

Reviews

Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet by Donald L. Deardorff II. (Lanham, Maryland; Toronto; Plymouth, U.K.: The Scarecrow Press, 2014. 216 pages).

Donald L. Deardorff II's *Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet* presents the latest survey of the work of Bruce Springsteen. Deardorff offers the newest volume in Scarecrow Press' series of introductory works on "rock, pop, and culture" that explore music and musicians within their social and cultural contexts. Given the introductory nature of the series, readers should not approach *Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet* expecting major scholarly interventions in the field of Springsteen Studies. Rather, Deardorff's work should be assessed as an introductory text, one which scholars should judge based on whether it effectively provides undergraduate students and readers outside the academy with a suitable introduction to Springsteen's music and the reasons for its popularity. Yet, in this task Deardorff definitively falls short. His methodology does not successfully answer his guiding question, and he demonstrates a troubling lack of familiarity with Springsteen's canon. Those hoping for an introduction to Springsteen from an academic perspective should look elsewhere for a guided foray into his music, biography, and career history.

In his introduction, Deardorff addresses the question of how to organize a book about Springsteen, a figure whose length of career and range of musical styles belies simple explanation. Deardorff elects to organize his book thematically. Unlike, for instance, Rob Kirkpatrick's *Magic in the Night: The Words and Music of Bruce Springsteen* (2009), Deardorff does not chronologically progress through Springsteen's albums and the biographical and historical context of their conception, release, and reception. Rather, following a chapter on Springsteen's upbringing and musical influences, as well as one on Springsteen's burgeoning career in the

context of the politically tumultuous 1970s, subsequent chapters focus on major themes that have endured throughout Springsteen's canon: working-class life, masculinity, patriotism, social justice, and redemption. Thus, Deardorff hopes to answer "why" Springsteen "became such a pervasive, resonant voice in his culture" (xxxv). In each chapter, Deardorff elucidates the historical context in which Springsteen's music was released in an effort to illustrate why it would have so widely resonated with fans at that time. For example, Chapter Three, "Streets of Fire: Working-Class Heroes," begins by detailing the effects of inflation, unemployment, and the recessions of the 1970s on working-class Americans, thereafter assessing Springsteen's treatment of blue-collar characters on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978). Deardorff then surveys changes to the American economy in the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s elucidating, accordingly, Springsteen's songs in those periods that deal with class issues.

However, Deardorff's methodology does not allow for a clear assessment of Springsteen's canon. Deardorff improperly assumes that Springsteen's music was popular because it tapped into contemporary fears or insecurities, that fans embraced his music because it provided a means of dealing with cultural, economic, social, and political changes. He paints with overly broad brushstrokes: rather than citing specific evidence – such as polling data – he oversimplifies the ways "many listeners" (54) or "many people" (131) reacted to cultural changes. Based on his selective telling of history, Deardorff portrays Springsteen's music as a direct translation of the post-war American zeitgeist. He intimates, in fact, that Springsteen wrote his music "for" specific people to help them deal with their struggles, that the discussion of African-American or Hispanic characters presents, for instance, a political act, an attempt to include these people in a community of listeners and fans. While parts of Springsteen's canon were certainly written as commentary on contemporary American life, Deardorff anachronistically assumes this to be a trait of Springsteen's entire body of work. Though he acknowledges the development of Springsteen's political

consciousness around 1980, he nonetheless tries to read author-intentioned political significance into Springsteen's earliest albums. For example, he improbably claims "Blinded by the Light" as expressing the sentiments of American youths in the early 1970s. Because of its compatibility with Deardorff's assessment of the cultural sentiment in this period, the author deems the track "the perfect tune for understanding [Springsteen's] early popularity" (39), ignoring Springsteen's highly limited audience in 1973 as well as his lack of a socially and historically grounded political consciousness at that time.

While Deardorff mishandles the contextual interpretation of Springsteen's canon, he excludes other aspects of Springsteen's career entirely. Shockingly, he almost completely ignores Springsteen's live performance though it presents a defining feature of Springsteen's long career. Fans, too, are entirely absent, though even a brief examination of fans' interactions with Springsteen and his music could have assisted Deardorff's attempt to explain Springsteen's popularity. Nor does Deardorff discuss the actual music. He focuses singularly on Springsteen's lyrics, ignoring the important contrast between dark lyrical themes and upbeat instrumentation in many songs, for example "Ramrod," "Glory Days," and "Tunnel of Love." When he does take up the music, Deardorff does not always do so accurately; he deems "Youngstown," for example, "a loud, powerful tune" (62), though he fails to specify that only the full band, live iteration, rather than the album version, can appropriately be described as "loud." The emphasis on lyrics rather than the music would be excusable, however Deardorff rarely engages with the lyrics. He quotes snippets of lyrics but often does so without a full explanation of a song's meaning. As a result, the out-of-context quoted lines frequently make little sense. Such mistakes prove indicative of Deardorff's less than fluent familiarity with Springsteen's canon. In a series of egregious but revealing errors, he mistitles a number of songs, referring to tracks such as

“Philadelphia” (xxxix), “Just Across the Border” (15-16), “Little Girl I Wanna Marry You” (16), and “Beautiful Reward” (140).

Deardorff’s most effective analysis comes in his final chapter wherein he illustrates the contemporary pop, indie, rock, country, and punk artists who have claimed Springsteen as an artistic influence. Though Deardorff reads too closely into the work of some of these artists in search for evidence of Springsteen’s influence, he provides some definitive proof of Springsteen’s importance for successive generations of musicians. This chapter adds a piece to Springsteen Studies that has until now been largely unattended. While *Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet* is not an ideal introduction for curious students to learn about Springsteen, this chapter helps those new to Springsteen understand the breadth of his cultural significance. Though Deardorff proves unable to explain Springsteen’s popularity, the shortcomings of his book illustrate the difficulty of encapsulating and explaining a musical career that has spanned nearly half a century of tumultuous social, political, economic, and cultural changes.

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Springsteen & I, DVD and Blu-Ray, directed by Baillie Walsh. 2013.

In late 2012, through marketing emails and calls for submission on fan websites such as Backstreets.com, Sony Music solicited videos from fans about their experiences with the music of Bruce Springsteen. Over 2,000 clips were submitted from around the world, amounting to over 300 hours of footage. The edited result is *Springsteen & I* (2013), a 77-minute documentary produced by Ridley Scott—whose 2011 film *Life in a Day* presents a similar montage of crowd-sourced video clips—and directed by

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Baillie Walsh, who had not previously worked with Springsteen and thereby promised a fresh perspective. The documentary 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. Longer video clips are interspersed with shorter segments of fans stating the three words that best describe Springsteen (“passion” is a common choice). The film also features high quality footage of Springsteen’s live performances, and these clips punctuate the endearingly amateurish short testimonials. The individuals featured in the movie hail mostly from the United States and Europe and represent a lively cross-section of Springsteen fans, including one decidedly non-fan.

The central theme of the documentary is fans’ deep connection with Springsteen and his music. A connection between fans and an artist is hardly unique to Springsteen, though his work has been noted for its particular emphasis on the values of community, friendship, and connection. The fan-made videos that comprise *Springsteen & I* offer insight into the uniqueness of the connection between Springsteen and his fans, as the film presents two main paradigms for fans’ relationship with Springsteen: as a friend and as a guide of both emotional and spiritual development.

In their videos, many fans speak about Springsteen casually, as they would an intimate companion. A Danish fan, Jane, poignantly states that she and Springsteen have “been friends since 1985, though he doesn’t know me.” A male Danish fan talks of taking his girlfriend to see Springsteen and how, at the end of the show, she marveled at feeling as if Springsteen had played for her alone. In a concert clip toward the end of the film, Springsteen echoes this intimacy, telling a crowd as he leaves the stage: “nice to be alone with you tonight.”

Others fans describe the ways Springsteen’s music has provided them with hope and emotional support. One young fan says that Springsteen’s music sustains her even at times when she knows things may

not get better, and another states that she cannot get through a day without his music. *Springsteen & I* depicts the Springsteen fan experience as a journey of finding oneself through his music. Springsteen is the facilitator of self-development, from the sexual—the woman who speaks intensely of her sexual awakening as a teenager at her first Springsteen concert—to the political—the young truck driver with a master’s degree who sees her work differently because of his music.

At times Springsteen’s role as an emotional guide has spiritual implications. The quasi-religious relationship between Springsteen and his fans has been noted before, for example in the work of Jim Cullen, Daniel Cavicchi, and Linda Randall. This spiritual dimension is evidenced to some degree in *Springsteen & I*. Many fans, for example, open their video segments by mentioning the moment of their “conversion,” the date or year when they first became fans. Springsteen has staged his concerts as rock and roll revivals and, in various clips, the documentary confirms Springsteen performances as part a journey out of the everyday and into a more spiritual realm.

The documentary also includes a number of special features. The first bonus section showcases 35 minutes of the Hard Rock Calling concert in London in 2012, with a special appearance by Sir Paul McCartney in a memorable duet with Springsteen on “Twist and Shout.” Other bonus selections include four short video tributes to Springsteen made by fans, including fans from Asia and South America, which were not shown in the theater version. Another segment shows a number of fans featured in the documentary meeting Springsteen in Copenhagen.

Yet for all the life, love, and faith that exudes from this documentary, some omissions feel critical. As two scholars whose fields are sociology and psychology, we had hoped to see more of the hallmark darkness that is thematic across much of Springsteen’s work. The tragedy of human existence and the lingering presence of death and destruction that so frequently appear in Springsteen’s canon are absent from the film. Elements

of this darkness appear in some of the fans' comments about how Springsteen's music provides support through hard times, but references to Springsteen's unflinching honesty in the face of personal and societal disaster and his capacity to transform those who are suffering remain absent.

Another piece missing from the documentary is Springsteen's band. While the E Street Band is present for most musical sequences, they are never mentioned explicitly. The relationship discussed by the fans is with Springsteen himself, hence the film's title. Yet, the E Street Band is obviously central to fans' experiences with Springsteen's music. Indeed, a pivotal moment of the film comes in a segment of concert footage of Springsteen performing "Blood Brothers" during The Reunion Tour. The clip shows Springsteen tearing up and joining hands with the E Street Band members as he sings of the endurance of their love and friendship despite the rocky roads they have traveled together.

This omission felt most significant given that the movie was made a little over a year after Clarence Clemons's death and four years after the death of Danny Federici. The movie left these reviewers to wonder how their recent deaths affected fan responses to the film. Seeing these band members in almost every archival concert clip, but not discussed explicitly in the movie at a time when Springsteen was still publicly mourning and honoring them in concert, felt awkward and a missed opportunity to further examine the role of the band in developing and maintaining the sense of connection shown in the movie.

Finally, the film leaves viewers to draw their own conclusions on the strikingly international dimension of the documentary. The number of videos featuring non-American fans underscores the effect of Springsteen's music on audiences around the globe—that despite its American genesis, Springsteen's music taps into emotions that are universal. Though failing to comment on this intriguing proposition, *Springsteen & I* nonetheless provides a unique and compelling narrative about Springsteen and his fans.

The film can assist scholars interested in testimonials by Springsteen's fans, and provides an overview of Springsteen's career for all those interested in the effects his music has had on listeners around the world over the past forty years.

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