

Everyday People: Elvis Presley, Bruce Springsteen, and the Gospel Tradition

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Abstract

Bruce Springsteen has often referred to Elvis Presley as the primary inspiration in his own vocational journey. This essay considers Elvis' complex significance over the long course of Springsteen's career. Elvis has been Springsteen's most important point of entry into older populist traditions, including the blues, country, and gospel. He has also been, in his later isolation and self-destruction, Springsteen's main cautionary tale. More recently, Springsteen has seen Elvis as the originator of a version of Rock and Roll that draws directly from gospel—particularly from the interactions between the minister, the choir, and the congregation—to create a “front man” who moves the audience toward a collective experience of restoration and hope. Along with Elvis' populist eclecticism and his crossing of racial boundaries, this dynamic of gospel redemption has played a central role in Springsteen's music, from the late 1960s, when he set out on his own career in the midst of the racial uprisings in Newark and Asbury Park, through his most recent albums and some of his most powerful recordings and performances, including “Land of Hope and Dreams.” Throughout, the gospel tradition has shaped Springsteen's understanding of an American identity with a need for collective redemption grounded in the music and the religious faith of “everyday people.”

Bruce Springsteen has often spoken and written about the evening of September 9, 1956. It was then—after dinner, two weeks before his seventh birthday, as he watched the *Ed Sullivan Show* in his family's living room in Freehold, New Jersey—that he saw Elvis Presley for the first time. In his 2016 autobiography, *Born to Run*, Springsteen provides his most elaborate and deliberately

extravagant version of this story: Elvis' appearance is "a moment of light, blinding as a universe birthing a billion new suns, there was hope, sex, rhythm, excitement, possibility, a new way of seeing, of feeling, of thinking, of looking at your body, of combing your hair, of wearing your clothes, of moving and of living." More than ever before, Springsteen frames this set piece as his own moment of vocational discovery, fusing our culture's two most prominent origin stories, the scientific (the Big Bang) and the religious (Genesis, with a glimpse of "God and Satan's glorious Kingdom on earth"). One of his most familiar stories has gone so far over-the-top, grown so full of ironic inflation, that we might ask if he is kidding. Mostly, he is not. He really does believe he has been called. Yes, it is a "joyous demand." But it is a demand, all the same.¹

To say the least, it is a lot to ask of Elvis, especially in 2016, and even more today. While Elvis has come to seem more and more out of place, in so many ways, in contemporary America, Springsteen's appreciation for him has only grown. Fortunately, it has also grown more reflective and thoughtful. Like many matters related to Rock and Roll, the early canonization of Elvis—by Springsteen, Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and others—has often depended on specific constructions of originality and authenticity, which have always been questionable and which have obscured or misrepresented a long and complicated history of commercial and cultural exploitation. Springsteen's continued allegiance with Elvis and his legacy can sometimes seem difficult to reconcile with other aspects of his career, perhaps most of all his generally progressive social and political views. Even more, Springsteen's recent pronouncements of his Catholic faith—especially in *Born to Run*

¹ Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 38-40.

and *Springsteen on Broadway*—might seem very distant from his praise for Elvis as a “Saturday night jukebox Dionysus” or an “Apollo.” Somehow, that striking figure on the television screen has continued to grow into something more complex: he is a rebel, a reactionary, a genius, a fool, a font of modern ideas, a cautionary tale, an inspiration, an embarrassment, and a precursor of the civil rights movement—often at the same time.²

In this essay, I explore Elvis’ often surprising influence on Springsteen and his music, with particular attention to his distinct place in the evolution of Springsteen’s Catholic imagination. First, I consider how Elvis provided Springsteen with his first and most significant point of entry into the populist musical traditions—most important, gospel—which would help him to integrate his faith and his music at formative moments of his career. Second, I discuss the most significant flip side of Springsteen’s fascination with Elvis—his view of Elvis as the ultimate cautionary tale of Rock and Roll stardom—which led him to reimagine his own career and persona, especially as he struggled to come to terms with the sudden fame that followed the 1975 release of *Born to Run*. These two sides of Springsteen’s long reflection on Elvis’ life and music have helped him to move beyond a highly restrictive view of Catholicism, allowing him to explore and express his faith in some

² In this respect, Springsteen is not alone. Shortly after Elvis’ death, Peter Guralnick, who would become his primary biographer, referred to him as an “all-purpose, economy-rate icon” (*Lost Highway: Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians*, New York: Vintage, 1979), 143. Gilbert B. Rodman argues that Elvis’ capacity to be mapped onto so many mythologies, many of which are contradictory, derives from our tendency to see him as the “embodiment of the American dream” and to utilize him “as a symbol for all that is most wonderful and all that is most horrible about that dream” (“A Hero to Most?: Elvis, Myth, and the Politics of Race,” *Cultural Studies* 8.3, 1994), 458.

of his most compelling songs. Ultimately, Springsteen's Catholic imagination suggests a framework, derived largely from gospel and shaping his most recent work. This framework can help us to understand the place of these two musicians – yes, even Elvis – in a larger context of populist music, social progress, and collective redemption.

The Student of Elvis & Populist Traditions

Over more than six decades since that fateful Sunday evening in his family living room, Springsteen has become, in his own way, a student of Elvis' life, music, and legacy. Mostly, he has tried to recover from the wreckage, so to speak, of a useable past. Springsteen has performed more than a dozen of Elvis' songs in concert (most of which Elvis himself covered from earlier musicians), including, most frequently, "Can't Help Falling in Love," "Follow That Dream," "Good Rockin' Tonight," "Heartbreak Hotel," and "Mystery Train."³ On an upbeat note, onstage and in interviews, he has often told the story of the night in 1976 when, after performing in Memphis, he climbed over the fence at Graceland, hoping to find Elvis at home, only to be turned away by security guards.⁴ More often, on more downbeat notes, Springsteen has felt the weight of Elvis' decline and death. For instance, in the spring of 1981, in the midst of *The River* tour, he

³ Jay Lusting. "Bruce Springsteen's Top 12 Elvis Covers." *NJArts.net* January 8, 2017. <https://www.njarts.net/pop-rock/bruce-springsteens-top-10-elvis-presley-covers/>.

⁴Andy Greene and David Marchese. "The Ties That Bind: Bruce Springsteen' 25 Biggest Heroes." *Rolling Stone*. January 10, 2014. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/the-ties-that-bind-bruce-springsteens-25-biggest-heroes-32797>. Springsteen used this story to express a wide range of thoughts about Elvis, generally confirming his early admiration and injecting a comic note.

transformed Chuck Berry's "Bye Bye Johnny" (a sort of prequel to "Johnny B. Goode") into "Johnny Bye Bye," a meditation on Elvis' death as the lonely conclusion—"They found him slumped up against the drain / With a whole lotta trouble running through his veins"—to his search for a "promised land" by way of Rock and Roll stardom.⁵ Throughout the two years of recording sessions for *Born in the U.S.A.*, Springsteen re-wrote and re-recorded "Johnny Bye Bye" several times, while also working on a downbeat, mournful cover of Elvis' "Follow that Dream" (taken from the soundtrack of a forgettable 1962 film of the same title). Springsteen repeatedly rearranged, revised, and reinterpreted "Follow That Dream"—"I gotta follow that dream to find the love I need"—in versions that became slower, more mournful, and more ironic, as this song, too, came to express the ultimate isolation and despair of Elvis' particular dream of stardom. He has never released it.⁶

Springsteen also saw Elvis in concert twice—or rather, he saw two versions of Elvis. The first time was in 1972 at Madison Square Garden, in Elvis' first series of shows in New York City, when, according to Clinton Heylin, he "was still a magnetic performer with a command of the stage and a band he had made his own." The second time was in Philadelphia in 1977, just a few months before Elvis' death, when he was by all accounts "a shell of the former shell . . . a bulbous parody of that once-legendary

⁵ While the several versions of "Johnny Bye Bye" all deal with the same theme, in the same tragic vein, not all of them mention Elvis by name. According to Dolan, Springsteen gave this song considerable attention during *The River Tour*, noting that "it was the only unrecorded song that Springsteen premiered" on the entire tour. *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Norton, 2013), 184-85. Springsteen has typically introduced the song with one of his familiar Elvis stories and a transition emphasizing the sadness of Elvis' demise.

⁶ Gillian Gaar. *Boss: Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band – The Illustrated History* (Minneapolis: Voyageur Press, 2016), 8.

performer ... [who] could barely hit (or hold) any note higher than middle C."⁷

In recent years, Springsteen has also studied Elvis in more deliberate and even scholarly ways, demonstrating a detailed knowledge of Elvis' life and times. When asked, in a 2014 interview with the *New York Times* to name the "best books about music" he had ever read, he mentioned *Last Train to Memphis*, the first volume of Peter Guralnick's two-volume Elvis biography.⁸ Most significantly, Springsteen provides much of the commentary—along with Tom Petty, Emmylou Harris, and Robbie Robertson—in the 2018 documentary film, *Elvis Presley: The Searcher*. This film is largely a Springsteen project, produced by Jon Landau, the former music critic who once famously anointed Springsteen "rock and roll future" before becoming his manager, and Thom Zimny, a frequent collaborator who also directed the film version of *Springsteen on Broadway* and co-directed the film version of *Western Stars*.⁹ And yes, right there on the cover photo of *Born to Run*, just

⁷ Clinton Heylin. *E Street Shuffle: The Glory Days of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band*. (New York: Viking, 2012), 141-42.

⁸ Bruce Springsteen, "Bruce Springsteen: By the Book." *New York Times*. October 30, 2014.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/02/books/review/bruce-springsteen-by-the-book.html>.

⁹ Fred Goodman gives much attention to—and sometimes overstates—Jon Landau's influence on Springsteen's early career. Landau worked as a film critic and then became an influential rock critic before working with Springsteen. Goodman notes that Landau's "favorite film" was John Ford's *The Searchers* and states that Springsteen's "new persona" in the later 1970s and early 1980s was based on the film's main character, Ethan Edwards. Goodman bases this claim on a review in which Landau refers to Edwards as "the archetypal American hero," alienated from family, roots, and human contact, who is "condemned to wander the wilderness, this time in search of whatever solace without purpose he can find there." Goodman, *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen, and the Head-on Collision of Rock and Commerce* (New York: Random

about dead center, on his guitar strap, Springsteen is wearing a button from an Elvis fan club in New York City called "The King's Court."

Still, it might seem odd that, as Springsteen's musical universe has steadily expanded, Elvis has remained the most prominent figure in his personal canon. Yet he has come to see Elvis as something far more interesting than the figure of Dionysian liberation that the not-quite-seven-year-old Bruce (and so many others) first saw on that television screen. He views Elvis as one of the foremost inventors of a particular version of Rock and Roll (at this point, for Springsteen, there are many versions), one that fuses personal discovery with national identity and individual liberation with social progress. It does so by drawing from distinctly American musical traditions, especially as these traditions have emerged from the lives of everyday people, often in struggling communities. In this way, Springsteen still views Elvis as a Rock and Roll originator—and even "as the first modern Twentieth Century man"—while also understanding that he represents the confluence of much older populist traditions, including the rhythm and blues of the Mississippi Delta, old-time country, and especially gospel.¹⁰

For Springsteen, Elvis' greatest gift was his uncanny ability to channel, combine, and re-imagine these traditions. More than anything else, that was his "magic"—to borrow a suggestive bit of Springsteen shorthand for the relationship between the artistic

House, 1997), 301. This description does generally coincide with Springsteen's view of Elvis in his later years, though not so much with Springsteen's persona or Springsteen himself. See my discussion of *Elvis Presley: The Searcher*.

¹⁰ Bruce Springsteen, "Keynote Speech" in *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters*, edited by Jeff Burger (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 387.

imagination and performance.¹¹ At times, Elvis seemed to do it unconsciously, at unanticipated moments in a studio session or a performance. One particularly telling example, often presented as a biographical or historical landmark, occurred during his commercial recording sessions with Sam Phillips at Sun Studios in Memphis in 1954, when he was just 19 years old. This event has been described many times, perhaps most carefully by Guralnick in his biography of Phillips, but seldom with a sufficient appreciation for Elvis' eclecticism. For hours, these sessions plodded along unsuccessfully, with attempts to cover all kinds of songs and styles, from Ernest Tubbs to the Ink Spots to Dean Martin. Then, a rendition of Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's Alright, Mama" unexpectedly turned into something like a "fever dream" (a more sensationalized version of "magic"), which suddenly resulted in the invention of Rockabilly and the Elvis persona (and according to some accounts by Guralnick and others, the invention of Rock and Roll itself).¹² In this particular origin story, the artist's gift resides in a power that is both combinatory and transformational (a logic consistent with the analogical quality of Springsteen's Catholic imagination). For reasons that are seldom made clear, the sources matter: crooners like Dean Martin seem impervious to this artistic transformation, whereas Delta blues musicians like Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup seem to invite it (and

¹¹ In a 2012 interview, Springsteen made his most concise—and most problematic—comment on Elvis' appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*: "It was the evening I realized a white man could make magic." (Greene and Marchese) Springsteen uses the "magic trick" metaphor in this autobiographical sense—"I come from a boardwalk town where almost everything is tinged with a bit of fraud"—in the "Foreword" of *Born to Run*, which also becomes his "set up" at the start of *Springsteen on Broadway*. *Born to Run*, xi-xii.

¹² Peter Guralnick, *Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock 'n Roll*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 207-213.

therein lies a good deal of controversy about race and appropriation). At the same time, the same gift exerts itself on the artist's personal identity: Elvis Presley becomes Elvis the persona. It is a formulation that grants the imagination extraordinary powers. It encourages outsized hopes, even a transformation of the collective American identity. And it almost inevitably subjects the artist to crushing disappointment.

For Springsteen, Elvis has always been the preternaturally gifted country boy absorbing influences song by song, note by note, sound by sound. It is significant that he started more or less nowhere, not even in Tupelo, exactly, but in that shotgun shack on the unpaved roads outside of East Tupelo. There, when he was no more than two years old, Elvis' parents would take him to the Assembly of God church, where his mother's uncle was the preacher, and he would sneak up towards the choir and sing along, even before he knew any of the words. There, by the time he was 12, he would cross back and forth between the white and black neighborhoods, hearing the music drifting out from the Armory dances, the jukeboxes in the diners and bars, the movie theatres, the house parties, the Sunday congregations, and the tent revivals just down the street. Then, fatefully, at the age of 13, he moved with his family into one of the New Deal projects of the Memphis Housing Authority, where he would be among the growing number of American teenagers listening at night to local radio stations playing the blues, country, and gospel – and just as important, hearing the words and the intonations of the Sunday-night preachers. There, in the projects, after school, Elvis would put together his first band. And before long, he would soon find his way to Beale Street where

he would hear great blues musicians like B.B. King, Little Junior Parker, and Rufus Thomas.¹³

While Tupelo and Memphis might seem a long way from Freehold and Asbury Park, Elvis' story is full of narrative lines that Springsteen has been able to map onto his own life and music, often with surprising precision and resonance. He and Elvis were both part of a generation in which a new eclecticism was suddenly becoming possible for popular music. In the words of the preeminent historian of country music, Bill C. Malone, Elvis was a "child of the media," in a manner typical of this generation, which tended to blur or ignore distinctions between traditional popular genres:

Presley, in truth, belonged to no precise musical category, and the sources on which he drew were remarkably diverse and eclectic. Like many young people of his generation, Elvis Presley was largely a child of the media. His dress and his demeanor were partially shaped by the movies and television, while his musical tastes were affected by the radio. He listened to the country music favored by his parents, but he also heard the gospel music, rhythm-and-blues, and mainstream pop music that boomed out over Memphis radio stations. Pop singer Dean Martin was just as appealing to Elvis as was country singer Red Foley or blues singer B.B. King.¹⁴

To appreciate Elvis' popularity and influence, it is important to understand him as a figure of this particular moment, with this sudden availability of various musical genres and an expanding economy in which teenagers suddenly had unprecedented access to disposable cash. Eager to establish cultural separation from their

¹³ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 8-27.

¹⁴ Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 249.

parents, these teenagers of the mid- to late-1950s were suddenly watching the latest stars on televisions, gathering at dancehalls, sneaking transistor radios into their beds at night, putting coins in jukeboxes, and watching films with soundtracks designed and marketed specifically for them.¹⁵ In this proliferation of media, Elvis was soon inescapable. Of course, it did not take long for him – and his relentlessly opportunistic manager, Colonel Tom Parker – to realize that his stage presence could be translated profitably and seamlessly to the movies. And it did not take much longer for them to realize that promotions of popular films and records could build upon each other, extending his fame and fortune, and locking him into contracts that were designed to succeed commercially just as they were designed to fail artistically (in this regard, it is not surprising that Springsteen would begin to work seriously with film much later in his career, much more cautiously and with carefully circumscribed aims). At times, Elvis's own aspirations would get confused, as he sometimes wanted to become something more enduring than a teen idol, with an appeal that crossed generations. But he became famous at a time in which Rock and Roll was increasingly associated with a distinct teen culture and teen rebellion: it was the brief era of “teens-gone-wrong films” and “teen delinquency scares,” often transparently linked to fears of race mixing.¹⁶ With so much fear and anxiety regarding social change projected and marketed on records and popular films, Elvis

¹⁵ Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Perennial, 2000), 237. James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 312-333.

¹⁶ Randall J. Stephens, *The Devil's Music: How Christians Inspired, Condemned, and Embraced Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 90-101. Dennis McNally, *On Highway 61: Music, Race, and the Evolution of Cultural Freedom*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2014), 276.

could not resist the desire to be the next James Dean – as opposed to the last Dean Martin or Red Foley – for reasons completely obvious to the teenagers who filled his concerts.

Of course, the broad social forces of this historical moment – the expansion of the economy, the growth of a middle-class, the invention of youth culture, the rise of electronic media, the evolution of music marketing – all helped to generate an exaggerated sense of Elvis’ “originality,” and even the problematic and embarrassing mythology of “The King.”¹⁷ In doing so, they also tended to obscure the longer history of his musical populism. As Springsteen would come to realize, particularly after he became famous, Elvis’ music was constantly drawing upon traditions that had arisen from people and communities who were generally excluded from the post-war prosperity that fueled his rise. They had little connection to the youth culture of the day. They were not generally “middle class” or even “working class.” In many cases, they were poor.

Nonetheless, it was primarily through Elvis that Springsteen began to appreciate the potential for Rock and Roll to draw from this common heritage. Eventually, he came to understand that this heritage is as old as America – and quintessentially American, particularly as it tends towards racial integration, through an exceedingly complex intermingling of black and white performers,

¹⁷ As Louis Menand has recently argued, Elvis would quickly become central to another kind of collective Origin Story, a myth of the “entertainer hero” through which “industry magazines like *Billboard* cast white, male musicians as artistic icons who reinterpreted an authentic ‘black’ sound for a new, mass audience of white teenagers in the Television Age.” Quoted by Marcie Bianco, “Louis Menand unmasks the rock god in his cultural history of rock’n’roll.” Stanford Humanities Center. April 9, 2018.

<https://shc.stanford.edu/news/research/louis-menand-unmasks-rock-god-his-cultural-history-rock'n'roll>.

traditions, and styles.

At the same time, Springsteen would also find in these traditions many of the challenges of American identity. He would come to see social progress – perhaps racial justice most all – not in terms of the sudden change that he and many others often imagined in the early days of Rock and Roll, but more and more in terms of a long historical and moral arc. As Malone and others have documented, from the time white settlers arrived, the “folk music reservoir of the South was fashioned principally by the confluence of two mighty cultural streams, the British and the African.”¹⁸ “If one looks for purity in the music of the South,” Malone writes, “the search will be in vain. ... It is not only difficult to posit the degree of borrowing on either side, but also next to impossible to determine the ‘racial’ origin of a large percentage of southern folk songs and styles.” American music begins to seem like a common heritage of the rural poor:

In fact, one can posit the existence of a folk pool shared by both blacks and whites, a common reservoir of songs known in one form or another by the poorer rural classes, regardless of race. As long as poor whites and blacks shared a milieu that was rural, agricultural, and southern, and one in which blacks were forced to adjust their lives to the needs of the dominant white population, the cultures of these two groups, while remaining distinctive often overlapped. Much that has been termed ‘soul’ in our day is not so much the product of a peculiar racial experience as it is of a more general rural southern inheritance.¹⁹

Elvis was Springsteen’s first point of entry into this “common

¹⁸ Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music, American Music* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1979), 4.

¹⁹ Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music, American Music* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1979), 5.

reservoir of songs." He would find this discovery liberating for many reasons, not the least of which was its undermining of simplistic distinctions between "white music" and "black music," along with the notions of "authenticity" and individual "genius" that these distinctions have often been used to support. The intermingled cultures of the "poorer rural classes" in the South could free himself from the provincialism of his own time and place. Before long, it would also help him to re-invent himself in opposition to the extremes of individualism and isolation that he associated with Rock stardom. And he would discover, too, that as this "southern inheritance" shaped American "soul," it also inflected this music, as the name implies, with southern styles of worship.

Just as Elvis' populist eclecticism arose from a specific local context, it was driven by a mix of good intentions, personal encounters, and commercial opportunism—all maddeningly entangled. Elvis owed his early success to two young white men in Memphis, Dewey Phillips and Sam Phillips (no relation), who shared his devotion to black musicians across genres and his determination to promote their music to a wider (that is, mostly white) audience. Dewey Phillips had a nightly show on the Memphis radio station WHBQ where he played a wide array of music, mostly by black musicians for a black audience. Elvis and his teenage friends—along with "half of Memphis"—listened to Dewey Phillips' wildly eclectic show. According to Guralnick, "in the course of one fifteen minute segment, you might hear Muddy Waters' latest hit, a gospel number by the Soul Stirrers (with their great singer, R. H. Harris), Larry Darnell's 'For You, My Love,' and Wynonie Harris' 'Good Rockin' Tonight'" —"boogies, blues, and

spirituals,” in the words of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*.²⁰ Elvis’ early music and persona emerged directly from this remarkable era of Memphis radio, which Guralnick aptly describes as “an Aladdin’s lamp of musical vistas and styles.”²¹ And that was just one small part of it. Other radio shows of the day featured “hillbilly music and cornpone humor”; gospel music, including the Blackwood Brothers who had recently joined the First Assembly of God Church attended by Elvis and his family; the Saturday night broadcasts from the Grand Ole Opry; and big band broadcasts from the Peabody Skyway. And then there was the local station WDIA, which in 1949 had instituted an “all-black programming policy and billed itself as ‘The Mother Station of the Negroes.’”²² On WDIA, B.B. King worked as a D.J. and performed live. The station’s “personalities” included black history teachers and comedians and the Spirit of Memphis Quartet, whose performances “made even the Carnation Milk jingle reverberate with feeling.”²³ From the start, Sam Phillips realized that Elvis “was like a sponge, soaking up every influence with which he came in contact.”²⁴ He knew he could cash in on just such a talent, and he could do so in the name – and, he believed, the reality – of social progress.

In his autobiography, Springsteen repeatedly reminds us how much his own sense of the rise of Rock and Roll depended upon the wide array of popular songs suddenly available on the radio. For that matter, throughout the autobiography’s early chapters, the radio virtually becomes a character in itself. In one of the most significant passages, he movingly recalls following his

²⁰ Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 4.

²¹ Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 38.

²² Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 38-39.

²³ Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 39.

²⁴ Guralnick, *Sam Phillips*, 227.

grandfather around the neighborhood, searching through the trash for radios, which he would then repair—"the resurrection is real"—and sell for five dollars in the migrant camps around Monmouth County, where "the mostly Southern black migrant population" harvested the crops in "dust-bowl thirties conditions." Springsteen also fondly remembers his mother's kitchen radio playing popular hits, the family's car radio playing doo wop on evening drives, and of course the transistor radio he tucked under his pillow at night.²⁵ Out on Highway 33, at the edge of town, the local radio tower stands "near the huge Jersey Freeze ice cream cone, like a giant." It brings more than music: it provides a connection to larger world, alive with possibility, with "staticky-voiced deejays playing 'race records'"—in the midst of all the other "poets, geniuses, rockers, bluesmen, preachers, philosopher kings"—coming to him over the radio waves.²⁶ The local becomes national, and vice versa, especially as the sounds of Elvis' Memphis arrive in Central New Jersey, even in Freehold (though more momentarily in New York City and Newark and Asbury Park).

From the very start of Elvis career, Sam Phillips clearly understood the "controversy over race mixing" and the appeal of "the boy's natural sexuality." There is no doubt that he also anticipated the opportunity to profit from both. What often gets lost, though, in the ongoing controversies over Elvis and his legacy, is just how clearly Phillips also grasped what he called "the inherent *spirituality* of the music." "It wasn't just that this young kid had grown up in a religious environment, like so many of the rest of them," Phillips said, "It was how he mixed the sound, and exuberance, of spiritual music with blues and country in a way that

²⁵ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 9, 37, 44, 46.

²⁶ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 40.

no one else had before."²⁷ Predictably, Phillips exaggerates Elvis' uniqueness, yet he also points to his most vital influences. During the same brief time period, in and around 1954, when Elvis made those first records, he and his girlfriend would sneak away from the Pentecostal services they attended with his family, and head to the East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church. There, they would listen to the songs of the Brewsteraires with "featured soloist" Queen C. Anderson, and they would listen to the sermons of Rev. W. Herbert Brewster, a legendary preacher and prominent civil rights advocate whose songs were recorded by Mahalia Jackson and Clara Ward.²⁸ Anthony Heilbut makes it clear that East Trigg "was not just another black gospel church."²⁹ He describes Anderson as "by legend the greatest gospel singer the South has produced" and Brewster as "a beautiful example of the progressive impulses nurtured by gospel and developed in the freedom movement."³⁰ As Randall J. Stephens notes, Elvis' presence at East Trigg was likely to have been "considered inappropriate, or worse," and so he would "sneak back to the First Assembly before services ended there." From that point on, though, he would remain "an enormous fan of black gospel music."³¹

²⁷ Guralnick, *Sam Phillips*, 218.

²⁸ Guralnick, *Last Train*, 75. On a related note, at the same time, J.R. Cash, who would soon be known as Johnny Cash, came to Memphis, took a job as a door-to-door salesman, formed a band with his brother Roy and three other mechanics from the local Chrysler dealership, contributed his own gospel number, and also began recording at Sun. Guralnick, *Sam Phillips*, 242-43.

²⁹ Anthon Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* (New York: Limelight, 1987), 97.

³⁰ Heilbut, 97-98.

³¹ Randall J. Stephens, *The Devil's Music: How Christians Inspired, Condemned, and Embraced Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 41.

More than anything else, it is this local context – with gospel deeply embedded in a vital religious community, in opposition to racial injustice, and in the early stages of the civil rights movement – that explains how, even to this day, Springsteen can consider Elvis (albeit ambivalently) a figure of social progress. Dr. Brewster and East Trigg were important in their own right. They were formative influences on Elvis. They contributed to broader movements in religion and popular music, as Brewster's gospel compositions were broadly eclectic, among the first to incorporate blues and waltz forms.³² Yet Dr. Brewster and East Trigg were also part of something even more significant. In the Memphis of Elvis' youth, as in so many other places across the South, the early civil rights movement was largely based in the black churches. It was sustained by preaching and church music that, in turn, powerfully shaped its public expressions through music, rhetoric, and civic action. These same traditions would provide Elvis' music with its most enduring foundation. In perhaps the least remembered moment from those performances on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, at the end of his third and final appearance, he insisted on singing "Peace in the Valley" – written for Mahalia Jackson in 1937 by "the father of gospel music," Thomas A. Dorsey – as a promise to his mother, and accompanied by a plea for donations for refugees fleeing Hungary after the Soviet invasion. Dr. Brewster, himself, later said that Elvis' version of this song was "one of the best gospel recordings I've ever heard."³³

³² Heilbut, 99.

³³ Quoted by Guralnick, *Last Train*, 75. Stephens points out that not all of these feelings were mutual. Whereas Brewster praised Elvis' gospel recordings, he was among those traditional Christians who disdained Rock and Roll and "preached against rowdy, lewd music that seemed to be infiltrating the churches." For her

Much like Springsteen, Elvis thought of music—and often gospel most of all—as his “vocation,” that is, a “calling” in the specifically religious sense. From the start, it was true, as Wesley Morris has recently put it, that “The rockin’ backwoods blues so bewitched Elvis Presley that he believed he’d been called by blackness.”³⁴ Springsteen characteristically describes this attraction as a yearning for intimacy: for him, Elvis was “a singer, a guitar player who loved black musical culture, recognized its artistry, its mastery, its power, and yearned for intimacy with it.”³⁵ This call “by blackness” would endure, even into his final days, more than the blues or any other form of music. On a personal level, through some of his most difficult times, it was gospel, more than anything else, that sustained him. In the end, it was the influence of gospel tradition, even more than rhythm and blues, that would shape his legacy in popular music. Elements of gospel find their way into just about every aspect of Elvis’ stage presence—his movements, his mannerisms, his vocal inflections, his interactions with his musicians and backing singers, and most of all his relentless desire to move a live audience. Joel Dinerstein has written that Springsteen’s theories of “*performance-audience interaction* owe more to African-American gospel traditions of affirmation than to rock’s calling cards of Dionysian revelry, adolescent rebellion, transgression, and Horatio Alger narratives.” According to Dinerstein, these theories are grounded, like gospel and soul, in a

part, Jackson sharply criticized Elvis for what she called his “deliberate theft” of black religious music. Stephens, *The Devil’s Music*, 41-42, 99.

³⁴ Wesley Morris, *New York Times Magazine*. August 14, 2019. Morris adds, “For centuries, black music, forged in bondage, has been the sound of complete artistic freedom. No wonder everybody is always stealing it.” Online.

³⁵ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 41.

“musical philosophy of community.”³⁶ The same is true for Elvis, though, like many of his contemporaries, he constantly blurred the distinctions, always tenuous, between the older traditions and the “calling cards” of Rock revelry and rebellion.³⁷ His personal demise only shows—and Springsteen would say it was caused by—his drifting away from the philosophy of community he had once found in these older traditions.

Here too, conventional racial distinctions can be misleading. As much as any other American populist tradition, gospel emerged from “a folk pool shared by both blacks and whites.”³⁸ Even as Elvis found himself called by the sounds and spirit of East Trigg, he also loved the music of the white gospel singers. He particularly admired the Blackwood Brothers and the Stamps Quartet and, as Malone notes, his singing “particularly resembled the quartet singers when he let his voice fall into the lower registers.”³⁹ Elvis also claimed to have copied his singing style from Jake Hess, the leader of the Statesman Quartet. Perhaps more obviously, the most recognizable (and later exaggerated) aspects of his style—the pompadour, the flashy clothes, the showmanship—can be traced directly to white gospel performers, especially those in “[P]entecostal-flavored” groups.⁴⁰

³⁶ Joel Dinerstein, “The Soul Roots of Bruce Springsteen’s American Dream,” (*American Music* 25.4, Winter, 2007), 441-76.

³⁷ According to Charles Keil and Lawrence W. Levine, “black secular song” has a very long tradition of mixing not only “European and African elements” but also of “blending” predominantly black musical forms. Keil, *Urban Blues* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), 33. Levine, *Black Music and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977), 199.

³⁸ Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* 249

³⁹ Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* 249.

⁴⁰ Stephens, *The Devil’s Music*, 43.

Moreover, as Stephens documents, Elvis was one of a number of highly influential popular musicians in the 1950s—including Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, James Brown, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, B.B. King, Tammy Wynette, and Johnny Cash—who were deeply influenced, personally and musically, by Pentecostalism.⁴¹ Elvis came of age at a moment when many Evangelical churches—especially the Pentecostal and holiness churches, which were newer and less bound by tradition—were more willing than Catholic churches or mainline Protestant churches to incorporate popular music and instrumentation into their worship. At a time when “[t]he leap from unbridled sanctified music to rock was not a great one,” Elvis was just one of the performers who made the leap, and sometimes leapt back.⁴²

Of course, throughout his career, Elvis continued to perform and record traditional gospel songs, including four albums devoted exclusively to the genre. But his broader legacy for popular music derives primarily from the crossing over—and even more the blurring of distinctions—between the religious and the secular, the church and the larger world, even the sacred and the profane. Of course, in general terms, he shared this impulse with many other popular musicians—in Rock and Roll, jazz, blues, country, and rhythm and blues. Yet in the late 1950s, he shared it directly and specifically with Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and James Brown. In this particular historical line of popular music, it was Lewis—the first cousin of the Pentecostal preacher and televangelist, Jimmy Swaggart—who was Elvis’ closest analog. He too was raised as a Pentecostal in the Assembly of God church, and, according to legend, he was dismissed from an Assembly of God bible college

⁴¹ Stephens, *The Devil’s Music*, 27-64.

⁴² Stephens, *The Devil’s Music*, 37.

in Waxahachie Texas "after he played a boogie version of 'My God is Real' in chapel."⁴³ This particular mix of faith and music would prove to be a great revelation—and an example to imitate—for a Catholic boy raised at that time in Saint Rose of Lima parish.

To understand how gospel influenced Elvis' early version of Rock and Roll, it is also important to consider that throughout his career, he was accompanied by backing singers raised in the gospel tradition. From early 1956 until 1972, he worked with the white male group, the Jordanaires. Though their lineup changed over the years, and though they also brought to Elvis' music distinct vocal elements of the quartets and country (in the early 1960s, for instance, they sang on more than two dozen of Patsy Cline's recordings), the Jordanaires' background was predominately traditional southern gospel. They began their career in the early 1940s as the Foggy River Boys, with a lineup of four brothers who were ordained ministers. On a personal level, the Jordanaires helped sustain Elvis during difficult times, not least through long sessions in which they sang traditional gospel songs together backstage.

From 1969 on—in Las Vegas, on tour, and in the studio—Elvis and the Jordanaires were usually joined by the Sweet Inspirations.⁴⁴ Often described as a black R&B "girl group," the

⁴³ Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 250. Not coincidentally, Springsteen performed with Lewis at various times, including performances in Ireland during his Seeger Sessions tour and backing vocals on Lewis' 2006 cover of "Pink Cadillac." According to Dave Marsh, Jimmy Swaggart is "no mean player of honkey-tonk gospel piano himself" and Springsteen's "favorite television evangelist," serving as the model for the onstage "orations" Marsh calls "Reverend Springsteen." Marsh, *Bruce Springsteen: Two Hearts, the Definitive Biography, 1972-2003* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 511.

⁴⁴ At times, Elvis also worked with another male gospel group, The Imperials, who are often credited with breaking a "color barrier" in 1972 by adding

Sweet Inspirations became seemingly omnipresent backing vocalists in popular music of the later 1960s and early 1970s. They accompanied, among many others, Aretha Franklin, Jimi Hendrix, Wilson Pickett, and T-Bone Walker – and in some of the odd twists typical of “backing” careers, the Bee Gees and The Killers. They also sang on Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl" and *Moondance* (and thus helped set the stage and provide the aftermath of Morrison's landmark album *Astral Weeks*, which, in the words of Steve Van Zandt, became “like a religion” to Springsteen and the early E-Street Band). Just as much as the Jordanaires, the Sweet Inspirations had grown up with gospel woven into their DNA. They started performing as the Drinkard Singers, sometimes known as the Drinkard Four, a family gospel group formed by a devout Baptist named Nitch Drinkard in Savannah, Georgia, in the 1930s. After Nitch moved the family to Newark, New Jersey, to work in a factory during the Second Great Migration, his daughters became featured singers in the choir of the New Hope Baptist Church, from which they gained a devoted and devotional following throughout Central New Jersey.⁴⁵ They came to see themselves as “junior ambassadors – not just sowing the gospel but also reaping the benefits of singing God's word in our own lives,” and did their part to spread the gospel sound from Newark through Asbury Park and much of Springsteen Country.⁴⁶

Sherman Andrus as the first African American lead singer in an integrated mainstream Christian group.

⁴⁵ Clemente, John, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females Who Rocked the World* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013). 480.

⁴⁶ Quoted by Richard Carlin in “The Drinkards.” In *Encyclopedia of American Gospel Music*. Edited by W.K. McNeil (New York: Routledge, 2010), 110-11. For a fuller account, see Cissy Houston, with Jonathan Singer. *How Sweet the Sound: My Life with God and the Gospel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

Ironically, in Elvis' later years, as he steadily became less relevant to Rock and Roll, it was the Sweet Inspirations – not just gospel singers, but black women raised on traditional gospel – who were sometimes able to inject a contemporary sound (“Suspicious Minds” and the later parts of “Long Black Limousine” are just a couple of notable examples) into his better performances and recordings. Musically, they were his last best hope.

The Cautionary Tale & Gospel Redemption

Even as he presented Springsteen with the outrageous and irresistible idea of becoming a Rock star, Elvis also became his ultimate cautionary tale. Of course, as Springsteen started his career in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was well aware of the troubled Rock heroes – most famously, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison – whose self-destruction provided the tragic examples for his generation's prevailing Romantic myth of the artist. By the early 1970s, it was a role that seemed destined to keep repeating itself. After the extraordinary promises of the 1960s, after Woodstock and Altamont, there was a common awareness, as James Miller writes, that Rock and Roll had been transformed “almost beyond recognition.” Rock had become “a new cultural form,” and now it needed a “once and future Messiah.”⁴⁷ Springsteen's critics have often disagreed about the reasons for his sudden fame following the release of *Born to Run* late in the

⁴⁷ James Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 297, 317-325. In essays that are often sharply critical of Springsteen, Miller contrasts his earnest construction of a populist persona with David Bowie's ironic and self-consciously theatrical creation, in *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, of a “simulacrum” of the Rock Star as “the very image of redemptive self-destruction.” It is an interesting argument, but Springsteen, mainly because of his religious beliefs, has never viewed self-destruction as a means of redemption.

summer of 1975, but they have been virtually unanimous about the excessive expectations placed upon him. As Peter Ames Carlin describes it, without exaggeration, “The critical appraisals greeting *Born to Run* read like news accounts of the second coming.”⁴⁸ What these early critics, even the True Believers, never seem to have realized is just how clearly Springsteen understood—almost as soon as he found himself thrust into the role of Rock and Roll messiah—that he needed to become something very different.

By that point, Elvis’ decline could hardly have been more obvious or more spectacular. For Springsteen, it was also more disconcerting than the other famous Rock and Roll tragedies. Only a musician like Elvis, whose roots reached so deeply into populist traditions, could have shown Springsteen so convincingly the dangers of losing his way. Elvis’ story provided more than a demonstration of “pitfalls” to be avoided. It also demanded that he imagine for some of the characters in his songs—and even more for himself—a kind of life that Elvis had somehow never managed to live, as he drifted deeper and deeper into isolation.

Most basically, as Springsteen would write in his autobiography (expanding upon decades of onstage commentaries), Elvis had followed the path of many of Rock and Roll “heroes” by mistaking “unfettered personal license” for “real freedom.”⁴⁹ The biggest problem with this “personal license” was not the sex or the drugs, though they obviously took their toll, and it certainly was not the music itself. The biggest problem was that the “connection between the man onstage and the fan had grown too abstract.”⁵⁰ Elvis had lost not only his connection to the fans in

⁴⁸ Carlin, *Bruce*, 204.

⁴⁹ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 262.

⁵⁰ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 266.

the audience; he had also lost any recognizable sense of belonging to the communities from which he and his music had emerged. He had done so torturously, operatically, in slow-motion and stop-action, album by album, film by film, dollar by dollar, over nearly two decades.

On this point, too, Springsteen knew his Elvis. By the later 1950s, wealth and fame had not only led him to abandon both his artistic freedom and his “real” personal freedom for the seemingly endless series of assembly-line movies and soundtracks. Along the way, Elvis had also allowed himself to become insulated and isolated, even from the musical revolution he had helped to set in motion, by his controlling carnival huckster of a manager and by an inner-circle of “his guys” who devoted themselves to nothing more than supporting his indulgences (when Elvis died, John Lennon remarked that had really died 19 years earlier—that is, when he joined the Army and handed his career to Colonel Parker and his marketing machinery). Even when Elvis went back to Memphis, he would imprison himself behind that iconic wall at Graceland, away from the local community that had given him its sounds and nurtured his gift. Through two shows a night in Las Vegas, a parody of himself, he would deteriorate inexorably, dying (still just 42 years old) in an avalanche of tabloid melodrama. Even after his death, he would end up bizarrely enshrined, more an object of worship than a man. Of course, he would continue “defying common-sense notions of how dead stars are supposed to behave,” as Gilbert B. Rodman has put it, “showing up in places where he doesn’t seem to belong.”⁵¹ His image would appear just about everywhere: postage stamps, political campaigns, art

⁵¹ Gilbert B. Rodman, “A Hero to Most?: Elvis, Myth, and the Politics of Race” (*Cultural Studies* 8.3, 1994), 457.

exhibits, advertisements, university courses, movies, T-shirts, comic books, academic journals, and on and on. He became an abstraction.

Springsteen's preoccupation with Elvis through this critical period in his own career has been carefully documented, especially his self-reflection and sense of loss in the months around Elvis' death. Highlights include a night at the Stone Pony, late in May of 1977, when Springsteen led a friend's band in a gyrating, Elvis-worthy rendition of "Jailhouse Rock."⁵² Just a few nights later, he and Steve Van Zandt drove down to Philadelphia for one of Elvis' final shows at the Spectrum, after which they were so disheartened that they drove home scarcely able to talk. What they saw must have been disturbing, not just to devoted fans – they decided to sit in the middle of the audience, rather than among the VIPs – but to anyone capable of recognizing human tragedy. Reviewers described these final concerts as "a series of postures" by a man "too tired – or bored – to care," as "a depressingly incoherent, amateurish mess served up by a bloated, stumbling and mumbling figure who didn't act like 'The King' of anything, least of all rock 'n' roll," and many other words to the same effect.⁵³ And then, as they worked on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, they set up a shrine to Elvis in the recording studio – "his ghost hovered over our sessions," Springsteen writes – and passed around a copy of the tabloid biography, *Elvis: What Happened?*⁵⁴ During the same recording sessions, Springsteen wrote "Fire," hoping that Elvis

⁵² Will Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York That Change Music Forever* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2011), 254.

⁵³ Quoted in Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little Brown, 1999), 603, 607.

⁵⁴ Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*, 254. Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 266.

might record it, and apparently sent him a demo, only to learn he had died before it arrived.⁵⁵

Then, in August of 1977, in one of the most consequential coincidences in the history of Rock and Roll, just as Springsteen was arriving at a critical point in his rather lengthy struggle to come to terms with his own sudden fame, Elvis died.

Two days after Elvis' death, Springsteen and Van Zandt flew to Salt Lake City with the photographer Eric Meola. As they drove through the desert taking photographs—they wanted to emulate the desolate images in Robert Frank's *The Americans* and John Ford's film adaptation of *Grapes of Wrath*—they lamented Elvis' demise as the culmination of a long and painful isolation that had been facilitated by his inner circle. "All those guys," Van Zandt said, "all his friends, abandoned him."⁵⁶ It could hardly have been clearer to Springsteen that Elvis had become exactly what he would never want to be.

Over the years, telling stories onstage, Springsteen has often echoed the iconoclastic Rock writer Lester Bangs, saying that "everybody remembers where they were when Elvis died."⁵⁷ Of

⁵⁵ Heylin, *E Street Shuffle*.

⁵⁶ Carlin, *Bruce*, 246-48.

⁵⁷ Quoted by Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 282. In many of his comments about Elvis, Springsteen has been influenced by Bangs. On the occasion of Elvis's death, Bangs wrote a seminal essay, "Where Were You When Elvis Died?" Much like Springsteen, he claimed that Elvis was the last figure that Rock and Roll's audience could agree upon, before he succumbed to a "nurtured indifference" to his fans. For Bangs, Elvis' indifference characterized a larger solipsism that, by the early 1970s, had come to dominate American culture, bringing with it a complete fragmentation of popular music. In a "keynote speech" at the 2012 South by Southwest Festival, Springsteen referred to Bangs' article on Elvis as the "most prophetic comment" about rock music of the previous quarter century. Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*. Edited by Greil Marcus (New York: Random House, 1988), 212-216. Bruce Springsteen, "Keynote Speech," 387.

course, very few of us actually do (even those of us who are old enough) or ever did (with the notable exception of Bob Dylan). From the time of Elvis' death, there has been a growing gap between Springsteen's preoccupation with Elvis' long demise—and his larger view of Elvis' place in popular music—and the perceptions of the world at large. Significantly, as Rodman highlights in an important analysis of Elvis and race, younger African American musicians, including Public Enemy in "Fight the Power" and Living Colour in "Elvis is Dead," have questioned and rejected the preoccupation with Elvis as The King. They understand that this imperial view of Elvis is part of a complex set of cultural myths that contribute to the devaluation, financial and otherwise, of black musicians.⁵⁸

For my purposes, it is important to understand Springsteen's preoccupation with Elvis, particularly at this time around Elvis' death, because it provides much of the personal context and critical vocabulary for his cultivation of a distinctly Catholic imagination, which was just then beginning to shape the direction of Springsteen's later work, and which would eventually shape his views of race, community, and redemption. By the later 1970s, Springsteen's reflections on Elvis would become significant episodes in the process of reflection and discernment through which he decided that he would not "age out of rock," as so many stars of the previous generation had done, and through which began to find his "adult voice." He would soon develop versions of this voice in the "story songs" on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *The River*, and *Nebraska*. More deliberately than before—in songs like "Racing in the Street," "Darkness on the Edge of Town," "The River," "Atlantic City," and "Nebraska"—he would depict flawed

⁵⁸ Gilbert B. Rodman, "A Hero to Most?", 457-77.

men and women facing distinctly adult responsibilities and struggles. These characters walk their own Narrow Paths between faith and despair, “one foot in the light, one foot in the darkness, in pursuit of the next day.”⁵⁹ Soon, he would find the literary and theological aspects of such stories more highly developed in the fiction of Flannery O’Connor, and he would learn how “[y]ou could feel within them the unknowability of God, the intangible mysteries of life that confounded her characters, and which I find by my side every day.”⁶⁰

At the same time, Springsteen’s pursuit of an “adult voice” would lead him to return in his songs to places like the Freehold of his youth, “blue-collar neighborhoods, somewhat integrated, filled with factory workers, cops, firemen, long-distance truck drivers.”⁶¹ He would hold these people in stark contrast to those Rock Stars who had who had somehow managed to “lose their way and watch their music and art become anemic, rootless, displaced when they seemed to lose touch with who they were.”⁶² And so, in the autobiography *Born to Run*—and even more fully in his second autobiography, *Springsteen on Broadway*—this decisive moment takes shape and finds meaning around his signature song and the central image of his early career: “Such were the circumstances that led the lovers I’d envisioned in ‘Born to Run,’” he wrote, “so determined to head out and away, to turn their car around and head back to town. That’s where the deal was going down, amongst the brethren.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 278.

⁶⁰ Bruce Springsteen, “Bruce Springsteen: By the Book.”

⁶¹ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 261.

⁶² Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 265.

⁶³ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 262.

The word “brethren” is particularly apt. The pathetic isolation and abstraction of Elvis’ demise convinced Springsteen that, somehow, he needed to put his own gift at the service of struggling communities. It was easy to see how Elvis and the other Rock “heroes” had lost their way. It would be harder—a lifelong project, as it would turn out—to find paths of return and redemption. Like those young lovers who, just a few years earlier, had been “sprung from cages on Highway 9,” he too decided to change direction, “steer away from escapism,” and head back—literally, psychologically, artistically, and spiritually—to “communities under siege.” “Along with Catholicism,” he writes in *Born to Run*, it was in his “family’s neighborhood experience” that he found his “other ‘genesis’ piece,” the beginning of his song.⁶⁴ In broader terms, Springsteen’s music became not just a “search for meaning” but more specifically a search for meaning in community, even in a community of faith.⁶⁵

Springsteen also continued to expand his musical influences, along with his critical understanding of them. In this same passage from *Born to Run*, he identifies the moment after Elvis’ death as the point at which he “began to find some inspiration in the working-class blues of the Animals, pop hits like the Easybeats’ ‘Friday on My Mind’ and the country music I’d so long ignored. Hank Williams, Woody Guthrie: here was music that emotionally described a life I recognized, my life, the life of my family and neighbors.”⁶⁶ He came to understand more fully how popular music had been a source of meaning—and the only available form of art—in the world of his youth. So now, for people

⁶⁴ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 266.

⁶⁵ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 265.

⁶⁶ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 264.

in other working-class communities, caught in one version or another of his “parents’ troubled lives,” he was “determine[d] to be the enlightened, compassionate voice of reason and revenge.”⁶⁷ In popular music, as he imagined it, everyday people find their dreams of better lives, their aspirations for justice, and even their hopes for a better world. As Springsteen moved on through *Nebraska* and eventually through *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, with the influences of Woody Guthrie and John Steinbeck, he would often return to this refrain, that “Country music, gospel music, and the blues were all forms that gave voice to adult lives under stress and seeking transcendence.”⁶⁸ Sometimes, these adults “under stress” might be hanging on to the last shreds of their dreams, maybe still hoping for rebirth and redemption, as in “Racing in the Streets” and “The River.” At other times, they might cross some line, becoming disconnected and even violently unhinged, as in “Johnny 99” and “Nebraska.” And sometimes they might just go out on that line, with whatever they have left, uncertain of the consequences, unable even to tell if they care anymore, as in “Darkness on the Edge of Town” and (re-using the opening from one version of “Johnny Bye Bye”) “Atlantic City.”

And so, Springsteen began to consider how his relationship to “communities under siege” should be reflected in his bands, in his dress, in his performances, in his interactions with his audience, in his support of service agencies in the cities on his tours. But most of all, of course, this relationship had to be reflected in his songs. After the album *Born to Run*, the heart and soul of his music would no longer be an imagined Jersey Shore or the city streets across the river in an imagined New York City. In “My Hometown,” it was

⁶⁷ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 264.

⁶⁸ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 292.

Freehold itself, with its own shuttered textile mill, vacant stores, and racial tensions. In “My City of Ruins” it was his alternate hometown of Asbury Park, with its long history of segregation and many of its buildings still shuttered and streets still empty from the racial revolt of 1970.⁶⁹ More often, it was another variation on Springsteen’s America, populated by displaced factory workers in Mahwah, New Jersey, and Youngstown, Ohio; under-employed construction workers in Johnstown, Pennsylvania; and migrant farmworkers in California’s Central Valley. It was found in the country songs of Jimmy Rogers and Hank Williams, in the protest songs of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, in the anthems of the civil rights movement, in Motown, in soul, and R & B, in New Orleans jazz, and in Delta blues.

For many of Springsteen’s most compelling later songs, though, the heart and soul of the music was gospel. Gradually, as he looked back to Elvis as a cautionary tale, he also looked farther back, to the version of Elvis that preceded his pathetic later isolation, and even farther back to the communitarian vitality of Elvis’ sources in populist traditions. As Marsh puts it, “In the Pentecostal churches whose gospel music spawned so much of rock and roll, the purpose of music is to enhance interaction between congregation and performers. Often, what Springsteen idealized in

⁶⁹ For a detailed account of the civil unrest in Asbury Park, and the various portrayals of the events by participants and the media, see Daniel Weeks. “From Riot to Revolt: Asbury Park in July 1970” (*New Jersey Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2.2, 2016), 80-111. In his 2019 documentary, *Asbury Park: Riot, Redemption, Rock ‘n Roll*, Tom Jones fills in some of the longer history of music in Asbury Park—one with many similarities to Elvis’ Memphis—which prominently featured gospel and its more popular successors, in clubs on the African-American West Side like Big Bill’s, the Turf Club, and Cuba’s, until they were destroyed in the racial unrest. A late addition to this project, Springsteen provides his own commentary on this history and its significance to his music.

early rock and roll music were attempts to achieve something similar.”⁷⁰ This interaction between congregation and performers has always been central to the gospel tradition, one of the main features distinguishing it from other traditions of black music. It allows for a kind of dialogue that can embrace “familiar topics of concern” at the same time that it reminds “everyone present of their roots.”⁷¹

Gospel has been part of Springsteen’s sound, in one way or another, from the beginning. When he broke up Steel Mill in 1971 to form a larger band (known at various points as The Bruce Springsteen Band, The Sundance Blues Band, and Dr. Zoom & The Sonic Boom, among other things), Delores Holmes (from a Gospel family in Matawan) and her friend Barbara Dinkins (who soon returned to singing in church) responded to an advertisement in the *Asbury Park Press* looking for assorted musicians and two women vocalists. Springsteen’s idea was that, in the first band in which he would establish himself as a front man (hence Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band rather than The Bruce Springsteen Band), he wanted a gospel sound. After a successful audition, the two women soon joined the constantly changing band, and for a while they were called “The Zoomettes.”⁷² When Springsteen scaled the band down and finally arrived at the E Street Band, he abandoned backing singers for a while. Nonetheless, at least from the various combinations of his early days at the Upstage club in Asbury Park, gospel continued to find its way into his music. It flowed through various paths, some subtle, some loud, not only by

⁷⁰ Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 266.

⁷¹ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 187.

⁷² Rob Kirkpatrick, *The Words and Music of Bruce Springsteen* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 11. See also *See Asbury Park: Riot, Redemption, and Rock and Roll*.

way of Elvis and Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis but also, less directly, by way of Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams and Motown and Mitch Ryder—all of whom Springsteen has covered and from all of whom he has borrowed. In historical and biographical context, this broad influence should not be not surprising, as Marsh has noted, considering the prominent southern influence in the popular music that took hold of Springsteen's generation, not least of all in Central New Jersey: "In those late Fifties, early Sixties Top Forty hits, you could hear not only the voices of teenagers but the accents of the black and white Southerners who had migrated to places like Freehold."⁷³ This broad generational influence also helps explain some of Springsteen's allegiance to—and longstanding support for—often-neglected musicians like Gary U.S. Bonds, Darlene Love, and the Ronettes.

Around the turn of the millennium, as Springsteen began to express his Catholic faith more openly, he also became more explicit about gospel's role in the evolution of his persona as a Rock and Roll "front man." In his commentary in *Elvis Presley: The Searcher*, Springsteen credits Elvis with inventing this role. For Springsteen, Elvis developed his front man persona directly from his own formative religious experiences, particularly as he adopted, on stage, some of the mannerisms and dynamics of an evangelical preacher, accompanied by a choir, performing to inspire and move a congregation. While there are many examples of this adaptation in Springsteen's songs, perhaps the most significant is "Land of Hope and Dreams." In several respects, it is also a quintessential Springsteen song, demonstrating the deep relationships between his musical populism, his commitment to

⁷³ Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 329-30.

community, his religious faith, and his aspirations for social change.

“Land of Hope and Dreams” is actually a combination of three very different songs, each of which has a longstanding place in Springsteen’s career. At the start, it is a power ballad, shading (as these songs typically do) from a story of romantic love into a tribute to friendship, companionship, and accompaniment. In this regard, it begins as a bigger, broader variation on the structure of “Born to Run,” “Thunder Road,” and “No Surrender.” Then, it becomes a direct variation on traditional gospel, deeply and knowingly imitative of “This Train is Bound for Glory,” a popular religious song of the 1920s which became a gospel hit for the great Sister Rosetta Tharpe in the 1930s. Significantly, too, “This Train is Bound for Glory” also came to be associated with Woody Guthrie, through his own adaptation of the song and the title of his autobiography, *Bound for Glory*. Fitting gospel’s heritage as a shared “folk pool” of songs, versions have been recorded by the Tennessee Ramblers, Dale Hawkins, Bo Diddley, Bob Marley & the Wailers, and Pete Seeger, among many others. Then, at the end, “Land of Hope and Dreams” briefly turns into a straight-up cover of the Impressions’ civil rights anthem, “People Get Ready,” in which Curtis Mayfield brought traditional freedom songs like “Wade in the Water” and “Gospel Train,” as well as the imagery of the Underground Railroad and the story of his grandmother’s journey on the Great Migration, into popular music at a crucial historical moment in 1965.

With this sequence of its parts, “Land of Hope and Dreams” enacts a movement from romantic escape and personal liberation to spiritual aspiration for a beloved community to collective action for social justice. By doing so from the structure of a love song, it

embraces and ultimately fuses *eros* and *agape*, personal commitment and radical kinship, the quest for a new life, and the aspiration for a better society.

This middle section of “Land of Hope and Dreams” emerged as a distinct song over roughly twenty years of Springsteen’s career. Its development draws broadly from his return to “the brethren” and “communities under siege,” his deepening roots in populist traditions, his evolution as a front man leading a congregation, and his move towards more explicit religious expression. Its origins include a routine Springsteen developed during *The River* tour of 1980 when, in the midst of the Detroit medley near the end of his concerts, he would name the cities on the tour’s itinerary and repeatedly call for the audience to “get on board.” It was during the same point in his career, after *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, when he began to settle into a sense of having progressed, as Marsh puts it, “from being an artist at the fringe of American pop music to one who embodied the center of that music.”⁷⁴ This nascent train song is also a Whitmanesque attempt to cast the tour as a quest for a collective, expansive American identity, drawing upon the various musical traditions he has already embraced in the course of the career:

This song did not have a name. It didn’t need one. But it contained echoes of a dozen songs, some older than Springsteen himself. There was Roy Acuff on “The Wabash Cannonball.” The Impressions and “People Get Ready.” James Brown aboard the “Night Train.” Elvis Presley and Little Junior Parker on that “Mystery Train” – that one most of all. And also Johnny Cash’s “Hey Porter,” the blues yodels of singing brakeman Jimmy

⁷⁴ Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 225.

Rodgers, and the lonesome wail of the original Sonny Boy Williamson.⁷⁵

“It is a song you had been hearing,” Marsh adds, “if you had been raised on American music, all of your life.”⁷⁶ Of course, it is also a song you have been hearing, in various forms, all of Springsteen’s career. While much has been made, understandably, of cars (and occasionally motorcycles) in Springsteen’s songs, it is the train—a more communitarian mode of transportation towards a common destination—that gains significance all along. In much of the same spirit that his early band, Steel Mill, played two very different train songs, *Western Stars* finds its thematic and stylistic centerpiece in “Tucson Train.”⁷⁷

As “Land of Hope and Dreams” took on its more familiar form in the late 1990s, it drew more directly on the 1950s version of “This Train” by Sister Rosetta Tharpe.⁷⁸ In this respect, Sister Rosetta plays a role in this stage of Springsteen’s career similar to that of Big Mama Thornton early in Elvis’ career. This version of “This Train” is deeply grounded in the gospel tradition. It is also inescapably visceral, always on the edge between spirituality and

⁷⁵ Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 237.

⁷⁶ Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 237.

⁷⁷ From theological perspectives, George Yamin and Azzan Yadin-Israel both note that, in Springsteen’s early songs, cars (and occasionally motorcycles) are often symbols with religious significance. Yadin-Israel adds that, in Springsteen’s later work, the train becomes “a more compelling analogue than the car to the collective and, broadly speaking, predetermined course of human life.” In this sense, the train takes on and expands upon the car’s earlier significance as “a vehicle of redemption or rumination” (*The Grace of God and the Grace of Man: The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen*, Highland Park, NJ: Lingua Press, 2016), 129-30. See also Yamin, “The Theology of Bruce Springsteen,” *Journal of Religious Studies* 16 (1990), 1-21.

⁷⁸ Sister Rosetta recorded a popular and more traditional gospel version of “This Train” in the late 1930s, then a version with electric guitar, on the cusp of Rock and Roll, in the early 1950s.

sensuality, with the layers of knowing irony that would characterize Rock and Roll's adaptation of its evangelical sources in the later 1950s. More specifically, it is also characteristic of Sister Rosetta's own adaptation of Pentecostal church music for a broader, more secular audience, much as she transformed "My Lord and I" into "My Man and I" and "Rock Me in Thy Bosom" into "Rock Me." For her, it was not much of a leap from *agape* to *eros*, from Sunday morning back to Saturday night. A similar irony enters "Land of Hope and Dreams," as a song framed in the trappings of romantic love becomes a song of companionship, and as a song of escape and passion with a beloved person becomes a song of commitment and compassion for a beloved community.

By the late 1990s, Springsteen was familiar enough with these sources to adapt them readily for his own purposes. Most important, in "Land of Hope and Dreams," he makes an emotional appeal and a theological claim through a very specific inversion of "This Train." Even in Sister Rosetta Tharpe's later version, the song relies conspicuously on a traditional assertion of a fundamental righteousness: "this train is a clean train / this train don't carry no liars." Her train carries those whose conduct has earned a passage to glory, making the point that it does so whether they are white or black, and she insists that it "don't carry nothing but the righteous an' a holy." Mindful of its historical context, the song is a moral assertion that righteousness has a place among the excluded and the oppressed. Granted, especially with the undeniable sensuality of Sister Rosetta's singing and guitar playing, the song invites sexual ironies, as Little Richard demonstrated when he used its declaration that the train is "built for speed" as a very different kind of tribute to Long Tall Sally. Nonetheless, this version of the song

structures its moral order and draws much of its rhetorical force from the traditionally binary opposition of sinners and saints.

On his train, Springsteen arranged the riders so that, if the song privileges anyone, it is the “lost souls.” In “Land of Hope and Dreams,” many (though not all) of Sister Rosetta’s undercurrents of transgression become explicit. That is much of the song’s attraction. It retains enough of the traditional structure to find its moral and theological ground principally in the inclusion and transportation of these “lost souls.” As Azzan Yadin-Israel puts it, the “communal aspect” of the train in this passage “offers an inclusive vision of redemption” and a “joyful appreciation of the grace available to us in the here-and-now of our lives.”⁷⁹ Springsteen’s conception of musical populism and his spirituality rely upon the recognition that just about everyone has been lost, or could be lost. This realization is the basis for accompaniment, and an aspiration for a radical kinship that is all-embracing.

The song’s concluding riff on “People Get Ready” – invoking the underground railroad and the civil rights movement – further dramatizes and reasserts this common need, and the universal possibility of redemption, not in some afterlife but in the here-and-now. At the time of its release, one reviewer referred to “Land of Hope and Dreams” as “pure secular gospel” and wrote that the 1999-2000 Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band Reunion Tour was “as much traveling tent revival as reunion tour.”⁸⁰ These comments mostly get to the heart of the matter, but “secular gospel” is not a sufficient concept for this song, just as is not sufficient for Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s later version of “This

⁷⁹ Yadin-Israel, *The Grace of God and the Grace of Man*, 131.

⁸⁰ Chris Wellman, “Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band: Live in New York City,” *Entertainment Weekly*, updated March 17, 2020.

Train.” These songs are not dilutions of the gospel tradition, as “secular” typically implies. They are calls for gospel redemption in – and of – their contemporary world.

Strange as it all might seem, Springsteen’s long career suggests that, without Elvis, he could never have adopted gospel in such compelling ways. At the same time, Elvis is turning out to be just one part of a project that continues to grow more ambitious both in its spiritual aspirations and in its hopes for collective redemption. In an interview about his album *Letter to You*, Springsteen says that his new song, “House of a Thousand Guitars,” is “about this entire spiritual world that I wanted to build for myself.” He compares it to the gospel song “I’m Working on a Building”: “That’s the building we’ve been working on all these years. It also speaks somewhat to the spiritual life of the nation. It may be one of my favorite songs I’ve ever written. It draws in everything I’ve been trying to do for the past 50 years.”⁸¹ In other words, “House of a Thousand Guitars” is also a sequel to and an expansion of “Land of Hope and Dreams.” It shows how fully Springsteen has come to see his work as part of a living tradition, grounded primarily in gospel, that seeks redemption in community – and a tradition that seeks the redemption and restoration of communities. Of course, he also realizes (past his 71st birthday) how much work remains to be done before all the misfit riders on that train – the saints and sinners, the whores and

⁸¹ Quoted by Brian Hiatt in “Ghosts, Guitars, and the E Street Shuffle” (*Rolling Stone*, September 20, 2020). <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/bruce-springsteen-interview-new-album-touring-e-street-band-1059109/>. While its origins are uncertain, “I’m Working on a Building” seems to have been an African America spiritual before becoming an early standard for B.B. King, the Carter Family, and Bill Monroe. Elvis Presley recorded it on his 1960 gospel album, *His Hand in Mine*.

gamblers, Elvis and Sister Rosetta, and the rest of them—are included in the same congregation, the same “spiritual world,” the same beloved community. And as strange as it might seem to a contemporary audience, in more traditional Catholic terms, whatever these riders might have done along the way, those still living are all still open to grace, still capable of finding their way into a communion of saints. Not coincidentally, the album also includes “Ghosts,” a big, autobiographical anthem in which Springsteen speaks about being alive in the presence of the departed “saints” from his own past. *Letter to You* is likely to require another broad reassessment of this already very long career, one informed by these traditions and just beginning to express their principles of restorative justice.