

# Another Side of “Born in the U.S.A.”: Form, Paradox, and Rhetorical Indirection

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## Abstract

“Born in the U.S.A.” has been one of the most important and controversial songs of Bruce Springsteen’s career. For some listeners, the song is a pro-America anthem; for others, it is a scathing commentary on American government and society. This paper challenges both of those views, arguing that the song’s apparently contradictory musical form and lyrical content interact to produce a collective rhetorical effect. In this view, “Born in the U.S.A.” is not an argument for a specific political ideology but rather a multilayered and multidirectional interrogation of the paradoxes of national belonging.

“Patriotism tends toward a paradox...”  
—Steve Johnston<sup>1</sup>

“Born in the U.S.A.” is in some ways the most important song of Bruce Springsteen’s career. It dominated the airwaves throughout the mid-1980s; it was the driving force behind the *Born in the U.S.A.* album, which vaulted Springsteen into mega-stardom; and it is the song that most listeners in the United States and around the world associate with the artist. Additionally, even though “Born in the U.S.A.” is probably not the favorite song of many Springsteen fans, it is the song that has aroused the most controversy and discord among devoted fans, casual listeners,

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Johnston, *The Truth About Patriotism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 227.

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music writers, and even politicians. Because of these debates and the strong feelings attached to them, “Born in the U.S.A.” has become a touchstone that fans use to define themselves and other listeners in relation to Springsteen and his music: Do you know what the song is really about? Do you know about the various misinterpretations and misuses? How do you assess the *Born in the U.S.A.* period in the context of Springsteen’s career? To borrow a bit of Bourdieuan social theory, answers to these questions serve as a kind of cultural capital that places listeners in Springsteenian social space; the right answers earn cultural capital, while the wrong ones diminish worth. Examining some of the competing discourses around “Born in the U.S.A.,” including varying interpretations of the song, is one of the goals of this paper. By analyzing these arguments, I aim to identify and problematize assumptions behind some of the key positions. Beyond this meta-analysis, though, I want to propose a way of thinking about “Born in the U.S.A.” that draws on assumptions from my own academic field, rhetorical studies, but which has broader reach. Rather than another interpretation of the song’s specific meaning, my perspective focuses on *how* the song means whatever it means – or in more rhetorical terms, how the song argues whatever it argues. To this extent, I am most interested in illuminating some of the mechanisms through which the song creates a rhetorical effect for listeners. The argument I will develop is that “Born in the U.S.A.” functions according to a paradoxical juxtaposition of form (musical delivery) and content (lyrics) to create “rhetorical indirection,” a term I borrow from Jason Ingram.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, I argue that this

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Ingram, “Plato’s Rhetoric of Indirection: Paradox as Site and Agency of Transformation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 40:3 (2007): 293-310. The term was also

structure and the accompanying rhetorical paradox it produces are precisely what make the song one of the most enigmatic recordings from Springsteen's catalog. Beyond this, I propose that the paradoxical structure of "Born in the U.S.A." offers a generative heuristic for thinking about Springsteen's larger artistic output and public persona, both of which have been marked by paradoxes since at least the mid-1980s, when *Born in the U.S.A.* was released, and perhaps even since the mid-1970s, when he first began developing some of the key themes that continue to define his work.

### Arguing "Born in the U.S.A.": Right, Left, and Neither

Arguments around "Born in the U.S.A." and *Born in the U.S.A.* began in the summer of 1984, shortly after the album's release. Historical narratives of the song and album typically focus on a September 1984 newspaper piece by conservative columnist George Will, who wrote about attending a Springsteen concert at the invitation of members of Springsteen's entourage. In the piece, Will made the following claims: "I have not got a clue about Springsteen's politics, if any, but flags get waved at his concerts when he sings songs about hard times. ... [T]he recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful affirmation: Born in the U.S.A.!"<sup>3</sup> These and other

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used by Maurice Natanson in, for example, "The Arts of Indirection," in *Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Literature*, ed. Don M. Burks (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1978), 35-47. More recently, Gerard Hauser employs the term extensively in a chapter of *Prisoners of Conscience: Moral Vernaculars of Political Agency* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 99-121.

<sup>3</sup> George Will, "A Yankee-Doodle Springsteen," *New York Daily News*, September 13, 1984.

comments in Will's piece constituted what Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm describe as the "first shot in the Springsteen wars."<sup>4</sup> Will's ignorance of Springsteen's politics was, in itself, enough to incense fans, many of whom identified strongly with the songwriter's increasingly pointed critiques of American social structure, particularly through his depictions of working-class characters who could not find a place for themselves in post-industrial America. The end result of Will's positive assessment of Springsteen, however, was much greater. He encouraged Ronald Reagan's reelection team to refer to Springsteen on the campaign trail, so on September 19, 1984, Reagan made the following comments during a stump speech in Hammonton, New Jersey: "America's future rests in a thousand dreams inside your hearts. It rests in the message of hope in songs of a man so many young Americans admire—New Jersey's own Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about."<sup>5</sup> Reagan's use of Springsteen's name was by no means sanctioned, as Springsteen was anything but a Reagan supporter; indeed, in 1980, the day after Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter, Springsteen had gone on stage and called the results of the election "pretty frightening."<sup>6</sup> However, Springsteen did not react publicly

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<sup>4</sup> Jefferson R. Cowie, and Lauren Boehm, "Dead Man's Town: 'Born in the U.S.A.,' Social History, and Working-Class Identity," *American Quarterly* 58:2 (2006): 359.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Reagan-Bush Rally in Hammonton, New Jersey, September 19, 1984," *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed June 2014, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/91984c.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, Live in Tempe, Arizona, November, 5, 1980, bootleg recording; "Badlands" recording accessed June 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGoBcNXa3mM>

for a few days to Reagan's use of his name in 1984. Then, during a concert on September 22, after finishing a performance of "Atlantic City," he said this: "The President was mentioning my name the other day, and I kinda got to wondering what his favorite album musta been. I don't think it was the *Nebraska* album. I don't think he's been listening to this one," and then he launched into "Johnny 99," a folk tale about a laid-off auto-plant worker whose frustration leads to a drunken robbery, during which he murders a store clerk.<sup>7</sup>

If Will's comments were indeed "the first shot in the Springsteen wars" that resulted in Reagan's New Jersey speech, then Springsteen's observation that the president had not "been listening to this one" can be understood as his own direct contribution to the conversation. Clearly, the assumption behind his claim was that Reagan did not appreciate the extent to which he, through his lyrics, had been critiquing the American socioeconomic situation—one which presumably had resulted, at least to some degree or another, from Reagan's own policies. To this extent, the debate at that moment was about the profound socioeconomic changes that were taking place in America and Reagan's and Springsteen's competing assessments of those changes. Was the new America—Reagan's America—a place where individuals' dreams could flourish, or was it a place of profound desperation, as experienced by alienated workers, such as the protagonist of "Johnny 99"?

This ideological question about the state of America, however, did not remain central to the debates around "Born in the U.S.A."; rather, Springsteen's initial public response served as an

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<sup>7</sup> Dave Marsh, *Glory Days: Bruce Springsteen in the 1980s* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 263.

unambiguous gesture to Reagan and his people, and to any confused listeners, that they should not presume an association between him and the president's politics, regardless of how many American flags were being waved at his concerts. What developed in the months and years following was an effort by Springsteen fans and some music critics to emphasize what they heard as the true meaning of the song and album in response to the apparent misunderstandings. To this extent, the story about Reagan became a moralizing-aggrandizing tale for Springsteen fans in 1984-85, years of true Springsteen-mania, because it highlighted the extent to which listeners, including presumably many of the 13 million who bought *Born in the U.S.A.*, did not understand the album or the song, which Dave Marsh describes variously as "misinterpreted," "misconstrued," and "misappropriated."<sup>8</sup> Some years later, Eric Alterman offered a similar view on widespread perceptions of "Born in the U.S.A.," claiming that the song offered a prime example of the whole album's "lyric-melodic confusion" and that "millions of people heard exactly the opposite message of what Springsteen intended."<sup>9</sup> The general position that both Marsh and Alterman take here, that many listeners did not understand "Born in the U.S.A." or *Born in the U.S.A.*, is echoed in the commentaries of myriad writers. A few examples from the academic literature are illustrative: Bryan Garman argues that the "political intentions" of *Born in the U.S.A.* were "largely misunderstood," and claims that the musical form of "Born in the U.S.A." in its full rock version "removed some of the sting from the lyrics and opened the door for

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<sup>8</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, 200; 258.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Alterman, *It Ain't No Sin to be Glad You're Alive: The Promise of Bruce Springsteen* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1999), 156; 158.

manipulation"; Alan Rauch observes that "Born in the U.S.A." was not "the patriotic anthem that many in Springsteen's audience conceived it to be" and, similarly, that "[w]hile there is no question that the song was written to represent the voice of Vietnam veterans who are unemployed or who have been alienated, it is by no means an anthem"; Jason Stonerook calls the song "[h]orrendously misinterpreted by the masses as a patriotic anthem," arguing instead that the song constitutes "a scathing condemnation of an America that has left some citizens behind and alone."<sup>10</sup>

The shared, underlying thesis of these and other commentators has become *doxa* among Springsteen fans and writers, and, as noted earlier, it partly serves the function of determining whether or not one truly understands the artist.<sup>11</sup> However, the argument that "Born in the U.S.A." has been largely misunderstood or misinterpreted operates according to at least two problematic assumptions that I want to highlight here, even if I admit to being sympathetic to the argument as a response to a

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<sup>10</sup> Bryan Garman, "The Ghost of History: Bruce Springsteen, Woody Guthrie, and the Hurt Song," *Popular Music and Society* 20 (1996): 92; Alan Rauch, "Bruce Springsteen and the Dramatic Monologue," *American Studies* 29:1 (1988): 39; Jason P. Stonerook, "Springsteen's Search for Individuality and Community," in *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream*, eds. Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zolten, and Mark Bernhard (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2012), 222.

<sup>11</sup> Additional examples of similar perspectives can be found, among other places, in the following: Peter Ames Carlin, *Bruce* (Touchstone: New York, 2012), 316; Jason M. Bell and Jessica Bell, "Socrates the Sculptor, Springsteen the Singer," in *Bruce Springsteen and Philosophy*, eds. Randall E. Auxier and Doug Anderson (Open Court: Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois, 2008), 241-242; and from a fan's point of view in Daniel Cavicchi's ethnography, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press), 92, 116.

certain rhetorical situation—namely, Will’s and Reagan’s uses of Springsteen’s name and the explosion of Springsteen-mania in the mid-1980s. First, to call any piece of art *misinterpreted* is to assume that there might be right or wrong understandings of artworks; or, more pointedly, it is to assume that artworks hold specific meanings and that the role of an audience is to decipher or find those meanings. This is a popular and widespread belief about art, and lyric art in particular, but it is a position that has become theoretically tenuous in the wake of more than four decades of postmodern thought. Similarly, the notion that the meanings of artworks are somehow reflective of their creators’ intentions is specious if we accept the basic tenet that the ideological, discursive, and aesthetic expectations of audiences affect their interpretations of texts. Second, and more important for the argument I want to develop later in this paper, the ways of thinking about “Born in the U.S.A.” favored by many fans and writers clearly privilege the song’s lyrics over its music. In fact, in most versions of the argument, the music itself is never addressed, or, in the case of Alterman’s and Garman’s arguments, the music is described as a feature that distracts from the true meaning of the song. In this view, the earlier acoustic version of the song, which was recorded during the *Nebraska* sessions and appears on the 1998 *Tracks* collection, offers a truer, or perhaps purer, rendering of the song’s meaning, since there is no distraction of a rock band or the nearly screamed refrain of “Born in the U.S.A.” that might be misinterpreted as anthemic or as a “grand, cheerful affirmation” of America, as Will put it. Rather, on the acoustic version, Springsteen’s vocal delivery seems rough and muted, suggesting anger, frustration, and desolation—all of which dovetail with the



avored interpretation of the song's lyrics as a scathing critique of American state policies and socioeconomic structure.

In the second half of this paper, I will offer a more detailed response to the assumption that we might be able to divide a song's lyrics, or what I will call its *content*, from its musical delivery, or its *form*, grounding my position in assumptions from both rhetorical theory and discourses on popular music.<sup>12</sup> For now, though, I only want to emphasize that the idea that "Born in the U.S.A." has been misunderstood is a commonplace among Springsteen fans and many commentators. Furthermore, I want to propose that this argument has primarily served the rhetorical purpose of claiming, or perhaps re-claiming, Springsteen for those who have listened to him the most or the longest; or perhaps even more, for those who share his specific political convictions. As Steve Johnston puts it in a similar critique of Marsh's and Alterman's writing about *Born in the U.S.A.*: "[They] excoriate Will, of course, to exonerate Springsteen."<sup>13</sup> As Johnston suggests, though, and as I will argue later, the song opens itself to a range of more or less persuasive interpretations, including the one proposed by Will. To be clear, I am not claiming that Will's interpretation is fully convincing, but I do believe it accurately recognizes a particular rhetorical dimension of "Born in the U.S.A.," even if it strategically overlooks other dimensions. To this extent, Will's commentary can be

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<sup>12</sup> I acknowledge that creating a direct correspondence between the notions of form and content, and music and lyrics, respectively, is somewhat slippery. Lyrics themselves have form, and music can have content (or, at least this was the position of Liszt, Wagner, and other proponents of so-called "program music" in the second half of the nineteenth century). However, the basic distinction seems productive, and it does help highlight a limitation in many other analyses of Springsteen's work.

<sup>13</sup> Johnston, *The Truth About Patriotism*, 216.

understood as limited and one-dimensional. However, the favored reading among Springsteen fans and writers is equally limited and one-dimensional if from a different ideological perspective, because it, too, highlights only one aspect of the song, namely its lyrics or content.<sup>14</sup>

While the positions described above are the most prominent in the controversy over “Born in the U.S.A.” and *Born in the U.S.A.*, a handful of writers have offered more nuanced and theoretically complex positions, all of which treat the song and album as multi-dimensional. In Jim Cullen’s analysis, for example, “Born in the U.S.A.” can indeed be considered a patriotic song, even a “conservative” song, but its patriotism and conservatism are not those of Will and Reagan; rather, they harken back to earlier American ideals, and most pointedly to those of the 1930s, a period

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<sup>14</sup> A couple of clarifications are in order here. First, to be fair to George Will, his interpretation of “Born in the U.S.A.” emerged from what apparently was a single listening at a concert, during which he claims to have had cotton stuffed in his ears. Presumably, if he had delved deeper into the lyrics, he would have qualified some of the observations he made in his newspaper piece. Nonetheless, I do not know of a robust presentation of his argument—that the song is a powerful celebration of “the U.S.A.”—even though this conviction surely circulates in mainstream perception. Second, within the interpretation of “Born in the U.S.A.” as a uniformly critical song, there is often an effort to explain away the thundering refrain of the rock version as angry or ironic. For example, Carlin describes this version as displaying “shades of fury” (Carlin, *Bruce*, 294), while Eric Branscomb highlights the “irony” of the song, which he sees as “the mistreated veterans’ lament” (Eric Branscomb, “Literacy and a Popular Medium: the Lyrics of Bruce Springsteen,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27 [1993]: 39). Rauch, meanwhile, comments that the song’s protagonist is “[l]ost in his own America,” and that his “insistent repetition that he was ‘born in the U.S.A.’ is full of the ironic bitterness inherent in the fact that he has to say it at all.” (Rauch, “Springsteen and the Dramatic Monologue,” 39). As I will explore more closely later, describing the rock version’s refrain as ironic does not strike me as a well-supported position.

which Cullen calls Springsteen's "spiritual home," not least of all because of that era's celebration of "the common man."<sup>15</sup> In Elizabeth Bird's analysis of "Born in the U.S.A." and the period of Springsteen's career surrounding it, she notes that in the 1980s "Springsteen was becoming all things to everyone. Politically, his image was increasingly unclear."<sup>16</sup> She does not see this as a misunderstanding of some true message in his work; rather, she argues that the "potent, swirling brew of images and emotions" that were connected to *Born in the U.S.A.*, and not just the lyrics of the songs, meant that "people could inscribe any meaning they liked, or no meaning at all," which is exactly what they did.<sup>17</sup> In her final analysis, the apparently divergent messages that Springsteen presented to the public, including Springsteen's extensive use of the American flag and other iconography, allowed the artist to become a kind of postmodern floating signifier that circulated in the public sphere to be appropriated for a range of ideologies. Cowie and Boehm also offer a theoretically sophisticated reading of "Born in the U.S.A.," as they graft its competing "anthemic" and "desperate" qualities, or its "series of dualities," onto the developing story of working-class alienation in 1970s and 1980s America.<sup>18</sup> In short, they analyze the song as addressing both foreign and domestic "wars" – one in Vietnam, the other on the socioeconomic landscape in the United States, and perhaps most emblematically in the Rust Belt. For them, the song offers insight

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Cullen, *Bruce Springsteen: Born in the U.S.A. and the American Tradition* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 5-13.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Bird, "'Is that Me, Baby?' Image, Authenticity, and the Career of Bruce Springsteen," *American Studies* 35 (1994): 44.

<sup>17</sup> Bird, "Is that Me, Baby?," 49.

<sup>18</sup> Cowie and Boehm, "Dead Man's Town," 356, 359.

into “[t]he withering of the economic dimensions of class, the destruction and demoralization of the politics of place, the betrayal of institutions designed to protect workers, and the amplification and mobilization of cultural nationalism...”<sup>19</sup> Also, importantly, they see the full rock version of the song as the one that “manages to transcend simple partisanship in its use of art and history.”<sup>20</sup> In all, they claim that “[t]he artistic decision to juxtapose the song’s two contrasting dimensions ought to be central to any approach to understanding the essence of ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ The heart of the song rests at the intersection, not the selection, of its internal oppositions.”<sup>21</sup>

I concur with this claim, and following Cowie and Boehm—as well as, to some extent, Cullen, Bird, and Johnston—I see the song’s “two contrasting dimensions” as inherent to its structure and its effect as a rhetorical performance. Thus, rather than treating the rock version’s musical form as a distraction from the true meaning, I will use it, in conjunction with the lyrical content, as a way into understanding how “Born in the U.S.A.” employs an apparently paradoxical structure to create a particular rhetorical effect, one that I will describe as *rhetorical indirection*. To clarify, rhetorical indirection does not mean rhetorical confusion, because I do not see “Born in the U.S.A.” as a confused song; rather, the term describes a textual pedagogy through which a rhetor—that is, an orator or speaker, or even a writer—presents audiences with a range of possibilities “with no fixed answer nor a clear set of propositions to be applied dogmatically.”<sup>22</sup> This is not exactly a

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<sup>19</sup> Cowie and Boehm, “Dead Man’s Town,” 361-369; 373.

<sup>20</sup> Cowie and Boehm, “Dead Man’s Town,” 376.

<sup>21</sup> Cowie and Boehm, “Dead Man’s Town,” 361.

<sup>22</sup> Ingram, “Plato’s Rhetoric,” 294.

postmodern position, as the one proposed by Bird, according to which Springsteen and his work can take on nearly any meaning for anyone; rather, it is a position that highlights the way in which texts can strategically propose apparently divergent meanings in order to produce a particular kind of rhetorical effect.<sup>23</sup>

### **Rock as Rhetoric, Music as Form**

To treat popular music as rhetoric is not unique. Since at least the middle of the twentieth century, it has become commonplace to treat all kinds of texts as inherently rhetorical. One assumption of this approach is that all texts necessarily imply viewpoints on issues in the world; or, as rhetorical and literary theorist Kenneth Burke put it, all uses of language and symbols entail a "striking of attitudes."<sup>24</sup> This orientation also requires accepting the premise that texts function as arguments, whether or not their creators imagine them as such. This last point is crucial for rhetorical analyses of popular culture, because to claim that a song by Bruce Springsteen, for instance, is an example of argument is not to suggest that Springsteen conceptualized it as such; rather, it is to say that when his creations enter the realm of public discourse, they necessarily function as arguments in relation to other public arguments and ideologies. For this reason, Springsteen's supposed intentions for his art, which are key to many analyses of his work,

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<sup>23</sup> It is important to keep in mind that all works of art can be polysemous and, to this extent "Born in the U.S.A." is not unique. However, through its apparent mismatch of form and content, the song seems to invite starkly divergent interpretations, which is evidenced by the wide range of discourses around the song. Furthermore, many of these interpretations seem convincing, in that they do rely on textual/musical evidence.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 289.

are not relevant to my method here; instead, the question of *how* “Born in the U.S.A.” functions as a public text is what matters most.<sup>25</sup> In the case of Springsteen, in particular, there are already examples of explicitly rhetorical treatments of his work, including a chapter by Michael Hemphill and Larry David Smith, who describe how the narratives in Springsteen’s story-telling songs provide listeners with what Burke calls “equipment for living,” as well as an article by Lisa Foster, who has explored the populist argumentation style in songs from *The Rising*.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, commentaries on Springsteen by other critics – including Johnston and Bird, as well as Simon Frith, Lawrence Grossberg, and Stuart Hall – have implicitly rhetorical dimensions to them.<sup>27</sup>

Thinking about art, and verbal art in particular, as rhetorical is a practice that reaches back much further than the twentieth century. In his book on rhetoric and poetics in ancient Greece and

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<sup>25</sup> The same would be true of a rhetorical analysis of a politician’s speech, for example. What the politician intends is largely irrelevant to understanding how the speech functions when it enters the realm of public discourse and ideology.

<sup>26</sup> Michael R. Hemphill and Larry David Smith, “The Working American’s Elegy: The Rhetoric of Bruce Springsteen,” in *Politics in Familiar Contexts: Projecting Politics through Popular Media*, eds. Robert L. Savage and Dan Nimmo (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex, 1990), 199-214; Lisa Foster, “Populist Argumentation in Bruce Springsteen’s *The Rising*,” *Argumentation and Advocacy: The Journal of the American Forensic Association* 48:2 (2011): 61-80.

<sup>27</sup> Johnston, *The Truth about Patriotism*; Bird, “Is that Me, Baby?”; Simon Frith, “The Real Thing: Bruce Springsteen,” in *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 94-104; Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 165-166; Lawrence Grossberg, “Rockin’ with Reagan, or the Mainstreaming of Postmodernity,” *Cultural Critique* 10 (1988): 123-149; Stuart Hall’s comments on Springsteen are included in an interview with Grossberg in Lawrence Grossberg, “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (1986): 45-60.

Rome, Jeffrey Walker describes how lyric poetry was a form of public discourse in the ancient world, much like legal and political oratory, and, to this extent, it also functioned as a medium for public argumentation. As he explains, treating poetry as rhetoric entails some of the following assumptions: poetry is persuasive; the audience is expected to exercise judgment in response; this kind of response implies ethical positionings; and, not least, "poetry may have direct and indirect effects on social and civic life through the shaping of communally shared judgments and ethical commitments with regard to both particular and general kinds of questions."<sup>28</sup> Although the contexts of contemporary popular music and ancient lyric poetry are different in important ways, Walker's observations provide a basis for treating rock music as rhetoric. Even more to the point, in the case of Springsteen, there is no question that his art has "direct and indirect effects on social and civic life" and interacts with a range of "ethical commitments." To this extent, Springsteen is clearly a rock and roll rhetor.

Analyzing Springsteen as a rhetor could entail a range of specific orientations, but one unifying feature would be an interest in how his songs produce public arguments, rather than just individual experiences of entertainment or pleasure. To this extent, any features of his songs that contribute to those arguments merit attention, including both the lyrics, or content, and the musical delivery, or form. As Kenneth Burke and others have theorized, textual analysis demands attention to both form and content because both contribute to what Burke calls "function," according

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffery Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 154.

to which texts “do something” for a rhetor and the audience.<sup>29</sup> Writing about popular music, Frith echoes this view, emphasizing that “the issue in lyrical analysis is not words, but words in performance,” and that “a song doesn’t exist to convey the meaning of the words; rather, the words exist to convey the meaning of the song.”<sup>30</sup> Bird assumes the same perspective on Springsteen’s art in particular when she critiques many interpreters of his work for their assumption that “we can understand Springsteen’s mass appeal by understanding and interpreting his lyrical message – his ‘meaning’ can, in effect, be read off his narrative texts.”<sup>31</sup> An effort to account for the overall effect (or “function”) of a song’s form and content would be, thus, one key aspect of a rhetorical orientation to popular music. Additionally, and relatedly, an appreciation for how musical arguments interact with audience expectations constitutes a necessary consideration. To borrow some of Burke’s language again, textual forms have rhetorical effects by enacting “an arousing and fulfillment of desires” for the audience, as they create “an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite.”<sup>32</sup> Applied to popular song, this perspective highlights the extent to which meanings are not located strictly within musical artifacts themselves but emerge through interaction between musical form and listeners’ own aesthetic, rhetorical, and ideological frameworks – or what Burke calls “the

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<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 89.

<sup>30</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites*, 166.

<sup>31</sup> Bird, “Is that Me Baby?,” 42.

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 31, 124.



psychology of the audience."<sup>33</sup> Frith makes a similar observation when he describes how each music listener operates according to a "scheme of interpretation," which is based partially on one's previous experience of a specific "musical culture," such as the genre of rock music. As he explains, "[f]or sounds to be music, we need to know how to hear them..."<sup>34</sup> In the case of "Born in the U.S.A.," the wide range of audience assumptions and expectations seems to be a driving force behind the divergent interpretations of the song's supposed meanings.

### **The Order of "Confusion": Paradox and Rhetorical Indirection**

As described, the claim that there is an apparent mismatch, or what Alterman calls "confusion," between the lyrics of "Born in the U.S.A." and their delivery in the full rock version is accepted as a truism by many of Springsteen's fans and critics. Drawing on the ideas of Burke and Frith, we might also say that there seems to be a mismatch between some listeners' genre-based desires and appetites and the degree to which they do or do not get fulfilled by the song. Generally, this should not be surprising, since interpretations of artworks often vary, at least partly, due to differing audience expectations or "scheme[s] of interpretation." If we accept, though, that both form and content are constitutive rhetorical elements of "Born in the U.S.A.," then some of the dominant perspectives on the song's supposed meaning are not grounded in comprehensive analysis. That is, they have not addressed the question of how both the lyrics *and* the music contribute to a collective rhetorical effect for listeners. As noted,

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<sup>33</sup> Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites*, 249.

Cowie and Boehm offer one answer to this question that resonates with the story of American labor. For them, the apparent form-content “dualities” of the song encapsulate the increasing struggle of American workers in the 1970s and 1980s to situate themselves amidst the wars they were fighting abroad and at home. My own analysis is less focused on the unique historical realities of the early 1980s—even though that period did provide the specific rhetorical exigency for the song—and more on the abstract question that the song seems to address, which is the struggle of an individual to negotiate a relationship among him- or herself, the state, and a national community.<sup>35</sup>

On the one hand, the song’s content seems to argue for a critical analysis of both American government and society, specifically in response to the way that Vietnam veterans were treated upon their return home, and perhaps more generally in reaction to growing class inequity (which helps explain why the song’s protagonist was in Vietnam in the first place); that is, it seems to articulate one individual’s feelings of complete alienation from the political and social communities into which he was born. On the other hand, the form of the song, with its positive musical

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<sup>35</sup> In making this move, I do not mean to devalue the importance of the unique history and socioeconomic situation that surrounded the invention of this particular rhetorical artifact, or of context more generally, which has always been key to rhetorical analysis. Rather, in my view there has already been a great deal of astute interpretation of Springsteen’s music in relation to the specific reality of the 1980s—from Cullen, Alterman, Johnston, and Cowie and Boehm, to name a few—and thus, I am consciously working to offer a different view on Springsteen’s work. My perspective, coming 30 years after the release of *Born in the U.S.A.*, allows a chance to consider not just what the song seemed to mean in its immediate discursive context, but rather what it might be coming to mean in an increasingly distant aesthetic and sociopolitical reality.

timbre – the major key, the simple two-chord structure, the bright synthesizer, the steady drum beat, the anthemic refrain – seems to argue for an impassioned celebration of “the U.S.A.,” whatever that might mean to the protagonist. Or, as Frith puts it in his description of the song, the chorus, through “its texture, its rhythmic relentlessness, its lift” comes off as “triumphant.”<sup>36</sup> These are only interpretations of the recording’s musical form, of course, but the claim that the song offers something like a triumphant celebration of “the U.S.A.” is grounded in the conventions of musical grammar (that is, listeners’ shared “schemes of interpretation”), according to which major keys and bright sounds are *happy*, and perhaps even more specifically in the rock music grammar that Springsteen has employed throughout his career. This was clearly the argument that George Will heard, and this was surely the argument that millions of listeners heard in the 1980s. Undoubtedly, Springsteen-mania had a great deal to do with this understanding of “Born in the U.S.A.” and the American iconography that adorned the album, the concerts, and several of the music videos.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the response of many to these interpretations has been to describe the thundering proclamation of “I was born in the U.S.A.!” as angry or ironic. In my view, however, there is no solid basis for this analysis, except through an interpretation of the lyrical content of “Born in the U.S.A.,” which is not actually an interpretation of the musical

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<sup>36</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites*, 165.

<sup>37</sup> Greil Marcus is reported to have made a similar observation in the 1980s, noting that this particular interpretation of “Born in the U.S.A.” was “the key to the enormous explosion of [Springsteen’s] popularity” in 1984-1985. Quoted in: Mikal Gilmore, “Bruce Springsteen: What Does it Mean, Springsteen Asked, to Be an American?” *Rolling Stone*, November 15, 1990, in *Bruce Springsteen: The Rolling Stone Files*, ed. the Editors of Rolling Stone (New York: Hyperion, 1996), 298.

form itself; rather, calling the form ironic merely extends an interpretation of the content to the form, without engaging with the context of rhetorical delivery. Furthermore, like Johnston, I believe that the interpretation of the song proposed by Will and millions of others actually has firm grounding in the musical form and confirms the breadth of what Johnston calls “Springsteen’s impact,” especially if we accept that musical meanings operate according to generic conventions (for example, the major key), and, more specifically, that Springsteen has typically been conservative in his employment of the grammar of rock music.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, I see the interpretation of Will and others as one-dimensional, since it does not respond to the full rhetorical force of “Born in the U.S.A.” and *Born in the U.S.A.*

If we treat both the song’s form and content as constitutive elements of a larger argument, then at least one way of understanding the overall effect may be to posit that what the song offers is essentially a rhetorical paradox, specifically in relation to one protagonist’s efforts to find a place for himself within the complex interplay of political, socioeconomic, and ideological forces that constitute his surroundings. That is, by juxtaposing the song’s apparently critical content with its conventionally understood celebratory music, Springsteen forces listeners to engage with seemingly divergent perspectives on questions of patriotism, identity, and national belonging; in short, the narrator seems simultaneously to love and to hate the polity into which he was born. To this extent, “Born in the U.S.A.” completely eludes efforts to align it with conventionally understood American left-right political ideologies; instead, it intermingles and embraces

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<sup>38</sup> Johnston, *The Truth About Patriotism*, 217.

conflicting perspectives in unexpected and beguiling ways. This effect can be understood as an example of what Jason Ingram calls "rhetorical indirection." In an analysis of Plato's writing about rhetoric, Ingram argues that Plato's manner of situating Socrates, the "foil," in complex dialogues is used "to provoke readers" into considering multiple points of view.<sup>39</sup> In short, rhetorical indirection is a method by which a rhetor presents the audience with a range of possible answers or outcomes without explicitly endorsing any one as correct. Ingram further explains Plato's use of rhetorical indirection this way: "Challenging texts to determine whether or not we agree with them is an integral part of conventional interpretation. Plato provides a somewhat unconventional supplement, a rhetorical form purposively designed to bring readers to a particular experience, one of extreme doubt or *aporia*..."<sup>40</sup>

While there are clear formal and contextual differences between Platonic dialogues and rock songs, the notion of rhetorical indirection seems applicable to "Born in the U.S.A.," not least of all because the song has a deeply dialogic structure. Essentially, by juxtaposing paradoxical arguments about being "born in the U.S.A.," and one particular narrator's feelings of belonging (or not) to "the U.S.A.," Springsteen's song "provokes" listeners to consider multiple ideological stances and "forces reflection about heuristics and fundamental assumptions..."<sup>41</sup> Moreover, like Ingram's Plato, Springsteen "uses indirection to create another level of meaning, one whose value lies more in performance or process than in

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<sup>39</sup> Ingram, "Plato's Rhetoric," 294.

<sup>40</sup> Ingram, "Plato's Rhetoric," 294.

<sup>41</sup> Ingram, "Plato's Rhetoric," 301.

memorizing discrete concepts or propositions.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, it is the entire rhetorical structure, or performance/process, of “Born in the U.S.A.” – not simply the lyrics or the music – that produces an overall effect. Certainly, this is true of many popular songs and rhetorical artifacts. However, “Born in the U.S.A.” seems unique in the starkness of its indirections, as well as in its thematic depth. Thus, if there is a unified argument in the song, it may be that the narrator’s feelings of connection to his own political state and national community are, above all, profoundly paradoxical.

One assumption behind this understanding of “Born in the U.S.A.” is that a paradoxical argument on questions of patriotism and national belonging might serve as a satisfying rhetorical outcome for a rock song, or as an acceptable fulfillment of rock listeners’ desires and appetites. Indeed, in my view, it is precisely this aspect of “Born in the U.S.A.” that makes it one of Springsteen’s most intriguing and captivating songs. However, if the most pervasive interpretations of the song are indicative, this is a very different assumption than the one that drives most listeners’ expectations, which are based on the premise that “Born in the U.S.A.” should be a logically coherent political statement; that it must be either for or against certain politics. This is precisely why listeners from various ideological vantage points have subsumed the form into the content or the content into the form, or simply ignored uncooperative dimensions of the song altogether. However, while an assumption of logical coherence may be useful for analyzing certain genres of rhetorical performance – such as political speeches, academic articles, and probably many works of art, including some of Springsteen’s songs – it is not well-suited to

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<sup>42</sup> Ingram, “Plato’s Rhetoric,” 301.

the rock version of "Born in the U.S.A."<sup>43</sup> The song is an exercise in paradox and incoherence—and perhaps this should not be surprising, given the song's themes. To imagine that the relationship between an individual and his or her nation-state might be logical or coherent does not seem very convincing, and, likewise, any song that makes this argument may not be very intellectually persuasive. More to the point, in the case of a Vietnam veteran in 1970s-1980s America, the observation seems particularly acute: Why should the audience expect this narrator's feelings about his government and national community to be anything but conflicted and multidimensional?

In writing about Springsteen's art in relation to the idea of patriotism, Johnston offers a series of questions with which he believes Springsteen's songs engage:

What do you do when you realize that love is misplaced when it comes to country or homeland? What do you do when you realize that America, the object of your love, does not and could not deserve it? That patriotism cannot justify itself? That patriotism is dangerous and potentially deadly to what it claims to serve in light of its love affairs with enmity and death?<sup>44</sup>

Through its rhetorical indirection, "Born in the U.S.A." forces listeners to engage with precisely these kinds of questions, and even to immerse themselves in the complexity of the issues. In this

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<sup>43</sup> The original acoustic version, however, seems to be a much more coherent work of art—in terms of its use of standard form-content conventions—which may be why it is the favored version of many fans and writers. For me, however, while the acoustic version has an engaging dark mood about it, as do many of the songs recorded during the *Nebraska* sessions, it does not achieve the kind of rhetorical and ideological complexity found in the rock version.

<sup>44</sup> Johnston, *The Truth about Patriotism*, 211.

way, the effect of “Born in the U.S.A.” is very much in line with Burke’s notion of rhetorical “order.” According to Burke, one of rhetoric’s many functions is offering interpretations of situations, or giving “order to an otherwise unclarified complexity.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, he describes how artistic texts can provide “a terminology of thoughts, actions, emotions, attitudes, for codifying a pattern of experience. The artist, through experiencing intensively or extensively a certain pattern, becomes as it were an expert, a specialist, in this pattern. And his skill in articulation is extended upon the schematizing of his subject.”<sup>46</sup> This, in the end, seems an apt description of “Born in the U.S.A.” as rhetorical artifact: It offers a potential order, via the structure of paradox, to an “unclarified complexity” and a certain “pattern of experience,” which is the relationship that all national subjects must negotiate with their governments and communities. Thus, the argument of the song is not an articulation of a singular version of this relationship; rather, it is an artistic ordering of the multiple anxieties, pains, joys, and perhaps even impossibilities that define the relationship itself. In this way, “Born in the U.S.A.” suggests that there can be no easy answers to questions of patriotism and national belonging, that these are paradoxical human experiences.

### **Thirty Years Down the Road: The Paradoxes of Bruce Springsteen**

As I have described them, the notions of paradox and rhetorical indirection offer a particular way of thinking about “Born in the U.S.A.,” and, by extension, *Born in the U.S.A.* I have

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<sup>45</sup> Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 154.

<sup>46</sup> Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 154.



not given the album explicit attention, but variations on the arguments I have made easily apply to other songs on the album (for example "Darlington County," "Working on the Highway," and "Dancing in the Dark"), and to all of the American visual rhetorics that accompanied the *Born in the U.S.A.* period. Indeed, a larger analysis of the myriad symbolic aspects of Springsteen's performances in the mid-1980s would be fruitful. Additionally, the idea of the paradox, in particular, provides a heuristic for gaining broader insights into Springsteen's entire career. Although it is certainly easy to pinpoint cohesive themes, trends, interests, and beliefs across the span of Springsteen's work – this is a familiar type of cultural analysis – there are also ways in which his artistic output is defined by paradoxes. For example, since at least the mid- to late-1970s, there has been a central tension in Springsteen's work around the notions of the individual and society. As John Sheinbaum observes, Springsteen's work seems to embody, on the one hand, a deep engagement with the theme of isolation, particularly through its exploration of "the plight of the individual"; however, at the same time, there is a way in which this very exploration "results instead in the formation of a community."<sup>47</sup> Sheinbaum quotes Parke Puterbaugh's comments on this topic in relation to the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* tour: "[I]t was a strange phenomenon. The more Springsteen sang about alienation, the more people turned out to listen."<sup>48</sup> This paradox also plays out in "Born in the U.S.A." and other songs in an

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<sup>47</sup> John J. Sheinbaum, "'I'll Work for your Love': Springsteen and the Struggle for Authenticity," in *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen*, eds. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010), 233.

<sup>48</sup> Sheinbaum, "'I'll Work For Your Love'," 233.

interesting way, as noted by Stonerook: The “big, sing-along choruses on buoyant songs” –including “Born in the U.S.A.,” “Hungry Heart,” and “Glory Days” –all help to create a sense of community.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, however, the lyrics of all of these songs seem to explore particular dimensions of isolation.

Another example of a paradox in Springsteen’s work is the tension between *the local* and *the national* –or perhaps even *the global* –especially in relation to political subjectivity. Lawrence Grossberg made the following observations about Springsteen during the *Born in the U.S.A.* period:

Springsteen empowers his fans, energizes them, within their affective commonality by invoking personal and local images . . . But even as he recognizes that one must do more (recreated in his political raps during the concert and in his support for local groups and struggles), even as he appeals to national imagery, his commitment to the local and the image prevents him from engaging in larger issues. America, such a powerful image in his current success, is always invoked as one’s “hometown,” and Springsteen deals with national history by reducing it to the level of individual lives.<sup>50</sup>

In a sense, Grossberg’s observation highlights a feature of all art that attempts to engage with national or even global sociopolitical themes through storytelling: The individual plight serves as a synecdoche for commonly shared experiences. However, as Grossberg notes, it is at the level of engagement that the paradox comes into stark relief: Do songs about individuals’ hometown experiences provide a rhetorical foundation for “engaging in larger

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<sup>49</sup> Stonerook, “Springsteen’s Search for Individuality and Community,” 215.

<sup>50</sup> Grossberg, “Rockin’ with Reagan,” 134.

issues" or do they, instead, reify a pervasive American ideology of the individual, which is, arguably, antithetical to progressive community processes?

Both of these paradoxes merit more careful exposition, and certainly additional paradoxes could emerge from more extensive reflection on Springsteen's music. I hope that others will take up this work. In my view, pursuing these types of critical questions offers the best chance for generating new and interesting insights from Springsteen's rich oeuvre. It may be that the passage of years makes inquiries like mine easier, to the extent that time allows critics to distance themselves from the immediate sociopolitical and rhetorical pressures that surround the creation of particular artworks. Certainly, we must always attend to those specific exigencies. But, at the same time, it is worth considering how new meanings and implications can emerge over time. Indeed, if Springsteen's music has any chance of remaining relevant in the decades ahead—and I think it does—it will depend on the willingness of listeners and critics to reimagine his art in new contexts.