to Run” and “Thunder Road” with queer and racialized elements in Springsteen’s music and performance. Holly Casio’s contribution to the collection, “Is anybody alive out there?: Growing up queer with Bruce,” is a confessional essay written and typeset as though it were part of a fanzine and documents the author’s interpretation of Springsteen’s songs as queer anthems that provided her with emotional support during her teenage struggles with sexuality. “Who is Springsteen to his women fans” by Lorraine Mangione and Donna Luff is something of a companion to Casio’s personal essay: it is a study that, drawing on a survey and fan scholarship, characterizes Springsteen’s relationship to female fans in terms of a “psychological and existential journey” of healing and growth, with the Boss as a “companion” (126).

Part three of the collection consists of five essays and one “Dialogue.” Like the preceding section, the focus here is on the construction of identity and on relationships between performer and audience, as constituted rhetorically. Eric Rawson’s “When words fail: Non-lexical utterances and the rhetoric of voicelessness in the songs of Bruce Springsteen, 1975-1984” offers a study of songs in which Springsteen has exhausted his literary lexicon, turning to wordless sounds to express the inexpressible and give voice to the voiceless. In “‘To stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart’: Authenticity, community, and folk music in

the recent work of Bruce Springsteen,” Owen Cantrell examines Springsteen’s connections to folk music traditions, focusing on his 2006 homage to Pete Seeger, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*. Cantrell argues that Springsteen’s use of folk music has evolved over his career: once a marker of authenticity and connectedness to a tradition and community, folk music for Springsteen in recent years has taken on more of Seeger’s “politically revolutionary usage” (147). The subsequent “Dialogue” asks the question “How do listeners and audiences interpret a Springsteen song?” (161) and links the essays that follow with respect to the semiotic challenges the music-with-a-message presents. Like Cantrell, Jason Schneider considers Springsteen as a folk musician in his essay “‘Bring ‘em home!’: The rhetorical ecologies of *Devils & Dust*,” but within a broader, “ecological” framework that posits Springsteen’s music—specifically the 2005 *Devils & Dust* album—as a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (universal artwork) that informs the rhetorical strategies Springsteen uses to catalyze his audience to political action. Journalist Peter Chianca contributes a short essay about the thematic narrative structures of Springsteen’s set lists and how they are part of a delicate, carefully crafted negotiation with his audience and its expectations. The final essay in the collection, Scott Wagar’s “‘They don’t just see some person with a guitar’: Springsteen and rhetorical identification,” considers popular music in general as rhetoric, but looks specifically and critically at how Springsteen seeks to forge connections—successfully or otherwise—with his audience through the rhetoric of his songs and how audiences in turn identify with the Boss.

There are some very strong contributions to Springsteen scholarship in this volume. Jonathan Cohen’s historical-biographical account of Springsteen’s political engagement is well-researched and compellingly argued: his conclusion that future scholarly examinations of Springsteen and his music as “the particular product of the troubled political atmosphere of the 1960s and early 1970s” (28) would benefit from the

careful consideration of historical context is particularly apposite. Karen O'Donnell's examination of Springsteen's Marian themes and references in his recent music is likewise engaging and thought-provoking and offers some new insights into what O'Donnell rightly describes as the liminal and complex figure of Mary, who becomes even more complex in the context of Springsteen's oeuvre. Owen Cantrell's essay provides an apt deconstruction of Springsteen as a folk musician, resituating him with respect to tradition and authenticity. He makes a convincing argument that Springsteen is not promulgating the folk singer's "cult of authenticity" but rather is thinking about the present while offering an invitation to the richness of history through folk music. Sara Gulgas' essay on punk criticism of Springsteen is likewise a standout in this volume, as it effortlessly integrates cogent musical analysis into a well-written and fascinating comparative study.

Editor William Wolff is clear from the outset that *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture* is intended as both an interdisciplinary volume and as an effort to merge scholarly and fan discourses. To that end, it is well-curated, with essays grouped sensibly into broad thematic areas and with the inclusion of both fan scholarship and contributions from non-academic writers; and it certainly seems "interdisciplinary" as advertised, with contributors running the gamut from sociology, psychology, English, digital pedagogy, women's studies, musicology, and so on. With respect to the volume's interdisciplinarity, my chief concern would be that it is very nearly non-disciplinary, insofar as many of the contributors seem to occupy nebulous, if not outright mysterious, niches within the academy. As a musicologist, moreover, I take issue with the editor's claim that this book – nominally about popular music – includes much of anything that could be considered musical scholarship. Indeed, for a book about music, there is almost no discussion of 'the music itself.' Springsteen's songs are sonic artifacts, not

merely delivery systems for lyrics or flotsam within a socio-cultural nebula of emerging subjectivities and competing discourses of power. Some readers may find it frustrating to read a 221-page book entitled *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music* only to find no sustained discussion of the songs as musical objects. Pamela Moss's essay is emblematic of this particular concern. In addition to its jargon-laden and unwieldy prose—it contains, for example, the non-sentence “Discourses circulating around the masculinized subject, such as domination, love, heterosexuality, and security, support and reproduce the masculinized subject positioning affixed to the humanist knowledge that Springsteen as a songwriter is located” (83)—it is almost entirely about theory, and I struggled through it waiting to read something substantial about Springsteen and his music. I take issue, too, with what seems to me the gratuitous inclusion of Holly Casio's pretentious, faux-typeset, fanzine-style essay in this volume: it epitomizes the lack of objectivity of fans/fan scholars, and reinforces the tendency towards hagiography in Springsteen Studies. It is jarringly out of place in a scholarly book on popular music, and especially in a book about a songwriter of Springsteen's gravitas and import.

As I noted at the beginning of this review, editor William Wolff asserts in his introduction that this volume is a timely addition to the “conversation” about Springsteen and popular music, given that now is the moment at which the Boss has “reinforced his status of global superstar and achieved the iconic status of ‘observer of America’” (6). This is an inauspicious start, and I fear Wolff has missed the boat by several years, if not decades, with this claim. Eric Alterman's 1999 book, for instance, already and compellingly made that claim, namely that Springsteen had become an “inescapable icon of American culture” as early as the mid-

1980s, immediately following the *Born in the U.S.A.* tour.² Jimmy Iovine boldly re-inscribed this iconic identity nearly 15 years ago, including Springsteen in a triumvirate with Elvis and Bob Dylan – going so far as to suggest that Springsteen was the apotheosis of Dylan and Elvis – in a 2003 *Rolling Stone* article.³ Over ten years ago, Melissa Etheridge lionized Springsteen as an American icon in an essay for *Razor Magazine*, tying his iconicity to even earlier albums (ca. *Born to Run*).⁴ All of this is just to say that Wolff's suggestion that Springsteen is at this moment somehow especially timely seems stale; to suggest he is emergent as an American icon – an “observer of America” – in 2017 is absurd.

Ultimately, this collection could easily and more honestly be renamed *Bruce Springsteen and Contemporary Culture*, as the Boss's music is often given second billing (at best) to the social, cultural, and political issues linked to Springsteen's oeuvre. When the volume focuses on the literary aspects of his songs, and specifically on rhetoric in the final section of the book, the results are often fruitful and fascinating, but there is such a thing as musical rhetoric: its history goes back centuries. Eric Rawson's essay on “the rhetoric of voicelessness” in this final section is particularly ironic in this regard: the author wants to address the moments in Springsteen's songs when the Boss's rhetoric switches from the lexical – words – to the non-lexical – i.e., when language becomes (musical) sound; when language becomes purely sound-as-meaning in the form of vocables ranging from shouts, moans, and wails to “hey, hey” or “la la” – but instead, Rawson ends up crafting a verbose essay that says almost nothing specific about these sounds and with almost nothing in his bibliography relating to the

² Eric Alterman, *It Ain't No Sin to Be Glad You're Alive: The Promise of Bruce Springsteen* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1999).

³ Jimmy Iovine, “American Icons: Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan & Bruce Springsteen” *Rolling Stone*, May 15, 2003.

⁴ Melissa Etheridge, “American Idol: Bruce Springsteen,” *Razor Magazine*, May 7, 2005.

materiality of the voice or the function and meaning of vocables (Roland Barthes's seminal essay "The Grain of the Voice" would have been a likely starting point for any study of a performer's 'voice').

Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture includes enough decent essays to recommend it to pop music scholars, but surely, when studying a musician-bard of such range and influence as Bruce Springsteen, a deeper investment in the relationships between words and sounds – of course, as part of an holistic approach that also includes reception history, the socio-political elements of songs and performance, biography, etc. – is warranted?

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For the Grace of God and the Grace of Man: The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen by Azzan Yadin-Israel (Highland Park, NJ: Lingua Press, 2016. 202 pages).

Contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor's magnum opus *A Secular Age* surveys the landscape of spirit and belief in Christendom from 1500 until today. It's a map of places, ideas, and practices in the lands that might be called the Rock and Roll Empire—that realm where music dominated popular culture for much of the second half of the twentieth century and where Bruce Springsteen ruled off and on for decades.

Taylor outlines a seismic shift in the role of religion in Christendom and asks what caused it:

[W]hy was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?

He describes a state of relative equilibrium within basic religious social units of individual, society, and the divine before the cusp of modernity in the sixteenth century. "Human agents [were] embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporate[d] the divine," Taylor says. But beginning around 1500, as a result of the natural evolution of corporate religion, various movements of religious reform, as well as the Enlightenment, relatively static relationships between people, society, and the divine were no longer stable if they continued to exist at all.

Individuals who had once been "porous" selves receptive to the influence of divine or supernatural forces and defined primarily by communal function and ritual as prescribed by tradition became "buffered" selves, protected by rationality, focused internally on their unique experience of the world. This new self compartmentalized each individual mind and body in distinction from the outer world—including traditional communal religion. Taylor describes this dramatic shift in basic forms of human meaning in Christendom with a single word: disenchantment.

His concepts of enchantment and disenchantment are derived from German sociologist Max Weber, a contemporary of Emile Durkheim, who in turn had borrowed the term from the German poet Friedrich Schiller. The “enchanted world” is defined by social imagination and energy animated by faith, superstition, magic, myth, and chains of tradition both written and oral that connected people to communal meaning within the predictable tensions of person, society, and the divine. The notion of disenchantment – a state of something missing, of longing for connection and being part of a greater whole while remaining alienated from both the divine and deep social roots should sound very familiar to anyone who has traced the themes of Bruce Springsteen’s work over the past decades. Indeed, perhaps more than any other rocker, Springsteen has taken on spiritual and cultural stasis of the last part of the twentieth century and pushed his audiences, the social landscape, and above all himself towards reenchantment, a one-man movement (with the help of a band) of spiritual renewal which both rejects and seeks tradition and embraces individual destiny and the necessity of community.

Springsteen’s wrestling with the divine, with theology, with issues of grace, justice, connection, purpose, sin, and community are familiar to students of religion generally as well as within Catholicism, where the same questions troubled Augustine and Aquinas and Sir Thomas Moore. According to Taylor, even in the confusion of a “secular age,” these are the raw materials for contemporary struggle for spiritual purpose and cohesion. And this quest for redemption in the secular age is the topic which Azzan Yadin-Israel explores admirably in his book *The Grace of God and the Grace of Man: The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen*.

Yadin-Israel, a scholar of the rabbinic culture and texts of the late Roman Empire, begins with a fine contextualization of the place of rock and roll in the study of contemporary religion. He calls upon a wide-ranging bibliography and an academic structure accessible to lay readers and does

well in showing rock and roll as continuous with poets and philosophers—particularly those in the nineteenth century—wrestling with religious sensibilities and with religious doubt. This is a route that many have travelled, a kind of traditions history of rock. Greil Marcus mastered this approach not only in his early work in *Mystery Train* (1975) but most cogently in his work on Bob Dylan. A small library of work on Springsteen has emerged in recent years as well, and Azzan-Yadin references it thoroughly and skillfully.

The case for Springsteen working with the same essential raw materials as other great America poets and thinkers, from Walt Whitman and William James to Woody Guthrie, makes sense for studying Springsteen, and, probably—thanks to the tutelage of his manager Jon Landau and Springsteen’s own self-education—is a good way for understanding how Springsteen conceives of himself as part of the religious canon of the secular age. Beyond theory, though, millions can attest that Springsteen’s marathon concerts, the tenor of much of his lyrical work, and how he thinks about his role as a musician all engage transformation within the “church” of rock and roll where he is the highest ranking clergy.

Once Yadin-Israel outlines the historical and sociological landscape where this mission can take place, he lays out a plan to explain how Springsteen charted this landscape though passionate, very public trial and error for nearly fifty years, Springsteen’s “non-traditional, immanent path to redemption” (*Grace*, 49). Then Yadin-Israel turns to a chronological survey of Springsteen’s life through 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town*—essentially the age of Springsteen crying out and feeling powerless, even if empowered, by music and love and his band; for the most part, he is suffering and running away because of all of the alienation he feels.

Next, in thematic chapters focusing on sin, grace and redemption, and the struggle within (personal struggle), Yadin-Israel offers close readings of songs with some attention to both historical context and

Springsteen's personal circumstances. The style of the scholarship, however, is classical close readings, a focus on the text from the inside out which offers many thoughtful commentaries even if the chronological flow of the book is interrupted.

Finally, Azzan-Yadin plies his trade as a student and teacher of midrash – the ancient Jewish art of interpretation of sacred text – on select portions of the Springsteen canon. He looks for biblical references and themes and watches Springsteen attempt to spin, unravel, or understand them. There are many moments of subtle, generous listening to Springsteen's lyrics. These are poetic twists on poetry – though often not Springsteen's best because, indeed, when Springsteen works as a commentator, songs can sound forced. The same can be true of Yadin-Israel or anyone trying to squeeze further meaning from lyrics. At times, the interpretations of Springsteen on the Bible and Yadin-Israel on Springsteen fall flat.

But still, this is a thoughtful, well-written, colorful, and deeply researched book, useful for scholars who care about rock critique, students of religion who care about the world as it is today, and, of course, anyone who loves the music of Bruce Springsteen. It adds to a body of scholarship that has come to appreciate rock and roll as an important liberation movement even as rock's social impact has faded dramatically over the course of Springsteen's career.

If the world before the Age of Enlightenment was enchanted by rich traditions of religious meaning, community, and the "porous self," the Rock and Roll Empire addressed the abuses of overly dominant religious authority and the longing of disenchantment.

"We can *feel*" – wrote Rudolph Otto, a theologian of the first part of the twentieth century who also innovated broad new horizons for thinking about religion and modernity – "without being able to give it a clear conceptual expression." And in the end, both as a kind of theology to rescue

communities and *communitas* and to engender grand largeness of feeling, Springsteen is preaching the feeling, why it matters, *and* what he thinks should be done about it. He is, as Yadin-Israel points out rightly, a freely feeling Romantic and, despite his doubts, a new kind of secular age believer.

Yadin-Israel's scholarship takes aim at what Springsteen meant in taking on these issues, finding lovely readings of particular songs, strong theoretical context for continuing study of Springsteen's work, and a refreshing review of how the artist has grown and struggled with themes of religion in a secular age that continues to shape society as a whole. He also affirms Springsteen as an artist – even a kind of prophet – both of his times and also calling out for something deeper, more connected, and even redemptive in future times in this world, lest we wait for such changes in the world to come.

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