

“Pullin’ Out of Here to Win”: The Narrative Flexibility of “Thunder Road”

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Abstract

In *Conceptualizing Music*, Lawrence Zbikowski uses the idea of conceptual blending to build upon Nicholas Cook’s understanding of song as multimedia, explaining how the music and lyrics of a song can work together to create a more complex narrative than either component could on its own. While Zbikowski’s examples are taken from German art song, the present project applies this idea of conceptual blending to popular music, investigating how different recordings of a song can alter its narrative. I examine three versions of Bruce Springsteen’s “Thunder Road,” all recorded in 1975: an early live performance in February, the studio recording released in August, and a later live performance in October. This investigation of “Thunder Road” highlights an interesting issue present in popular music: the artist can continue to tweak his/her/their arrangement of a song in live performances, drastically altering the song’s narrative. Springsteen’s alterations to the song’s music and lyrics over the course of 1975 create three distinct protagonists, each negotiating their own relationship the desire to escape from a small town and find a better life on the open road.

Despite his current fame and financial success, Bruce Springsteen is hailed as a champion of the working class because of his blue-collar roots and the working-class experiences embodied in many of his songs. Yet, in the opening monologue of his Broadway show, Springsteen jokingly points out that he has never held a real job or had a five-day work week until his Broadway

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residency. So, what is it about Bruce Springsteen that makes him a working-class hero? Is it his identity as a white, Catholic, Italian/Irish-American son of blue-collar parents that explains his ability to speak to the working class experience?² Or is it in "the sometimes intangible features of his performances... sheer vitality, raw energy, and expressive delivery – that Springsteen conveys working-class value"³ While these things certainly play a role in the creation of Springsteen's performance persona, I would argue that it is what Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde term his "empathetic imagination" that enables him to "bear witness to the dreams, struggles, disappointments, and small victories that determine our everyday lives."⁴

Drawing on his personal experiences, as well as those of friends and family, Springsteen's songs present passionate characters with palpable emotions that his listeners can connect with. Springsteen crafts his music and lyrics with meticulous precision, blending the two together to effectively convey the psychological states of his characters and imbue their stories with narrative nuance. His 1975 song "Thunder Road" demonstrates how his blending of music and lyrics projects complex personas and narratives.

² Mike Cadó and Teresa V. Abbruzzese, "Tracking Place and Identity in Bruce Springsteen's *Tracks*," in *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen* ed. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 95-118.

³ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴ Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde, "Introduction: The Bard of Asbury Park," in *Reading the Boss*, 8.

In popular music studies, a studio album recording is considered the primary text of a song. Many popular musicians will replicate their album recordings in live performance, with no more than subtle interpretive changes. However, some performers view their studio recordings as simply one interpretation of a song, and their live performances are often substantially different from what appears on their albums. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Bob Dylan, but Springsteen has also made significant changes to his songs in live performances over the course of his long career. In the case of songs like “Thunder Road,” such changes can alter both the persona of the main character and the outcome of his desired escape.

This article looks at three different performances of Springsteen’s song “Thunder Road,” all from the year 1975: the studio recording released in August; an earlier performance at The Main Point in Bryn Mawr, PA in February; and the version appearing on the *Live 1975-85* album from a concert in West Hollywood, CA in October. I begin with a brief overview of how this project engages with conceptual blending in music scholarship.⁵ Then, I examine how Springsteen’s writing and performance decisions in each recording suggest three equally

⁵ While conceptual blending is an inherently interdisciplinary topic, the primary disciplinary lens of this project comes from the field of music theory.

convincing yet distinct personas⁶ and narrative trajectories,⁷ ultimately determining whether each recording's protagonist ends up "pullin' out of here to win."

Conceptual Blending

The following analyses are grounded in the idea of *conceptual blending*, a term from cognitive psychology that refers to the "process in which elements from two correlated mental spaces combine into a third."⁸ This concept has been applied to music by scholars like Lawrence Zbikowski, who argues that conceptual blending goes beyond notions of cross-domain mapping or musical metaphor to a point where elements from two different conceptual domains – in this case, music and text – blend together to create an entirely new domain. Though other scholars have addressed the dialectical relationship between music and text using different terminology, conceptual blending provides a

⁶ Allan Moore writes of a song's persona as informed by the lyrics, vocal melody, and singing style. Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). Moore distinguishes this from the "persona environment," which is communicated by the accompaniment and can interact with the person in various ways. In the following analyses, however, I use the term persona to address the character that the lyrics, melody, singing style, and accompaniment combine to convey.

⁷ David Nicholls has discussed the application of narrative theory to popular music. David Nicholls, "Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music Texts," *Music & Letters* 88, no. 2 (2007), 297-315. The recordings of "Thunder Road" discussed in this paper are party to Nicholls' fourth level of narrative: "both lyrics and music contain elements of narrative discourse, which to some degree operate independently of each other, though always in relation to an overlying story." *Ibid.*, 301.

⁸ Lawrence Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 245.

useful visual representation of the blend taking place: conceptual integration networks, or CINs.

This graphical technique, developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, helps “formalize the relationship between the mental spaces involved in a conceptual blend, to specify what aspects of the input spaces are imported into the blend, and to describe the emergent structure that results from the process of conceptual blending.”⁹ In a CIN, the input spaces on either side of the diagram contain elements of the two different domains that are being correlated; in the case of popular music, these domains would be the lyrics and the music.¹⁰ The two inputs give rise to the blended space at the bottom of the diagram; here, the resulting narrative or persona. The generic space, which appears in the topmost circle, dictates the fundamental categorization that the input spaces and blended spaces share.

While Zbikowski’s work applies conceptual blending to German art song, it can easily be applied to twentieth-century popular song. Popular music has certainly addressed the idea of blending, even if musicologists have not referred to it explicitly by that name:

In the world of pop music, it is pretty meaningless to say of a lyric that it is good: it is only one piece of the jigsaw puzzle and must be judged not on its own merits but on

⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰ While there is arguably a third input – the visual element – involved in the study of live performance, this element will not be addressed in this article because the focus is on the interaction of music and lyrics in three specific sound recordings.

the way it fits in with the other pieces, both distinct from them and at the same time completely dependent on them.¹¹

Bruce Springsteen's oeuvre epitomizes the symbiotic relationship between music and lyrics, and a particularly strong example of this is "Thunder Road." I begin my analyses by looking at what the words and music of each recording separately contribute to the song's narrative and persona.¹² It should be acknowledged that the lyrical and musical analyses that follow, like any such analyses, are subjective interpretations based on my own reading and listening. They are nevertheless supported by the text and music of the songs and present one plausible way of making sense of the relationship between these three recordings.

Studio Recording - August 1975

Lyrics

"Thunder Road" is the opening track on Springsteen's third studio album, *Born to Run*. This album can be seen as a bridge, both thematically and musically, between his first two albums and the three that followed *Born to Run*: *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *The River*, and *Nebraska*. Springsteen's first two albums contained

¹¹ Antoine Hennion, "The Production of Success: An Anti-Musicology of the Pop Song," *Popular Music* 3 (1983), 182.

¹² The analytical discussion of the studio recording is the longest, as it serves as a point of reference and comparison for the other two recordings. To avoid redundancy, the discussions of the February and October live recordings are limited to the differences from the studio recording.

Dylan-esque lyrics and lush orchestration in their tales of optimism, romanticism, and innocence.¹³ Beginning with 1978's *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, however, Springsteen's songwriting turned thematically towards stories of isolation and hopelessness, set with comparatively sparse instrumentation.¹⁴ While *Born to Run* is closer to the earlier albums in terms of orchestration, the lyrical turn towards passionate first-person narratives seems to foreshadow the thematic shift towards the realistic depictions of working-class desperation that appear on *Darkness*.

Born to Run also marks a turning point in the trajectory of Springsteen's career. While *Greetings from Asbury Park* and *The Wild, The Innocent, and The E Street Shuffle* were critically acclaimed, they did not have the commercial success that his record label had expected from their much lauded "New Dylan."¹⁵ At the time, Columbia Records was considering dropping Springsteen so that they could put more resources into promoting their newest sensation, Billy Joel. For this reason, *Born to Run* served as Springsteen's last chance to make it big in the music industry. Though he was not a member of the workforce at the time of its composition, his desire to escape his blue-collar roots helped to infuse the album with palpable desperation.

Springsteen is a perfectionist when it comes to his songwriting, often going through several versions of his lyrics to make sure that the words were exactly what he wanted. This semi-

¹³ Cadó and Abbruzzese, "Tracking Place."

¹⁴ Ibid. One could also read that album as containing a mix of despair and hope.

¹⁵ Marc Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012).

obsessive writing process is evident in the composition of the *Born to Run* album; the titular track alone took six months to write and record.¹⁶ Because Springsteen worked on his new material while touring, he tested early versions of many of his new songs at live shows before recording them. One such song is "Thunder Road." Through significant rewrites, "Thunder Road" was transformed from a story of a restless, car-obsessed teenager who does not understand the meaning of despair to the tale of a determined and desperate young man who is trying to convince his cautious love interest to leave her claustrophobic life and run away with him in search of something better. The lyrics to the studio version of "Thunder Road" are given in Appendix 1.

The opening stanza of the song depicts the protagonist sitting in his car outside the house of a girl named Mary, listening to the radio and watching as Mary comes outside. In the first line, Springsteen describes a screen door slamming in an otherwise peaceful scene, as if the door is closing quickly to keep the house's occupants from escaping. This stanza is filled with Catholic imagery, from Mary's name to the description of her as a "vision."¹⁷ These lyrics suggest that Mary is repressed by the expectations of her upbringing, but they also imply that Mary is repressing herself

¹⁶ Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 208.

¹⁷ While it could be argued that this is Christian imagery rather than specifically Catholic, the focus on Mary is a distinctly Catholic feature, as are the stories of Mary appearing in a vision to believers (for example in the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe). Additionally, it is well-known that Springsteen himself was raised Catholic and so referring to the imagery as Catholic seems appropriate.

in order to retain the self-sacrificing status that the speaker attributes to her.

As he watches Mary emerge from the house, the speaker is listening to Roy Orbison “singing for the lonely” on his car radio, referring to Orbison’s popular ballad “Only the Lonely.”¹⁸ This song gives voice to a man who has just had his heart broken and is saddened by the painful realities of the world. Orbison’s last verse, while still dark, offers a glimmer of hope to all those familiar with this heartache: “Maybe tomorrow/A new romance/No more sorrow/But that’s the chance –/You gotta take/If your lonely heart breaks/Only the lonely.”¹⁹ Springsteen’s protagonist clearly identifies with the lonely speaker in Orbison’s song, indicating to the listener that he has experienced pain but sees Mary as his “new romance,” his chance for something better.

When the speaker identifies with the song on the radio, he switches from observing the scene to addressing Mary directly. He sings, “Don’t turn me home again, I just can’t face myself alone again/Don’t run back inside darling, you know just what I’m here for,” implying that this isn’t the first time he has asked her to run away with him. He knows that she is scared to leave her comfort zone. He suggests, however, that with a little faith, they can escape to a better life together. The speaker seems to put his foot in his mouth when he tells Mary she isn’t a beauty, but what appears to be an insult is the speaker’s way of saying that, though Mary may

¹⁸ Roy Orbison, “Only the Lonely,” *Lonely and Blue*. Washington, D.C.: Monument Records (1960).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

not be perfect, she still deserves a chance to escape her circumstances.

In the third stanza, the young man shifts from pleading with Mary to accusing her of ignoring this opportunity. Instead of escaping, she puts her head in the sand or dwells on her misery, letting it eat away at her. The image of the cross once again portrays Mary as a would-be-martyr, while the reference to "throwing roses in the rain" paints her as childlike. The speaker claims that Mary is fervently waiting for a rescuer but, when he finally shows up to offer her an escape, she is too scared to act. Though the young man acknowledges that he's far from perfect and can't fix all her problems, he has the means to get away and can offer Mary the chance to find something good.

Springsteen's use of the phrase "dirty hood" is open to several interpretations. The most obvious is the engine under the hood of the car, suggesting that their chance to escape is, quite literally, "beneath this dirty hood." Another possible reading is that the speaker's passion and desperation are housed in the heart that beats beneath his dirty sweatshirt. Finally, the speaker could be using "hood" as a slang for himself. In this case, the lyrics take on a sexual connotation, implying that Mary can escape the expectations of her Catholic upbringing by taking the speaker as her lover to achieve a fleeting type of escape. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and the multiple meanings might simply serve to reinforce the inextricability of the man, the car, and the possibility of escape. Though the speaker is vague about where

they will go or how exactly things will be better once they get there, he is adamant that escaping now is their only option.

The fifth stanza romanticizes their escape as the speaker describes racing down an empty highway with the windows rolled down. This description contrasts with the opening image of the slamming door, suggesting that the repression of their lives will disappear as soon as they leave town. It is as if the speaker gets caught up in his own optimism, thinking of the endless possibilities that lie beyond the limits of their small town. The line "We've got one last chance to make it real/To trade in these wings on some wheels" once again argues that Mary must give up her self-sacrificing behavior and embrace her real hope for salvation: the speaker and his car.

In the sixth stanza, the young man explicitly states his invitation to Mary, letting her know that, while leaving her comfort zone is terrifying, she will not have to take the risk alone. His desperation and passion are palpable in this stanza as he describes his intention to "case the Promised Land." Casing is colloquially understood as checking the scene of a theft in preparation for committing the crime. This tells the listener that the speaker has had a hard life; he believes that if he wants something for himself, he will have to go out and take it. Even the name of the highway conjures power, passion, and earth-shaking intensity.²⁰ He calls the highway "a killer in the sun," perhaps implying that if they don't go, the possibilities of their escape will become "*what ifs*" that slowly kill them. The speaker reminds Mary that she has not

²⁰ This is also likely a reference to the 1958 film of the same name.

resigned herself to that fate yet. All she has to do is get in the car and hang on for the ride; the car will do the rest.

The young man mentions his guitar playing in the seventh stanza, suggesting that this will be a way for the couple to support themselves. He seems confident that if he gets out of his small town, he can make a life for himself as a musician. Then, he reminds Mary of their current situation: his car is ready and waiting, she just needs to commit to the idea of leaving. He will not force her to sacrifice her safety and comfort; the choice is Mary's. The speaker acknowledges that Mary may be hesitant because he has yet to tell her he loves her (the "words that I ain't spoken") or assure her that everything will be okay. He addresses these concerns by saying that, though excitement lies ahead, neither of them can know exactly what will happen once they escape: "all the promises'll be broken."

However, the protagonist predicts what will happen to Mary if she chooses not to come with him: she will regret her decision and be haunted by memories of boys like him who tried to save her. The eighth stanza describes this in eerie detail, from the "skeleton frames" of the cars to the "screams" of the spurned saviors. Even her graduation robe, a symbol of the accomplishments that were expected of her, "lies in rags" suggesting that staying for the sake of duty and obligation will end up being worthless.

Night is a time filled with potential and opportunity over the course of the song. As the magic of the night wears away, however, "in the lonely cool before dawn" Mary will hear the

sounds of car engines and change her mind. She'll run out to join him, but it will be too late. Having issued this warning, the speaker extends one last invitation to Mary before turning the attention back to himself. He concludes by passionately declaring that "It's a town full of losers, I'm pulling out of here to win." While he would like Mary to join him, he must leave regardless of her decision.

Music

Determined to address the criticism leveled at the production quality of his first two albums, Springsteen used *Born to Run* to showcase the latest recording technology. He strove to create the perfect rock record, obsessing over every detail of the album's recording and production. His first two albums had been recorded live, with all the band members playing at once, but Springsteen decided to use the technique of overdubbing on *Born to Run*. This allowed him to create an enormous, Phil Spector-inspired wall of sound on this album.

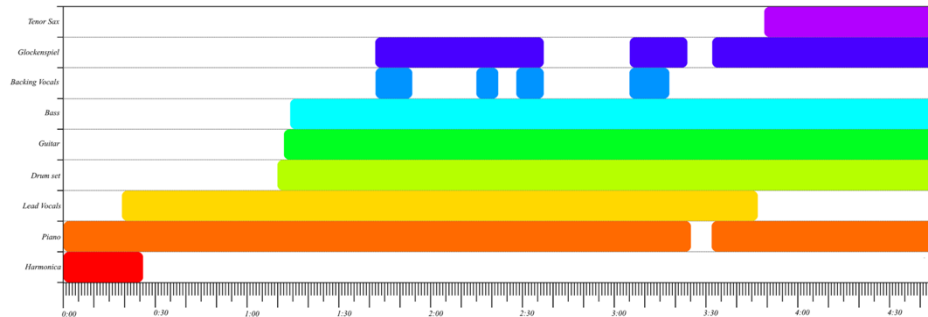
Another aspect of *Born to Run* that sets it apart from the earlier albums is his method of composition. Springsteen wrote all the songs for *Born to Run* on the piano instead of his primary instrument, guitar. In the words of E Street Band keyboardist Roy Bittan, "There's a great difference when you write on the piano.... I think that oftentimes on the piano you can discover things that you wouldn't discover on the guitar."²¹ Composing at the piano allowed Springsteen to create powerful melodies in the album.

²¹ Thom Zimny, *Wings for Wheels: The Making of Born to Run* (New Jersey: Thrill Hill Productions, 2005).

Though the piano is the most prominent instrument in the song, the other instruments have their affective roles to play. One of the key musical features of "Thunder Road" is the crescendo created by adding layers of instruments over the course of the song, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

The song opens with a simple melody played by piano and harmonica. The piano becomes more rhythmically active at the end of this introduction, creating a sense of rushing by shifting from a relaxed two-beat tempo into a driving four. The first two stanzas of the song are accompanied solely by the piano. Both the arpeggiated eighth notes of the right hand and the sparse, syncopated bass of the left occupy a register higher than the vocals, highlighting the rough quality of Springsteen's voice. The treble accompaniment conveys a quiet timidity under the rhythmically steady vocals. Despite the simplicity of the texture, the constant eighth notes in the right hand of the piano suggest an underlying urgency. At the beginning of the second stanza, there is a measure of strong, stable chords that shifts the register of the accompaniment down an octave, giving the impression of growing strength and confidence. Though the basic melody of the second stanza is the same as the first, the range of the vocal line expands upward, further energizing the song.

Figure 1: Texture Diagram for Studio Recording



The texture begins to build just before the third stanza with the entrance of the drums, guitar, and bass. The addition of these other instruments does not automatically turn “Thunder Road” into one of the more haphazard jam sessions found on Springsteen’s earlier albums, however. The bass doubles the left hand of the piano while the usually prevalent guitar adds simple harmonic and rhythmic support to the primary accompaniment of the piano. The nervous running eighth notes of the first two stanzas are replaced by more confident chordal support, highlighted by the simple drum set part. As the instruments lock together into a strong and stable accompaniment pattern, the vocal line becomes less rhythmically and dynamically predictable. Even still, all the parts form a coherent whole as the accented downbeats and extended vocal line propel directly into the fifth stanza.

Here, Springsteen introduces the organ and the backing vocals into the mix for the first time. The guitars and keyboards merge into a unified accompaniment, and the drum set becomes more prominent. In the production of the album, the backing vocals

were put very low in the mix, creating a distant, almost echoless effect, like shouting across a wide-open space. A measure of sixteenth notes on the drum set launches the song into the next stanza, bringing back the introductory melody in the vocals and keyboards. In the second half of the stanza, the keyboards continue this melody while the vocals add in the melody of the earlier verses overtop. The layering of the two different melodies adds to the crescendo effect of the song while also emphasizing the growing independence of the vocals, and they rise in register and volume to give the impression of uncontrollable excitement.

There is a two-beat drum fill between the sixth and seventh stanzas, which brings the vocals back under control and reunifies the accompanying instrumental parts. Here, Springsteen finally introduces the lead guitar as a focal instrument for the first time in the song, adding yet another voice to the expanding texture. At the end of the stanza, the vocal line ascends in contrary motion to the accompaniment and the last two measures crescendo through the repeated eighth notes in the piano, drum set, and vocals. By the last line, the vocals sound more like passionate screaming than singing, breathlessly leading into the end of the song.

The next stanza brings the vocals down from their screaming heights and reinstates the strong, syncopated accompaniment, this time with the guitars higher in the mix. At the beginning of the final stanza, the keyboards drop out for the first time in the song, introducing a new vocal melody with guitar and bass accompaniment. Midway through the stanza, the piano, and organ return with steadily descending quarter notes. The end of the

stanza is highlighted by colorful licks from the piano and guitar. As Springsteen sings the last lines of the song, the accompaniment builds from steady quarter notes to desperate eighth notes, outlining a clear IV-V-I cadential progression.

However, this cadence is done as the drums continue to build and a descending piano glissando lead into the song's instrumental conclusion. This eight-bar repeated outro introduces the final instrument: the tenor saxophone. The passionate saxophone melody trades the spotlight back and forth with the piano counter-melody. The harmonic progression of the outro, ending on the dominant, perpetually propels itself back to the tonic at the beginning of the passage. The only fitting way to end this cycle is with a fade-out.

The Blend of Lyrics and Music

"Thunder Road" is a strong example of how Springsteen deliberately blends his lyrics and music in order to convey complex characters and stories. The simple instrumentation and diatonic melody of the introduction set the scene of a small, quiet town. The rough quality of Springsteen's voice at the beginning of the song provides insight into the character of the narrator, suggesting someone rough around the edges who has not had an easy life but is not going to let that keep him down. The soft, high accompaniment implies a quiet timidity: the hesitation of a young man who has been rejected before and is almost afraid to ask again. The register of the accompaniment also has an ethereal quality that enhances the religious imagery present at the beginning of the

song. Overtop of the running eighth notes, the vocals are rhythmic and steady, like a speech that has been rehearsed over and over. One can almost see the young man practicing in front of a mirror, trying to work up the courage to approach Mary again. Despite his steadiness, the constant motion of the accompaniment implies an underlying urgency that drives the speaker to plead with Mary, even if it means risking another rejection.

When the speaker says, "I just can't face myself alone again," the piano accompaniment crescendos to mirror his growing confidence. The young man is not sure of much, but he knows that things cannot stay the way they are: it is time for a change. This determination is palpable through the musical gestures at the end of the phrase that shift the register of the accompaniment down, increasing both the volume and stability of the song. The singer's voice reaches up to F# on the lyrics, "show a little faith." In speech, a person's voice rises in pitch when one becomes impassioned, so it is appropriate that the vocal line ascends when the young man addresses Mary's concerns. It is as if he is telling her that she should have faith despite being scared. The lyrics no longer feel like a prepared speech; the speaker knows that he is getting carried away, but what he has to say is so important that he just cannot hold it in.

All traces of the young man's timidity are gone from the music as well as the lyrics by the time the drums, guitar, and bass enter. The support of the other instruments allows the vocal line to become more impassioned. The speaker is no longer afraid of offending Mary as he blatantly accuses her of hiding behind her circumstances. With endearing self-deprecation, he acknowledges

that he is not a knight in shining armor. Even still, he knows that he can offer her the chance she needs and, therefore, he is her opportunity for redemption.

The music of the fifth stanza embodies the excitement and desperation of the young man, who by now is completely carried away. He is no longer outside Mary's house; in his mind, he has already made his escape and he dreamily recounts what freedom on the open road feels like. The snare drum at the beginning of the sixth stanza snaps him back to the present and, for the first time, he explicitly invites Mary to run away with him. As he presents his invitation, he repeats the name of the highway, "Thunder Road," several times. It is as if just saying the name, with all its earth-shaking connotations, should be enough to convince Mary. Clearly, the young man is unable to contain himself as his voice rises in register and volume to exclaim, "Sit tight, take hold, Thunder Road."

The young man brings up his guitar playing just as the lead guitar is introduced into the mix. This is the first time that the guitar is prominent in "Thunder Road." As biographer Marc Dolan describes it, "waiting for the instrument to enter on this track perfectly conveys the song's gradually dawning hope."²² Mary may not have said yes yet, but she also has not said no, so the young man continues to describe his ideas for the future. The overall dynamic of the song builds dramatically when he sings, "And I know you're lonely for words that I ain't spoken / But tonight we'll be free. All the promises'll be broken." By the time he reaches the

²² Dolan, *The Promise of Rock 'N' Roll*, 121.

lyrics about broken promises, his vocals are closer to screaming than singing, as if sheer volume will assuage Mary's concerns about what will happen once they leave town.

The eighth stanza energetically predicts Mary's fate should she reject the speaker's offer. As he describes the "ghosts in the eyes of all the boys you sent away," the lead guitar interjects as if its voice will be one of the ghosts that will haunt Mary's thoughts. The vocals reach desperate heights on the line, "They scream your name at night in the street," and stay in that register to describe the symbol of all that Mary has worked for being reduced to "rags."

The keyboards disappear as the lyrics set a scene "in the lonely cool before dawn." The silencing of the piano, which has been the central instrument for the entire song, represents the silencing of Mary's hope for escape. It appropriately sets the lines that describe Mary being haunted by the ghosts of her missed opportunities. The piano and organ return with steadily descending quarter notes as the speaker tells Mary, "when you get to the porch they're gone," signifying her hope for escape, potentially disappearing into the distance. Just before the singer extends his final invitation to Mary, the guitar plays a soloistic blues riff, as if to remind Mary that her would-be savior is still there and that she has not missed her chance yet. As the young man sings his last desperate lines, the accompaniment and vocals build into their final crescendo. The instrumental ending tells us at least part of the story's ending: the young man has escaped. Whether or not Mary joined him is left open to speculation. Perhaps the descending

piano line just before the last lyrics symbolizes Mary running down the porch steps to join him in his victorious departure.

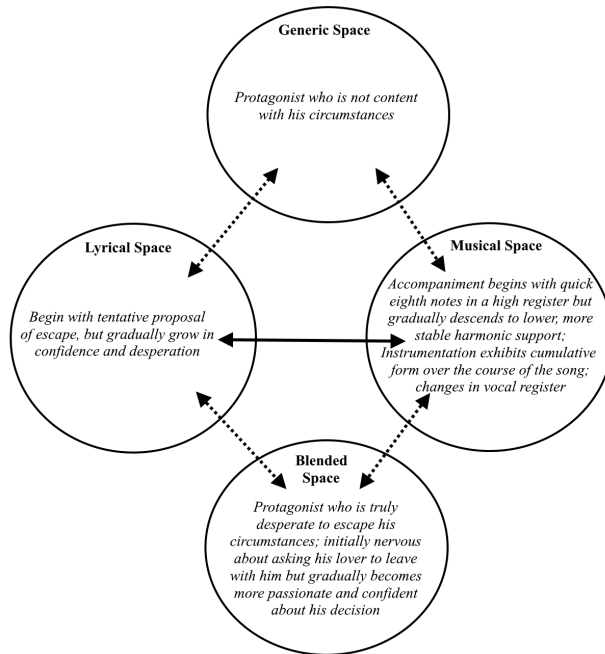


Figure 2: Persona CIN – Studio Recording

Figure 2 shows a CIN of the persona created in this song. The lyrics of the studio recording begin tentatively as the protagonist invites Mary to come with him, but he gradually grows in confidence, desperation, and passion as he tries to convince her. Similarly, the accompaniment begins in a high register that sounds tentative, but later moves to more stable harmonic support. Over the course of the song, the instruments are gradually introduced into the texture, what Mark Spicer would call a “cumulative

form."²³ This textural crescendo communicates increasing confidence, supported by changes in vocal register at key moments of the song. Together, these features create a protagonist who is truly desperate to escape his circumstances.

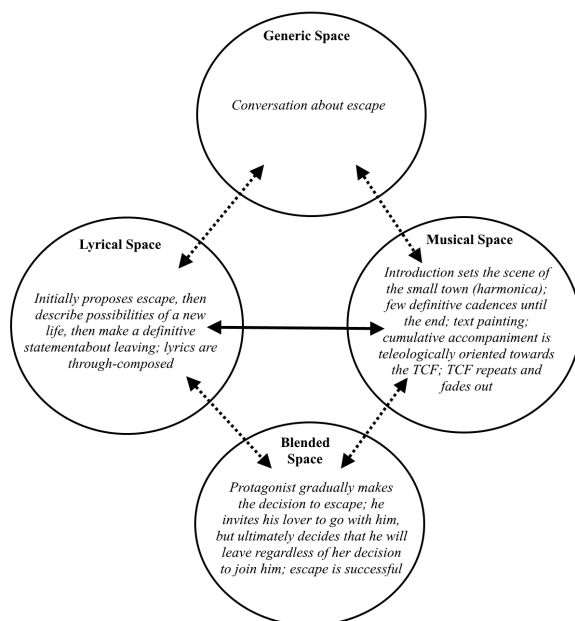


Figure 3: Narrative CIN - Studio Recording

A CIN of the narrative trajectory of this recording is given in Figure 3. The through-composed lyrics (a composition that does not have repeated sections) initially propose escape, then move to discussing the possibilities of a new life. The protagonist concludes with a definitive statement about his intention to leave. Musically,

²³ Mark Spicer, "(Ac)cumulative Form in Pop-Rock Music," *Twentieth-Century Music* 1, no. 1 (2004): 29-64.

the introduction sets the scene of a small town through the use of the harmonica. Perhaps it is even the protagonist himself, leaning against his car and playing harmonica along with the radio. There are few definitive cadences over the course of the song, with the strongest one occurring on the last line. Finally, the cumulative form of the song is teleologically oriented towards the climax of the outro, which repeats and fades out in a way that could signify driving into the distance.²⁴ The absence of the harmonica at the end of the song, the marker of the small town from the beginning, communicates that the setting has changed. Over the course of the song, the protagonist gradually comes to the decision to escape. He invites Mary to go with him but ultimately decides that he will leave regardless of her decision. The exuberant outro communicates that his getaway is a success.

Bryn Mawr, PA - February 1975

Lyrics

Before recording the version of “Thunder Road” that ended up on *Born to Run*, Springsteen performed an early draft of the song with the parenthetical subtitle “Wings for Wheels.” This version includes lyrics with a different focus than the studio recording, beginning with the name of the singer’s girlfriend: here, Angelina instead of Mary.²⁵ The lyrics of this recording appear in Appendix 2. The first and second stanzas are largely unchanged but, by the

²⁴ Brad Osborn, “Subverting the Verse-Chorus Paradigm: Terminally Climactic Forms in Recent Rock Music,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 35, no. 1 (2013): 23-47.

²⁵ Note that both names fit with the religious imagery, referencing angels in the early version and the Virgin Mary in the studio version.

third stanza, the singer seems more focused on his car than his girlfriend. He quickly shifts from assuaging her fears to pressuring her to make up her mind so that he can get back on the road. He seems more interested in going for a drive than in leaving town for good. The fourth stanzas of the two recordings communicate similar ideas but use different imagery to convey passion and excitement. The speaker in the "Wings for Wheels" version does not address the difficulties of starting a new life, but instead focuses on how they will "dance all the way" out of town.

The next-to-last stanza does not have a clear parallel to the studio version. It conjures images of the shore town life that is the focal point of "4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)" from Springsteen's second album. The singer laments that the season is over, the cold is coming in, and he wishes "I could take you to some sandy beach where we'd never grow old." This identification of a specific location makes the story less generalizable. This is not a generic small town where nothing ever happens; shore towns are busy places during the summer but become quieter when the tourists go home. Situating the town on the shore makes it seem like the young man's desire to leave is merely temporary until the next summer rolls around.

The final declaration in the studio recording is "I'm pullin' out of here to win." It is definitive and action oriented. Here, the lyrics are "baby I was born to win." While passionate – and perhaps foreshadowing "Baby we were born to run" – they are passive and do not contain any direct statement of action.

Music

The harmonica is absent from the beginning of this recording and the instrumentation is different, including violin and substituting organ for the studio recording's glockenspiel. The balance between instruments does not seem as intentional, though this is a live performance as opposed to a carefully crafted studio track. Before the next-to-last stanza, the energy drops down and the instrumental texture thins out, signifying a change of mood. Just before the last line, the energy begins to build back up again, reaching a similarly strong cadence as the studio recording. After this strong conclusion, however, the saxophone leads the band back in for an outro that feels disconnected from the rest of the song. It sounds like a party or a jam in the style of "The E Street Shuffle," ending the song on an upbeat note.

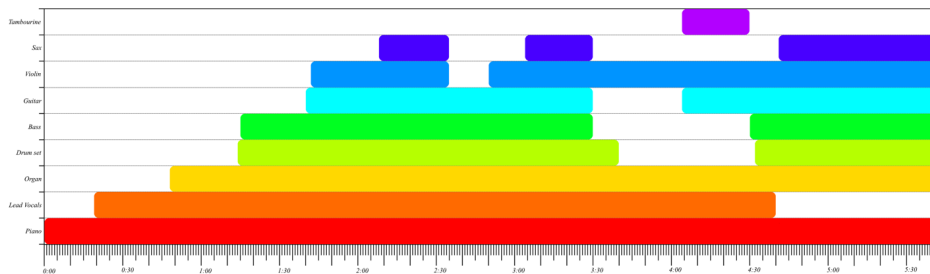


Figure 4: Texture Diagram for "Wings for Wheels"

The Blend of Lyrics and Music

The lyrics of this version of "Thunder Road" invite the protagonist's girlfriend to run away with him, but he is not focused on the realities of escaping and his reference to the end of the

summer in a shore town indicates a boredom that will disappear by the next summer. The introduction of instruments on the track, shown in Figure 4, does not have the same organized, goal-oriented feel of the studio recording. These features communicate a protagonist who is young and bored rather than desperate and determined to escape, as illustrated in the persona CIN in Figure 5.

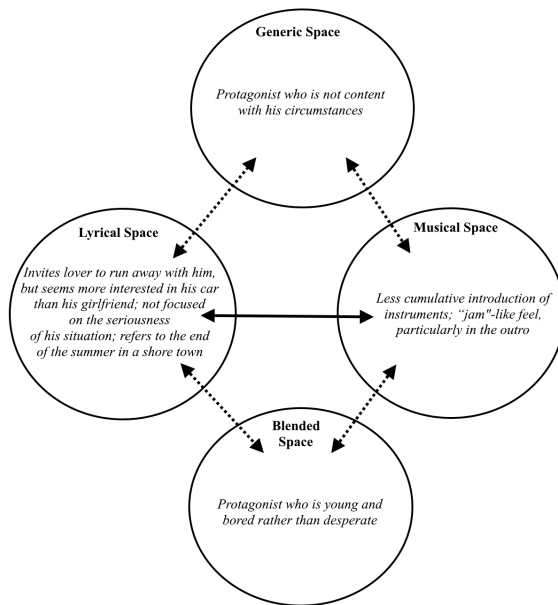


Figure 5: Persona CIN - "Wings for Wheels"

Figure 6 shows the CIN for the narrative of this recording. A lack of seriousness is communicated both in the proposal of the escape and the description of how it will happen. The closing lyrics also do not convey definitive action. Musically, the accompaniment is relaxed and not goal oriented. The instrumental balance is a bit

haphazard, and the closing material does not seem to fit with the rest of the song. Overall, it seems that this protagonist's situation is not serious and can be fixed by a long drive and an end-of-summer party. He does not escape, and that's okay. He believes he is "born to win."

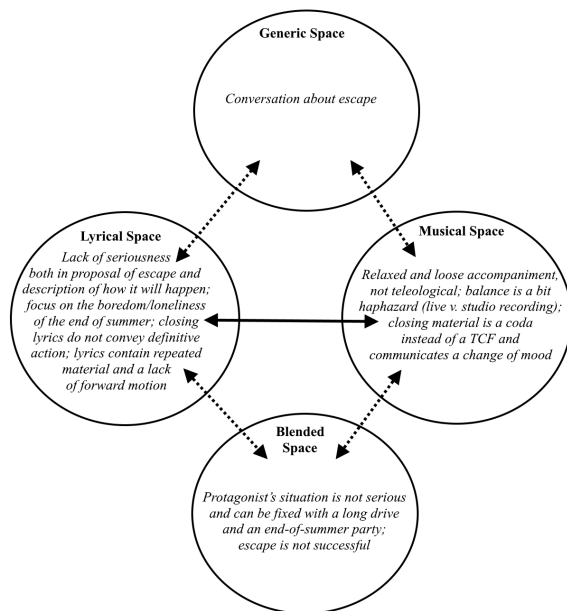


Figure 6: Narrative CIN – “Wings for Wheels”

West Hollywood, CA - October 1975

Music

The lyrics of the West Hollywood recording from October of 1975 are the same as those on the studio recording, but the

accompaniment is strikingly different. This performance took place in the 500-seat Roxy Theatre, a relatively intimate performance venue for Springsteen. Though the beginning of the track contains the introduction of "Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band," the only instruments that appear on the track are piano, harmonica, lead vocals, and glockenspiel. The tempo of this recording is about 20 beats per minute slower than the studio version, giving it a tired feel. Previously energetic parts of the song are played with rubato and the register of the melody appears an octave lower. In the outro, the piano plays the melody, countered by mournful vocal wailing, glockenspiel, and the return of the harmonica.

The Blend of Lyrics and Music

While the lyrical substance is the same as the studio recording, the tempo is also slower, and the voice stays in a lower register, conveying a lack of energy (see Figure 7). This protagonist comes across as significantly older and more hopeless than the singer of the other two recorded versions. The CIN for the persona of this recording's narrator is given in Figure 8.

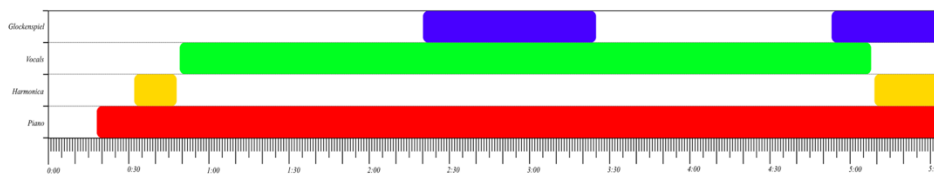


Figure 7: Texture Diagram for *Live 1975-85*

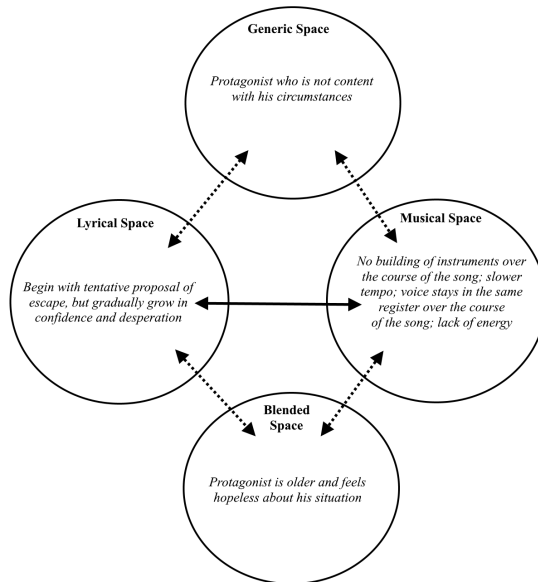


Figure 8: Persona CIN – *Live* 1975-85

Figure 9 gives the CIN for the narrative of this recording, which retains the lyrical content of the studio recording. The comparatively static texture, slower tempo, use of rubato, and more limited vocal range convey a sense of defeat. The use of the glockenspiel in this performance seems to highlight the difference between reality and fantasy through its absence at the beginning and presence as the protagonist describes the open road. Its reappearance in the outro makes it seem as though that dream might be fulfilled until the harmonica returns, suggesting that the protagonist ends the song in the same location he started. Though this protagonist longs to escape, he knows he never will.

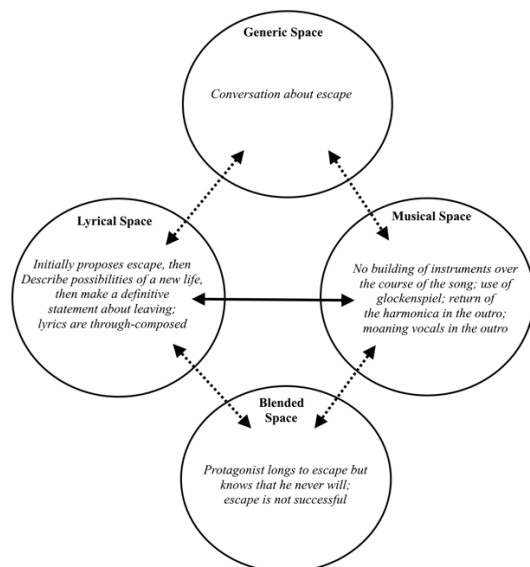


Figure 9: Narrative CIN – Live 1975-85

Conclusion

It is clear that Springsteen is aware of the narrative flexibility of "Thunder Road" and the effect of different interpretations of the song. In a 1984 interview with *International Musician and Recording World's* Don McLeese, Springsteen said of songs like "Thunder Road," "I don't get tired of them, because they're different every time out. They don't mean exactly the same thing anymore."²⁶ According to the crowd-sourced collection of setlists available on

²⁶ Don McLeese, "The Bruce Springsteen Interview" in *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters*, ed. Jeff Burger (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 136. Even though Springsteen was meticulous about the words that he used, the song's meaning still changes both with the passage of time and with different instrumental accompaniments.

the Springsteen fan site *Backstreets*, Springsteen performed “Thunder Road” 1,147 times between 1975 and 2017.²⁷ The vast majority of these performances have been variations of the studio version, but fans have identified 95 performances in which Springsteen performs a different version of the song. The early “Wings for Wheels” version does not reappear after February of 1975. The piano version from *Live 1975-85* was performed several times in late 1975, and sporadically since then: twice at benefit concerts in 1990, twice at shows in early 2003, twice as part of the *Devils and Dust* tour in 2005, and once each in 2010 and 2012. In addition, Springsteen has performed the song solo (or with his wife, Patti Scialfa) on acoustic guitar 62 times throughout his career, usually when performing in smaller venues without the rest of the band. Other variations of the song have occurred when performing with guest artists like Bob Seeger or Melissa Etheridge. During his recent Broadway residency, Springsteen performed an acoustic version of “Thunder Road” on guitar that struck me as different from the three versions of 1975. It was almost lullaby-like: softer and slower, but without the bitterness or sadness that appears in the *Live 1975-85* recording. It seems like, for Springsteen, the meaning of “Thunder Road” continues to evolve, and his performance evolves to suit his understanding of the speaker and the speaker’s journey.

In a 2005 interview, Springsteen remarked, “When I go back and play ‘Thunder Road’... I can sing very comfortably from my vantage point because a lot of the music was about a loss of

²⁷ *Backstreets: The Boss Website*, <https://www.backstreets.com/>.

innocence. There's innocence contained in you but there's also innocence in the process of being lost."²⁸ It is, of course, understandable that a loss of innocence would occur for Springsteen in the thirty years between 1975 and 2005. What is remarkable about the three versions of the song discussed in this article, however, is that they manage to address the loss of innocence in such different ways, despite all being recorded in the same year. In the earliest performance of the song, a young man experiencing adolescent restlessness deals with his boredom by going for a drive. In the studio recording, a desperate man pleads with his lover to escape from their small-town life and – it would appear – is ultimately successful. In the later version, an older man reflects on how he would like to escape, but he knows that he cannot. These three performances show how, from the outset, Springsteen's "empathetic imagination" enabled him to embody vastly different, but equally resonant interpretations of "Thunder Road."

More broadly, these three versions of "Thunder Road" from 1975 provide insight into Springsteen's creative process at a pivotal moment in his career. Not only was *Born to Run* Springsteen's first true commercial success, but it could be argued that this album marked the birth of his true authorial voice. While there are certainly elements of this voice present in *Greetings from Asbury Park* and *The Wild, The Innocent, and The E Street Shuffle*, both earlier albums differ significantly from his later work. The lyrics of

²⁸ Nick Hornby, "A Fan's Eye View," in *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters*, ed. Jeff Burger (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 318.

Greetings are arguably the most Dylan-esque of Springsteen's work, perhaps reflecting what the young Springsteen thought his record label wanted to hear. *The Wild, The Innocent* contains several long songs, ranging from 4:29 to 9:55 that reflect the influence of several different musical styles, most notably jazz, in a way that is different from his later work. Around the release of *Born to Run*, the personnel of the E Street Band solidified, allowing the group to find its distinctive sound. The transformation of "Thunder Road" from the February 1975 "Wings for Wheels" recording to the August studio album may reflect Springsteen learning how to write for and work with this particular group of musicians.

In addition, the transformation of the protagonist in "Thunder Road" may mirror Springsteen's own journey through 1975. Towards the beginning of the year, he's having fun touring and making music with the band. Things do not feel terribly serious, and his mental state may be most in line with the February recording at the Main Point. As he begins recording the new album in earnest, however, the reality of his precarious position at Columbia Records may have started to sink in, allowing him to tap into the focused desperation that is palpable on the studio recording. Then, as the record becomes a hit, Springsteen may have realized that making it big in the music industry was not everything that he thought it would be and did not instantly fix all the problems in his life or the trauma that he had experienced. The stripped down, slower October 1975 recording may reflect that realization.

Autobiographical or not, the three versions of "Thunder Road" analyzed here reflect a view of the popular song as a flexible entity that changes with time and in each performance. Unlike a classical orchestral work thought to be embodied in a score and evaluated by its adherence to written specifications, part of the value of popular music is its ability to grow and change and communicate new things to new audiences through reinterpretations. Often, this happens through cover performance. At other times, as here, the original artist takes the opportunity to reinterpret his own work. By reinterpreting "Thunder Road," and many of his other songs, throughout his career, Springsteen reiterates the creative value of his work.