

Springsteen & I: A Documentary Analysis of Springsteen's Fan Base

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Abstract

Music is an international code of interaction which allows listeners to enhance their knowledge of other countries and cultures. This paper offers a study of music fandom, of the ways in which people form special, sustained attachments to musical performers or genres. The focus for this study is to analyze the 2013 documentary, *Springsteen & I* through the lens of studies of fandom. This documentary is comprised of fan clips and, using this movie as a cultural artifact, we examine the documentary to see how Springsteen fans, both in the United States and internationally, employ their activities and experiences with the music of this artist.

Fans of Bruce Springsteen are committed, ardent, and passionate about both the man and his songs. While music enthusiasts typically embrace the artists they admire, hardcore Springsteen fans border somewhere between adulation and veneration. The level of fandom is not unique to Springsteen. Indeed, music is one of the most widely used forms of human communication, with the ability to transcend boundaries and generate new subgroups and subcultures. Fans of particular music artists become part of a culture of individuals who follow that musician or expert observers of the artists' canon and concert performances. In his ethnographic study of Springsteen fans, Daniel Cavicchi defined music fandom as "the ways in which people form special, sustained attachments to musical performers or genres."² Springsteen's fans come from all

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² Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

walks of life and all corners of the globe. Rather than simply the recipients of the gospel of Springsteen, his fans embody John Fiske's description of fan culture, particularly the fact that fans "are active producers and users of such cultural capital."³

In fact, Springsteen helps his fans grow as individuals, especially through the framework of emotional appeals. The emotions of audience members, especially during Springsteen's concert performances, help influence the feelings of those around them through emotional contagion, which is the process by which emotions are transferred from one person to another.⁴ Daniel Goleman showed the importance of emotions explaining that, "We catch feelings from one another as though they were some kind of social virus."⁵ This notion resonates with the purpose of this study, which is to explore how Springsteen fans share their emotional connection to Springsteen with other members of his audience.

This article examines fans' relationship with Springsteen through the 2013 documentary *Springsteen & I*, using the film as a rhetorical artifact which, though only including a miniscule percentage of Springsteen fans worldwide, provides insight into fans' general relationship with him and his music. We begin by discussing our theoretical approach, followed by a section highlighting some of the previous research on Springsteen. Then this article explores the rationale behind the making of the documentary and we review several video clips. While the popular

³ John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* ed. In Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 33.

⁴ Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppa, and Richard L. Rapson, "Emotional Contagion," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 2 no. 3 (1993): 96-99.

⁵ Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam, 2006), 115.

image of the prototypical Springsteen fan is a white American male, Springsteen has a passionate fan base of female devotees whose perspective we examine in the following section. Thereafter, we explore how nationality shapes fan responses to Springsteen's music, including analysis of fan reaction to live performances, participation in the concert experience, and narratives that aid in understanding the identification between Springsteen and his fan culture.

Methodology

This study involves a combination of rhetorical criticism and thick description, which assists us in analyzing divergent fan voices contained within the film. Rhetorical criticism is an excellent tool to study the selected clips, as it allows for recognition of the rhetorical potential of the video excerpts, suggesting inferences about the connection of Springsteen to his unique cultural community. Valerie Renegar and Jennifer Malkowski defined rhetorical criticism as "the process of examining a text to see how it works communicatively."⁶ We look at how the movie works as a text. What impact does it have upon the viewer and critic? Examining different voices within the film through a rhetorical lens enables an illustration of the importance of Springsteen's music to the lives of his fans. Since viewers get a first-hand glimpse into Springsteen's influence on the life of his fans, it is important to expound on their lived experience with his music. Along with rhetorical criticism, we study these clips as a form of ethnography. Clifford Geertz defined

⁶ Valerie R. Renegar and Jennifer A. Malkowski, "Rhetorical and Textual Approaches to Communication," In *21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook* ed. William F. Eadie (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2009), 51.

ethnography as thick description, saying, “Doing ethnography is like trying to read a manuscript ... written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but transient examples of shaped behavior.”⁷ These video narratives offer their own “thick description” of fans’ experiences with lyrics, music, and concerts. These voices arrived to the documentary makers unfiltered and unedited and were specifically chosen to be included because of the unique way they describe connections to Springsteen’s music. The film offers unique perspective on the identification between Springsteen and his fans.

In particular, the film focuses on Springsteen’s emotional importance for his fans, specifically the fact that the experience of Springsteen is transactional. Springsteen does not simply preach while his fans listen. Audience members experience the music and concert performances and share their encounters with other members of the Springsteen community. For many fans, immersion into the music, lyrics, and performances, result in spontaneous pleasure. Devout fans become expert spectators and take part in the communication process between the artist and his listening audience.

Previous Scholarship

A number of works have endeavored to explore Springsteen fans and their relationship to the artist. For example, Cavicchi explored how Springsteen’s audiences are connected through his songs, lyrics, and concert experiences, providing an in-depth ethnographic study. In a book released just three years before

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.

Springsteen & I, Linda Randall also used an ethnographic approach, as she examines how Springsteen fans have created a global community that provides emotional and material support to other members of his fan base.⁸ In addition to studies of Springsteen fans, a growing number of works have looked at the relationships between fans and other musicians. Previous studies have explored the fan-artist connection through case studies on Elvis Presley, Kiss, the Rolling Stones, and Michael Jackson.⁹

However, new studies are needed to achieve a more enhanced understanding of the ways in which fans produce meaning as a cultural community. This work differs from previous studies in that the documentary shows emotional and nonverbal variables not present in static reports. According to Ronald Adler and Russell Proctor, “Nonverbal communication performs a third valuable social function: conveying emotions that we may be unwilling or unable to express” and that “it is impossible to study spoken language without paying attention to its nonverbal dimensions.”¹⁰ *Springsteen & I* offers a unique opportunity to explore new dimensions of fans’ connection with Springsteen and analyze how describe their fandom.

⁸ Linda K. Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall: Community and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010).

⁹ Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Images* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Steve Bailey, *Media Audiences and Identity: Self-Construction in the Fan Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Andrea Baker, “Mick or Keith: Blended Identity of Online Rock Fans,” *Identity in the Information Society*, 2, no. 1 (2009): 7-21; Matt Hills, “Michael Jackson Fans on Trial? “Documenting” Emotivism and Fandom in Wacko about Jacko.” *Social Semiotics* 17, no. 4 (2007): 459-19.

¹⁰ Ronald B. Adler and Russell F. Proctor II, *Looking Out, Looking In* (Boston, MA: Cengage, 2017 [1974]), 213.

The Documentary

Springsteen & I was produced using video and photo submissions from around the world in order to provide unfiltered access to the voices of Springsteen's fans. Following a call for submissions, fans sent in over 300 hours of footage, which were eventually edited down into a 77-minute film. Director Baillie Walsh, a British music video and film director who has worked extensively with music artists such as Boy George, Kylie Minogue, and Oasis, collaborated on the documentary with producer Ridley Scott, who has an extended history of television and motion picture projects. The result, according to Donna Luff and Lorraine Mangione's review for *BOSS*, is "an inspiring funny, poignant, and creative array of videos showing fans discussing their feelings for Springsteen, their encounters with him, as well as his place in their lives."¹¹ Though the videos are diverse in their content, they consistently touch on several themes: Springsteen fans as a cultural community, the importance of both individual and collective experiences at live concerts, how gender shapes Springsteen fandom, and Springsteen's global appeal.

The documentary begins with footage of Springsteen introducing himself and his band to an audience at a concert in England. From the opening moments of the show, Springsteen highlights the importance of the audience: "We are here for one reason: because you are here." This communal framing shows the respect and reciprocity between Springsteen and his audience as Springsteen frames the concert as a journey shared by the audience, the artist, and the band. The documentary goes on to document that

¹¹ Donna Luff and Lorraine Mangione, "Review: *Springsteen and I*," *BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), 125.

journey. Fan after fan recounts how Springsteen's music represents a daily presence in their lives. Many describe moments when Springsteen's music or live performance assisted them through difficult life experiences. Springsteen has served the same function as family members or close personal friends: his ardent fans feel as if they know him and that he knows them. Jo Littler posited that this desire to understand the inner person

informs the way we connect to celebrities, whether as abstract friends, as offering us glimpses of what we would like to be; of lifestyles we wish to inhabit, spaces of impossible longing, characteristics against which we measure ourselves, or mechanisms through which we bond with other people.¹²

Springsteen's large fan base may connect with him in any or all of these ways, and, though most members of this fan community are not familiar with one another, they are bonded by the commonality of their connection to Springsteen's music.

One video segment centers on a middle-aged man, driving in his car, discussing why he liked Springsteen's lyrics and music. He explains that "Bruce" – referring to the artist by his first name, a mark of familiarity – "has always made me feel like I was going through someone's family photo album, and looking at their life. Smelling their coffee and feeling their sadness and triumphs." As he concludes his statement, the man begins to sob. This clip poignantly illustrates the emotional impact that even a description of Springsteen's music can have for listeners. In particular, showing a man in tears, overcome by emotion as he tries to describe his

¹² Jo Littler, "Making Fame Ordinary: Intimacy, Reflexivity and 'Keeping it Real'," *Mediactive* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2003), 5.

feelings for an artist he may have never met personally, dispels the stereotype of the stoic masculine male. Men who readily share their emotions have traditionally been seen as weak and feminine. In fact, research on emotional expression indicates that men mask their emotions more than women, which leads to the stereotypical notion that men should not share their emotions, especially tears, which would be seen as a major weakness.¹³ Yet in this instance, the director is not apprehensive about showing male emotionality, and the fan's reaction appears heartfelt and genuine, supported by both his facial expressions and bodily movements. This video clip plays on the stereotype of male stoicism to illustrate the depth of the connection between Springsteen and his fans. Springsteen's music is so powerful, *Springsteen & I* implies, and that it can make grown men weep.

The Female Fan

Another recurring theme in the documentary is the voice of the female Springsteen fan. These fans, we contend, offer a particular relationship with Springsteen, often, though not always, incorporating sexual attraction. For instance, in one video, a middle-aged woman discusses her experience of seeing Bruce Springsteen in concert when she was in ninth grade. The story was very detailed and presented in a way that could parallel an account of a sexual experience, with the individual perceiving the subsequent changes she noted in herself after the event. She explains that her experience at a Springsteen concert

¹³ Adrienne W. Kunkel and Brant R. Burleson, "Assessing Explanations for Sex Differences in Emotional Support: A Test of the Different Cultures and Skill Specialization Accounts," *Human Communication Research* 25, No. 3.1 (1999): 307-340,

became something bigger and more powerful than anything I understood or knew yet, in my young body. I grew a few years and a few inches. But it was like the genie had been let out of the bottle, and for me there was no going back. I think I cried, I must have. I was ripped out of my skin. I was ripped out of my senses. I look around and there are men around me smiling. I am soaked to the skin, and I am wearing red satin.

This quote is significant for a number of reasons. First, a major epiphany in her life occurs at a Springsteen concert, which she presents as a coming-of-age moment. Second, her growth is both physical and emotional. One study suggests that either positive or negative emotions come primarily from the label we assign to some physical symptoms at the time.¹⁴ In this instance, her memory of an earlier time in her life signifies her reaction to her personal experience at her first Springsteen concert. Her response to the event served as a catalyst in her growth as a woman from both a physical and emotional frame of reference. In addition, tones of sexuality permeate her story. Specifically, her account seems to say she is leaving behind her little girl status, that she is becoming a woman, with Springsteen serving as the catalyst. This clip emphasizes the growth of one's individual self as it relates to a concert experience in the life of a teenager, now explained from an adult perspective. Luff and Mangione emphasized the importance of these experiences, explaining that the film argues that "Springsteen is the facilitator of self-development."¹⁵

¹⁴ Phillip G. Zimbardo, *Shyness: What It Is, What to do About It?* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

¹⁵ Luff and Mangione, "Review," 126.

Though he had been involved in music for well over a decade, Springsteen became a mega star in 1984 with the release of his seventh studio album, *Born in the U.S.A.*, which would eventually result in sales of over 15 million units in the United States alone and double that worldwide. The album spawned seven hits, including the chart-topping, pop-oriented “Dancing in the Dark.” The song’s accompanying video showed Springsteen performing the song in concert, and toward the conclusion inviting a female audience member (Courteney Cox) to dance with him on stage. This scenario has often played out in reality, becoming a staple of the relationship between Springsteen and his female fans. This is evidenced in the documentary at a concert in England when Rachel brings a sign to a Springsteen concert asking him to allow her to dance on stage with him during his performance of “Dancing in the Dark.” She described the fulfillment of her dream in this way:

I had my “I will be your Courteney Cox” sign. I had my Courteney Cox tee shirt on. And then [my friend] James said to me, ‘Rachel, come on and get on my shoulders.’ And I was like, ‘I don’t want to.’ ... [He said] ‘come on, you never know if we are going to see Bruce again.’ Literally, a couple of seconds into the song, Bruce spotted me, and started laughing. And he was pointing at me, and I was waving at him. Next thing I know I get put on the big screen with my sign. ... The next thing I know is I am being pushed through a sea of black bodies. ... I am dancing with Bruce Springsteen.

The video of the concert accompanies her narrative, which includes her dancing on stage with Springsteen, playing a role beyond just spectator, participating with the band in the event. This type of

reciprocity between Springsteen and his audience has become expected and endears him to his fan community. Linda Randall expounded on this point, explaining, "Fans know they are in the company of other acolytes, and trust is established (to varying degrees) around this fact; the concert hall or stadium becomes a place filled with like-minded individuals 'tramps' all joined in mutual admiration and trust."¹⁶ In Rachel's narrative, she was assisted and cheered on by the Springsteen community. During live performances, the film contends, there is just a thin line between artist and audience. All attendees, including Springsteen himself, are participating members of the larger community.

The actual involvement of Springsteen in fans' lives is prevalent throughout the movie. In Rachel's case, she had a chance to dance with him onstage. For others, Springsteen can change their lives without being physically present in them. For example, Jane from Denmark states a claim of kinship with Springsteen:

I'd like to say something about me and Bruce. We have been friends ever since 1985, though he does not know me. Every day when I go home from work I hear his records in my car. I just love listening to his music.

Whether in concert or on cassette, Springsteen remains a constant presence in his fans' lives. In particular, Springsteen's presence facilitates individual growth, whether personal or sexual, or simply offers a comforting daily presence.

Audience Participation

Non-Americans fans have become an important component of Springsteen's fan community for decades. Springsteen's first ever

¹⁶ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 24.

live performance outside of the United States took place in London on November 18, 1975, a show arranged by Columbia Records to widen his appeal. His premier concert at the Hammersmith Odeon went a long way toward solidifying his connection with the European audience. In the liner notes for the DVD recording of the concert, Springsteen wrote, "It was the show that put us on the map in England and began a long and beautiful relationship with our fans overseas." In 1999, Springsteen noted the importance of his European audience with whom he felt he "really connected." "The greatest thing that I did was go back in the '80s and to continue to go back. It has been the center for an intense interest in the work that I've done."¹⁷ In fact, previous research has suggested that Springsteen's international fan base is more demonstrative in concert than are fans in the United States. Randall observed that the "Euro fans tend to be more enthusiastic and loud, waving and clapping in a hypnotic, synchronized motion... I was assured that the German audience ... would make American audiences pale in comparison."¹⁸ The documentary includes a portion of a concert performance by Springsteen in 2012 at the Hard Rock Calling in London, and the clip shows the large number of young Springsteen fans overseas. As clips of performances in the United States make clear, Springsteen's American audience is aging, but elsewhere in the world his music has resonated with a younger and more passionate fan base.

An implicit argument of the documentary is the similarity between fan-Springsteen relationship in the United States and that

¹⁷ Bruce Springsteen interview with Mark Hagen, *Mojo* 1999 in *Talk About a Dream: The Essential Interviews of Bruce Springsteen* eds. Christopher Phillips and Louis P. Masur (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 246.

¹⁸ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 46.

same relationship for fans in other countries. Language or national boundaries are not an impediment to connecting with the artist. A mid-thirties male fan from Denmark related his experience of witnessing Springsteen as both a nine-year-old boy and again as a 21-year-old. He described his boyhood experience as a “great day” and “priceless,” indicating he recorded the entire three-and-a-half-hour show on cassette tapes that he kept for years. As an adult, he attended Springsteen’s reunion tour with the reunited E Street Band on June 26, 1999, in the same venue in which he saw the show as a young boy. It was another meaningful experience:

It was one of these nights to remember. I remember during the encore of the show, Bruce decides to play “Blood Brothers,” beautiful song, beautiful, beautiful song. During the last verse of the song the guy next to me, I don’t know his name, I haven’t seen him before, and I haven’t seen him since. He puts his arms around me. All of a sudden this big guy is having his arm around me, it was just one of those moments, where it didn’t seem weird at all.

Cavicchi helps explain this fan’s experience, arguing that “Music is not a product to be consumed but rather a performance to be experienced.”¹⁹ This man explains his experience with both depth and specificity. Within the context of the song, it became permissible for personal space to be violated and the excitement of the concert experience was spontaneously shared with another member of the Springsteen community. This brief narrative illustrates in a particular instance how the man becomes part of the concert performance through his unexpected interaction with another Springsteen fan. Though he was not onstage, his presence

¹⁹ Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 89.

in the arena brought him closer to Springsteen and to Springsteen's music than he could have come listening at home by himself. The documentary shows Springsteen overcome with emotion while performing "Blood Brothers," and the fan's story offers an apt comparison, as he hugs a stranger while an emotive Springsteen and his band members clasp hands together. The documentary implies that the relationship between fans, even those who do not know each other, is akin to Springsteen's relationship with his band, with whom he has performed for years. Such is the power of Springsteen's music, that it can turn strangers into emotional companions.

American Fan Experiences

Such fan experiences are not limited to overseas audience. The prominence of signs brought to concerts by audience members suggests an important interaction between Springsteen and his fans. It is common for concert-goers to use signs to request specific Springsteen songs or ask him to cover tunes from other performers that he may have enjoyed playing as a young artist. At a Springsteen concert in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, about 10 years ago, one of the authors of this article saw an audience member holding a sign asking the band to play Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone." Springsteen complied with a memorable performance. Like virtually every artist, Springsteen has an organized set list for each concert. However, unlike those who maintain the same structure throughout a tour, Springsteen varies his list considerably from one performance to the next, sometimes (as in the case above) responding to signs and song requests from the audience.

Fans at Springsteen concerts around the world use signs, primarily to request particular songs or to ask for an opportunity to join him on stage. In allowing audience members to be a part of the performance narrative, Springsteen strengthens emotional connections with his fan base. This is discussed by Randall, who writes, "The notion of Bruce understanding who his fans are, what they are going through, is a strand that runs through many fan stories and no doubt accounts for much of the emotional attachment many fans feel."²⁰ Fans believe that Springsteen understands them and their struggles. They believe that by making his audience part of the concert experience he is providing a service to his audience. By bringing them onstage, for instance, he is giving them a chance for their dream to come true.

This is evident in a video segment centered on an audience member who had just experienced a relationship breakup. The man's sign read, "Hi Bruce—I just got dumped—'I'm Goin' Down.'" Noting the sign, Springsteen took the time to encourage the man and eventually welcomed him on stage for a hug before launching into the song, "I'm Goin' Down," a song about a breakup. The interaction went as follows:

Springsteen: "Hi Bruce. I just got dumped." We all know what that is like. Where is my man, right there? What happened, bro?

Fan: She didn't think I was spending enough time with her.

Springsteen: You probably weren't. What, can you get a hug? Come on up here. It's gonna be OK. It's gonna be alright. Don't worry about a thing. I got dumped many times myself. Oh, they are regretting it now. That's right, she be

²⁰ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 90.

regretting it. That's right, they left too soon man, too soon. They left that record company advance money. They left too soon.

While this interaction is comedic, it also indicates the identification between Springsteen and a member of his fan community. As Kenneth Burke writes, "You persuade a man insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his."²¹ Through his interaction with this young man, Springsteen indicates that the young man's experience is not unique. He shares that even he, a famous rock star, has gone through broken relationships, implying that perhaps this fan's former girlfriend will regret her decision, just as his ex-girlfriends regret theirs, thereby equating himself with his fan. The audience thoroughly relishes the interaction, identifying with Bruce as one of them even though his success has afforded him a lifestyle far beyond what most of them enjoy. But most of all, the message is that Springsteen is like his fans. He has experienced heartbreak himself, understands what his fan is going through, and wants to offer counsel – however brief – for his struggles.

Conclusion

This study has emphasized the impact Bruce Springsteen's music has had on his diverse fan base through the divergent perspectives established in the video segments highlighted within the documentary *Springsteen & I*. As Luff and Mangione write, "*Springsteen & I* depicts the Springsteen fan experience as a journey

²¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 49.

of finding oneself through his music.”²² Each clip is different: in some, individuals described incidents of personal growth—often life-changing events—derived through his music or the concert experience. For others, Springsteen is the catalyst of moments of connection with other fans. The film provides a miscellany of individual experiences that, taken together, provide an understanding of the impact Springsteen has made and continues to make today.

Understanding his concerts and music as a shared experience indicates Springsteen’s influence upon the lives of his fans. The fan videos meld verbal narrative with raw emotion and other non-verbal communication. Viewers gain a clearer understanding of the participant’s dedication to Springsteen’s music and what value fans get from their fandom, specifically faith, drive, vision, and a sense of community. Yet, while the videos highlight multiple voices, including female, male, and international fans, one voice that was notably absent was that of people of color, an issue raised in previous research by Cavicchi. This is an area of study that needs further development: assessments of the relationship between Springsteen and nonwhite audiences. Furthermore, the film speaks to the value of film as a text in ethnographic research when compared with transcribed interviews. Researchers in the future could use this template when studying differing fan cultures. This type of approach will allow future researchers to study the emotion inherent in fandom and the developmental bounds that unite fan communities.

²² Luff and Mangione, “Review,” 126.