

## It's Only Rock & Roll: Springsteen, Cultural Value, and Self-Myth on Film

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### Abstract

Bruce Springsteen's recent career activity (2016-2024) has seen him be remarkably active across a range of media types and platforms. Much of this activity is tied to what Laura Watson has termed Springsteen's 'memoir project', an arc of activity which extends from the publication of his autobiography *Born To Run* in 2016 through to the Netflix adaptation of *Springsteen on Broadway* in 2018. However, beyond the core aspect of this 'memoir project,' Springsteen has made pointed use of film as a way to expand perceptions of his place within the cultural landscape. Springsteen is no stranger to the use of cinema for affective purposes and has been making rockumentaries about his output since 1996. What is remarkable, however, is how his use of cinematic language (shots, camera angle, editing) has clearly been adapted recently to introduce and highlight new facets of his artistic persona with regard to compositional practice, while simultaneously working to maintain a coherence of narrative with regard to his rock'n'roll authenticity. This cinematic focus seems designed to expand Springsteen's cultural legacy to include gestures toward (high) artistic output rather than (just) rock'n'roll. While the biographical aspect—Springsteen's origin story—has remained remarkably consistent, Springsteen has used film to proactively reshape his legacy. Springsteen, via an extended period of careful career positioning, slight shifts in presentation of persona, and the engagement of his fan base in an authenticating process that facilitates the layering of identity, both creates the media flow out of which individual fans may construct a personal connection to his artistic output and ensures coherence with an evolving and highly curated mythology.

Bruce Springsteen's recent career activity (2016-2024) has seen him be remarkably active across a range of media types and platforms, including live performance (concerts, Broadway, guest appearances), recordings, books, audiobooks, podcasts, radio shows, film, television, and appearances of a uniquely political nature. Much of this activity is tied to what Laura Watson has termed Springsteen's 'memoir project',<sup>1</sup> an arc of activity which extends from the publication of his autobiography *Born to Run*<sup>2</sup> in 2016 through to the Netflix adaptation of the *Springsteen on Broadway*<sup>3</sup> stage production in 2018. Watson also draws attention to Springsteen's use of transmedia approaches to amplify and entrench the details of his personal and professional biography (print, audio, theatre, film).

In addition to this memoir project, however, Springsteen has made use of film as part of a wider project that seems geared toward expanding perceptions of his place within the cultural landscape. Springsteen is no stranger to the use of cinema for affective purposes and has been making rockumentaries about his output since 1996. What is remarkable, however, is how his use of cinematic language (shots, camera angle, editing) has clearly been adapted to introduce and highlight new facets of his artistic persona with regard to compositional practice while simultaneously working to maintain a coherence of narrative with regard to his rock'n'roll authenticity.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Watson. 'Born to Run: The Transmedia Evolution of the Bruce Springsteen Memoir from Book to Stage and Screen' in *Popular Music and Society*, December 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. Simon & Schuster, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> The original live engagements of *Springsteen On Broadway* ran 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2017 – 15<sup>th</sup> December 2018, with a limited, 31-show reprise June 26, 2021, through September 4, 2021. The Netflix production premiered on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2018 and was filmed across two performances in July 2018 for invited audiences. An accompanying soundtrack album was released 14<sup>th</sup> December 2018. *Springsteen On Broadway* was also one of the first high-profile shows to return to the New York theatre district following the pandemic, premiering on June 26, 2021, for 31 performances through September 4, 2021.

In *Western Stars* (2019) and *The Middle* (2021) in particular we see a new emphasis upon notation, scores, composition, and arrangement unseen in previous Springsteen films or indeed as part of the ‘memoir project’, while *Letter To You* (2020) returns pointedly to a legacy of rock authenticity anchored in the E Street Band and emphasized in previous film releases. This new focus seems designed to expand Springsteen’s cultural legacy to include gestures toward (high) artistic output rather than (just) rock’n’roll. While the biographical aspect—Springsteen’s origin story—has remained remarkably consistent, Springsteen has used film to proactively reshape his legacy within a cultural landscape in which rock still holds a somewhat tenuous position relative to concepts of high and low art.<sup>4</sup>

By considering Springsteen’s approach to filmmaking between 1996’s *Blood Brothers* and 2021’s Jeep commercial *The Middle* as well as his use of the cinematic space itself as a means of authenticating process, Springsteen’s recent work can be seen as a concerted effort to amend and extend the narratives he has actively been constructing across his career and, I argue, to ‘fix’ particular perspectives *vis a vis* his legacy. By ‘fixing’ I mean both an unequivocal securing of the narrative as Springsteen would like it told as well as an alteration to Springsteen’s cultural legacy relative to notions of ‘art’ and cultural value. Watson’s consideration of transmedia and its approaches provides a comprehensive study of Springsteen’s

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<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding Dylan’s Nobel (in Literature, not music) and Kendrick Lamar’s Pulitzer, popular music such as rock/rock’n’roll, pop, blues, country etc. are still absent from most college and University curriculums which include classical music (esp. performance but also history) and are not accorded similar levels of public funding as classical music. As a cultural code (in cinema, advertising, etc.) classical music still signifies ‘high’ art and all that implies while ‘popular’ music still signals ‘low’ art, even if it might at times be ‘hip.’ Hip itself of course being a signifier of *countercultural* nous.

autobiographical arc from the *Born to Run* book, audiobook, accompanying soundtrack, and book tour, as well as the Broadway and Netflix productions that took it as source material, but looks no further back than 2016 and does not link these activities forward through *Western Stars* (2019), *Letter to You* (2020), and *The Middle* (2021).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, though Watson considers these first two titles a more orthodox return to “the continuation of a rock trajectory” and doesn’t consider *The Middle* at all,<sup>6</sup> I find that these three most recent film projects are those in which we can find the strongest evidence that Springsteen is seeking to actively adjust the way in which his artistic contribution and legacy is considered.

In a 21<sup>st</sup>-century cultural landscape that can afford Bob Dylan a Nobel Prize (in Literature) and Kendrick Lamar a Pulitzer while still denying rock and adjacent musical forms the sort of public funding afforded ‘classical’ music and even jazz, Springsteen has recently made pointed use of film to highlight an identity which extends beyond guitar-playing rock musician. In one of the few instances of tension or disagreement in Springsteen’s carefully curated presentation of his public self, these moves to claim an identity as ‘artist’ rather than simply ‘rock musician’ is tied to compositional practice. For a musician who has claimed that they never learned to read or write

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<sup>5</sup> One could add to this list his pandemic-era radio show *From My Home To Yours* broadcast on SiriusXM satellite radio and available via Spotify (and other platforms); his Spotify-hosted podcast *Renegades: Born in the USA* which he co-hosted with Barack Obama, and the coffee table book of the same name (both 2021), or the 2023-2025 World Tour which has been criticized by fans for its use of a largely static set list which Springsteen as defended by saying that the set list has been ‘curated’ to ‘tell a particular story’.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Watson. ‘Born to Run: The Transmedia Evolution of the Bruce Springsteen Memoir from Book to Stage and Screen’ in *Popular Music and Society*, December 2021, pp. 15

music, Springsteen's recent turn toward the use of strings and scores suggests an interest in claiming some association with a broader musical identity.

By taking a critical look at Springsteen's filmed output – *On Broadway* (2018), *Western Stars* (2019), and *Letter to You* (2020), but also *Blood Brothers* (1996), *Wings for Wheels* (2005), and *The Promise* (2010) – we can clearly see Springsteen that is invested not in denying his prior rock-based legacy but rather in adding to it, and, importantly, in authenticating<sup>7</sup> these new facets of identity via fan engagement. My work seeks to follow on from Richard Elliott's consideration of Springsteen's use and development of persona<sup>8</sup> via the autobiographical *Born to Run*<sup>9</sup> and *Broadway* and reminds us that "discussions about popular musicians' personas, especially for musicians considered over extended periods, are often guided by two dominant categories: the artist as shape-shifter and/or the artist as consistent, layered self."<sup>10</sup> Both Elliott and I place Springsteen in the latter camp, however where Elliott considers only the autobiography and its stage production, I seek to consider the ways in which Springsteen's subsequent filmed work carries on this project and links through to material released decades earlier. Though these efforts at amendment on Springsteen's part are most evident in his recent work – the films *Western Stars* (2019), *Letter To You* (2020), and the

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<sup>7</sup> See the work of Phillip Auslander, incl. 'Musical personae', *The Drama Review*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 100–119, 2006; *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, University of Michigan Press, 2020, as well as Theodore Gracyk's *Rhythm and Noise: Aesthetics of Rock*, Duke University Press, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Elliott, Richard. 'Brilliant Disguises: Persona, Autobiography, and the Magic of Retrospection in Bruce Springsteen's Late Career' in *Persona Studies* 2019, vol. 5, no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20

short film *The Middle* (2021) which aired as a Super Bowl advertisement for Jeep – they are contextually wedded to prior material.

I offer that there are three main areas of concern to Springsteen on film: his autobiography or self-myth as a red blooded, blue-collar adjacent, self-made authentic American rock'n'roll star; (more recently) his cultural place as an 'artist' rather than 'just' a rock musician (including the relationship of art to politics); and his place relative to his role as leader of the E Street Band, an ensemble against which he has often pushed back, making it clear that despite the focal place they hold with a majority of his fan base, they are an essential part of, but not the sum of his creative self. At the heart of these issues, and particularly the notion of Springsteen-as-artist, remain concerns about cultural value and the place of rock music within that discourse.

Springsteen's apparent interest in the cultural placement of his legacy can be seen clearly in *Springsteen on Broadway*, via its one-man-band rawness and links to autobiography; in *Western Stars*, via its use of cinematography, narrative framing, and deployment of the cinema-space as fan-space to say some quite new things about Springsteen-as-composer; in *Letter to You* via its reprise and juxtaposition of key E Street Band tropes; and in *The Middle* via its lack of musical performance and startlingly novel political adjacency. The relative success of what I am suggesting is Springsteen's self-conscious use of film to add nuance and new layers to his public persona as artist-rock star relies, of course, in large part upon what Richard Elliott has termed the 'affective pact' he has established with his

audience<sup>11</sup> – an extraordinarily engaged core fanbase which can be counted upon to notice what he’s doing and to aid in the essential processes of authentication required to legitimize and entrench Springsteen’s work.<sup>12</sup> Unlike many artists in the twilight of their careers, Springsteen, now nearly 75 and still out on tour with the E Street Band, is not simply reenacting a static, long-established performance identity but is rather actively engaged in a process of nuancing and layering his publicly accepted identity – a process that, given widespread negative commentary among hardcore fans to a change in approach to set list design for the 2023 World Tour and the lukewarm reception to his 2022 album of soul standards *Only the Strong Survive* – is not always guaranteed to go smoothly.<sup>13</sup>

Whether attempts at layering, adding, or altering Springsteen’s persona are successful or not relies in large part upon transmedia and convergence culture; related concepts that point to a complex and fluid process of world-building that requires audience(s) to piece together narratives spun across both time and media forms. This process relies heavily upon social interaction between members of an audience(s) or

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<sup>11</sup> Elliott, Richard. ‘Brilliant Disguises: Persona, Autobiography, and the Magic of Retrospection in Bruce Springsteen’s Late Career’ in *Persona Studies* 2019, vol. 5, no. 1, pg. 19

<sup>12</sup> See the work of Phillip Auslander, incl. ‘Musical personae’, *The Drama Review*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 100–119, 2006; *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, University of Michigan Press, 2020, as well as Theodore Gracyk’s *Rhythm and Noise: Aesthetics of Rock*, Duke University Press, 1996. For work that deals with fans specific to Springsteen please see Daniel Cavicchi’s seminal *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans*, Oxford University Press, 1998 and Lorraine Mangione and Donna Luff’s recent *Mary Climbs In: The Journey’s of Bruce Springsteen’s Women Fans*, Rutgers University Press, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> See longer discussion on page 17 and also consider parallels in Taylor Swift’s largely unsuccessful attempt to rebrand as ‘folk’ or ‘indie’ with *Folklore* (2020).

fanbase who collaboratively make sense of additional layers of structure.<sup>14</sup> While media theorist Henry Jenkins used the then-developing DC Comics universe to explain his thinking, the concept can be quite easily stretched to fit the public persona of those artists, like Springsteen, who engage in multiple forms of media expression (live performance, audio recording, music videos, concert films, live interviews, book authorship, public speaking, theatre, documentary film, radio programming, podcasts, and political activism) and who might seek self-consciously to tweak the way(s) in which they are perceived.<sup>15</sup> The importance of fan engagement in the success of these strategies also sits comfortably alongside popular music's reliance upon audiences and scenes to function as processes of authentication for an artist's career development alongside the opinion of professional critics.<sup>16</sup> Since the decline of traditional music criticism toward what Nancy Hanrahan has termed 'a culture of consensus'<sup>17</sup> and within

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<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006. Pp. 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Springsteen has of course quite famously built the radical loyalty and genuine fondness of his fan base via the engaged participation of his fans at live concert events, but Springsteen has also been made sense of as an artist and cultural phenomena through the deeply engaged activity of fans via Springsteen-oriented fanzines (*Backstreets*, etc.), websites (greasylake.org, etc.),<sup>15</sup> through bootlegging, and through Springsteen 'events' that enable fans to congregate without any direct access to or appearance by Springsteen such as the UK-based Hungry Heart jukebox evenings which began in 2018 and have drawn fans from the USA, Ireland, and Europe to the club nights. Hungry Heart events are now something of a fixture before or after Springsteen gigs in UK cities, are regularly held to celebrate his birthday, and were a powerful online outlet for fans during the pandemic.

<sup>16</sup> Allan Moore (2002), 'Authenticity as Authentication' in *Popular Music*, 21:2, 209-223; Philip Auslander (1999) 'Trying to Make it Real: Live Performance, Simulation, and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock Culture' in Philip Auslander *Liveness: performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Routledge Press, pp. 73-127

<sup>17</sup> Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, 2013. 'If the People Like It, It Must be Good: Criticism, Democracy, and the Culture of Consensus' in *Cultural Sociology*, 7:1, pp. 73 - 85.



fanbases as long-running and famously engaged as Springsteen's, fan reaction is perhaps paramount to critical reception for new projects or developments in legacy building. Convergence, Jenkins tells us, occurs as "each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives."<sup>18</sup> As Springsteen releases work with new or alternate points of performative focus which seek to layer on to his established persona, these aspects enter into the arena of fan discourse and are accepted/legitimized to a greater or lesser degree. This approach leads to a kind of Springsteen orthodoxy in which a 'core' of works exists around which other works, deemed less essential, orbit.<sup>19</sup> This approach enables Springsteen's varying performance identities to exist alongside a multiplicity of stable fan-constructed identities via a process of picking and choosing. By thus far keeping his overt engagement with composition and notational practice separate from his identity as linked to the E Street Band, Springsteen allows himself to be both all things for all listeners and to have a widening sense of artistic output inscribed on and as biographical record.

Springsteen is no stranger to rockumentaries and there are no fewer than 11 projects which directly concern his career and over which he claims

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<sup>18</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006, pp. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> While this is a complex topic itself worthy of further exploration, core works would certainly include Springsteen's recordings with the E Street Band while other projects completed solo or with different ensembles are generally considered peripheral by the fanbase. For the most part this is reflected in Springsteen's approach to set lists, certainly since 2007, whereby songs originally recorded without (some iterations of) the E Street Band feature at times, but are not the core material upon which the concerts are built ("Atlantic City," "Pay Me My Money Down," "Lucky Town," "Local Hero," etc.)

some level of curatorial control (director, producer, etc).<sup>20</sup> These various film projects all take a slightly different approach to fusing Springsteen's music and symbolic capital with film footage: some are more or less orthodox attempts at documentary (*Blood Brothers*, *Wings for Wheels*, *The Promise*, *Letter to You*, etc.) while some are rather Terrance Malik-inspired short films serving various aesthetic purposes (*Hunter of Invisible Game*, *The Middle*)<sup>21</sup>. Springsteen's most recent feature-length projects – *On Broadway*, *Western Stars*, and *Letter to You* – are of particular interest here as they are strikingly different, or at least more urgent, in their use of cinematic processes to establish and secure particular narratives around aspects of Springsteen's legacy. In conjunction with Thom Zimny, his collaborator for nearly all of these filmed outputs, Springsteen uses the intimacy of cinematic space – both on-screen via camera placement and editorial shot selection and in the theatre auditorium itself via fan engagement – to engage in curating and fixing particular narratives around the self, artistic practice, and cultural value. Springsteen is open about the fact that these latest projects are in some ways consciously interrelated<sup>22</sup>, but what is

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<sup>20</sup> I'm concentrating here not on music videos, concert films, or films about Springsteen but only those films for which Springsteen himself claims creative control as producer, writer, director, and/or composer.

<sup>21</sup> The most recent of these more allegorical outputs is *The Middle*, a 2021 Super Bowl advertisement for Jeep which engendered controversy on two levels: first as Springsteen's first career venture into the world of advertising (his music having never previously been licensed for use in a commercial) and second, for the ad being summarily pulled following allegations of drunk driving, charges which were themselves quickly dismissed by the court but which nonetheless placed Springsteen at the heart of considerable online political furor in the dying days of the Trump administration.

<sup>22</sup> "...[I'm] getting to that age where you sort of, you're summing up a lot of what you've learned and what your life has been and ... writing a book really was the first chapter [of] me doing that I suppose, and then the play came out of the book, and in a funny way you

notable is that much of the material used in these three films is actually recycled or repeated from prior work and therefore clearly the product of decades of consideration and honing.<sup>23</sup>

### **'One-two, one-two-three-four: Rock'n'roll legitimacy'**

One of Springsteen's primary concerns, particularly when paired with the E Street Band, is in claiming and positioning himself at the heart of American rock and rock'n'roll authenticity. Springsteen's frequent alignment with rock'n'roll (or rock'n'soul) is important here, with rock'n'roll sitting closer to the improvisatory Black traditions of the music and 'rock' with the more studio-mediated, compositional, and frequently white expressions that dominated from the mid-late 1960s.<sup>24</sup> Springsteen's recordings certainly *are* studio mediated, but pains have been regularly taken to ensure that the E Street Band and Springsteen as its leader are linked through to the live-off-the-floor, improvisational roots of the genre.<sup>25</sup>

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know the film [*Western Stars*] sort of came out of the play." (Springsteen 2019, Loudersound.com)

<sup>23</sup> Springsteen, Bruce. *Songs*. Virgin Publishing, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Gabriel Solis (2010) 'I Did it My Way: Rock and the Logic of Covers', in *Popular Music and Society* 33 (3), pp. 297-318

<sup>25</sup> Springsteen has reinforced this via 'sign requests' while on tour, working the seemingly improvised into what is a tightly scripted concert performance. While these requests are legitimate and not staged, the band is helped enormously by on-stage monitors to which techs quickly supply chord changes and lyrics for anything Springsteen selects. The performance of these tunes sometimes also includes aspects of theatrical hokum, with Springsteen for example expressing that the band hadn't played "You Never Can Tell" "since we were 16 ... if ever" in Leipzig, Germany on July 7, 2013, when in fact it had been played in Mansfield, Ohio on August 23, 2009 with a remarkably similar bit of theatre to introduce the tune. As they attempt to determine what key to play in, Springsteen and guitarist Steve van Zandt's exchanges at the microphone are nearly identical across the two performances, though the earlier instance lacks the presence of the E Street horns.

Springsteen is a legendary control freak<sup>26</sup> yet this knowledge lives comfortably alongside celebrations of the seemingly off-the-cuff: “In striving for spontaneity, [Springsteen] often won’t tell you what key you’re in, [or] what song you’re going to do ... just follow me, boys!” says Garry Tallent in *Blood Brothers*, released in 1996 and filmed during the recording of additional material for Springsteen’s *Greatest Hits* (1995) album. *Blood Brothers* centers itself on the E Street Band, congregating together for the first time since Springsteen famously disbanded the group in 1989, and sets out key themes and set pieces to which Springsteen will return across subsequent E Street-oriented documentaries and depart from significantly in *Western Stars* (2019). The theme of the film is very much that of the band; the ‘blood brothers’ at the heart of E Street and of Springsteen’s place as leader of the ensemble. The film’s narrative highlights Springsteen as songwriter and the camera follows him at work, offering numerous shots that are framed to include his notebook(s) – a theme that recurs later across *Wings for Wheels* (2005), *The Promise* (2010), and to a lesser extent *Letter to You* (2020). The emphasis here is on the importance of Springsteen as lyricist, and upon his lyrics as central to the music-making process. It’s important to note that the notebooks we are shown glimpses of seem to contain little other than lyrics; there are very few chord symbols present and no notated pitches whatsoever. Indeed, almost no focus in *Blood Brothers* is placed upon musical (rather than lyrical) materials or charts, and certainly no material of this sort is linked to Springsteen himself.<sup>27</sup> This will

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<sup>26</sup> see making of narratives for *Born to Run*, *Born in the USA*, and even *Nebraska* along with the rehearsal process for his live performances, Warren Zanes (2024) *Deliver Me From Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen’s Nebraska*, Penguin.

<sup>27</sup> There is an incidental shot of material on drummer Max Weinberg’s stand early on upon which can be observed notated rests, a similar shot of guitarist Nils Lofgren’s stand shows chord symbols written on notepaper (rather than manuscript paper)

stand in marked contrast to *Western Stars* (2019) where we shall see a radically different approach to shot choice and emphasis.

In *Blood Brothers* Springsteen is also seen several times seen playing a song through on acoustic guitar (and once on piano) while the band transcribes around him, the suggestion being that these are the first moments of musical arrangement or chart making, and there's something of a freewheeling, though not improvisational, nature to the development of the new material that E Street is working up throughout the film.<sup>28</sup> While Springsteen is shown several times playing from a legal pad containing nothing but lyrics, these sequences result in the creation of lead sheets or chord charts as seen in camera shots that capture the transcriptive work of Garry Tallent in particular during a run-down of "Blood Brothers."<sup>29</sup> Whether this resulting material is meant as personal arrangements for each individual player within E Street (as all but Clarence Clemons are seen engaged in this process) or as a process of communal chart capturing/making remains unclear.<sup>30</sup>

These sequences are important however as they recur in 2020's *Letter to You*, a film that once again places the E Street Band at the heart of the narrative, and as they provide an important counterbalance to *Western Stars* in terms of Springsteen's relationship to charts/scores. In *Blood Brothers* and *Letter To You* these sequences pointedly distance Springsteen from the charts and the process of chart making (though he is also clearly framed as the musical source), while in *Western Stars* Springsteen claims credit as

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<sup>28</sup> This is clearly standard practice for the band as Springsteen at one point remarks 'Ok, start your notebooks!'

<sup>29</sup> This is the opening sequence in the DVD chapter 'Take Two'

<sup>30</sup> I reached out to Jon Landau for comment and/or to have this question taken to the band but was told the interview requests were not being taken at the time.

composer and arranger on a film which highlights the use of orchestral scores. Importantly therefore, *Blood Brothers* is also the first film in which we see Springsteen's developing interest in strings and string arrangements: work on an ultimately unused "Secret Garden" orchestral arrangement by David Kahn and Springsteen's enthusiastic response to it is something of a minor plot point.

Also worthy of note here is the camerawork, which is dynamic – moving over and through the band, tracking various musicians and tech crew – and, despite the inclusion of Springsteen's notebooks, never lingering in an editorial way on any one particular aspect of the process. This mobile, dynamic camera and unbiased framing of shots is a regular feature of Springsteen's cinematic output with the important exception of *Western Stars*, which will be discussed later.

Springsteen's follow up film *Wings for Wheels* (2005) which documents the making of *Born to Run* likewise offers us shots of Springsteen's notebooks, and once again the emphasis upon lyrics and on Springsteen's talent as a songwriter ("the time spent honing the lyrics was enormous"). Importantly, however, it is also clear from both the chord symbols we *do* see marked on the notebook pages and the actions of Springsteen across these two films as he writes material, rehearses, and leads the band, that Springsteen can indeed both write and read chord notation, and does so as part of his regular practice. Both films highlight Springsteen's position as bandleader and he is seen and heard calling out chord changes in rehearsal both by name (e.g: E-) and by function, (e.g: I chord or IV chord) indicating both an understanding of the functional use of these chords and their relationship to the tonic key. This is no small point, and we'll return to it later as we consider *Western Stars* (2019).

### Springsteen on Film

Released in 2010 *The Promise: The Making of Darkness on the Edge of Town* is the third of Springsteen's full-length rockumentaries<sup>31</sup> and is again driven by both a focus on Springsteen's notebooks (indeed the depth of his catalogue is a recurring plot point), and a mobile camera which does not settle long on any particular object, person, or particular cinematic framing. There's an emphasis, as with *Blood Brothers*, on looseness in the performance and arranging of the material, though some of this is also shown as occurring via after-the-fact studio mediation, as is common in rock recording practice. In a departure from the 'unspontaneous' processes that underpinned the recording of *Born to Run* and are documented in 2005's *Wings for Wheels*, the emphasis here is once again upon improvisation and, tellingly, upon the subtle differences inherent in playing vs 'recording' or 'tracking': "I'd give them the chords and count it in and they didn't have time [to come up with] parts. So, for the first couple of takes you didn't get people recording, you got people playing."<sup>32</sup> Liveness, improvisation, and the romance of 'authentic' live-off-the-floor recording will recur again as a central theme in the discourse surrounding 2020's album and film *Letter to You* and stands in contrast to the score-mediated performances highlighted on *Western Stars*.

With *The Promise* three key things also become clear: 1) the careful and painstaking process of self-curation with which Springsteen has been engaged across a period of years and multiple formats; 2) the extent to which Springsteen understands and relies upon the filmed image to create

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<sup>31</sup> Following *Blood Brother* 1996, *Wings for Wheels* 2005

<sup>32</sup> Springsteen in *The Promise: The Making of Darkness on the Edge of Town* (2010)

and transmit musical meaning; and 3) that critical acclaim and a modicum of commercial success for Springsteen's work on film had become a point of focus. Whereas *Blood Brothers* premiered on the Disney channel before being released on VHS (and later DVD)<sup>33</sup> and *Wings for Wheels* was included with a 2005 CD reissue of *Born to Run*, *The Promise* was offered to a wider and more discerning cinematic audience. Elevated from the realm of music video to 'proper' documentary film of the sort ones goes out to the cinema to see, *The Promise* appeared on the 2010 global film festival circuit where it premiered as an official selection at the Toronto International Film Festival and garnered warm reviews at both the BFI and Rome Film Festivals as well as in the mainstream press.<sup>34</sup> The film was then broadcast via HBO in October 2010 before its eventual release on DVD (2011). In 2019 with *Western Stars*, Springsteen would go one step further with cinematic release in commercial theatres, turning cinematic space into participatory fan space akin in many ways to the concert experience and marketed as such to the Springsteen fanbase.

Springsteen clearly understands the affective power of cinema and has always been clear that some of the key influences on his landmark albums were cinematic, not musical or literary. In *VH1 Storytellers* (2005), itself important for its relationship to the development of *Springsteen on Broadway*, Springsteen speaks of the creation and adoption of characters to sing through – to enable the telling of wider and different stories than those bounded by personal experience – and speaks of the role of film in

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<sup>33</sup> The film was also nominated in 1997 for a Grammy for "Best Music Video - Long Form"

<sup>34</sup> Rob Nelson in *Variety*, Sep 15, 2010; Will Hermes in *Rolling Stone* Oct 7, 2010; Kirk Honeycutt in the *Hollywood Reporter* October 14, 2010 [who also refers to director Thom Zimny as Springsteen's 'personal archivist'; Richard Williams in *The Guardian*, November 11, 2010; etc.



prompting this technique. *Nebraska*, he tells us, was meant to be an 'oral projection' of Robert Mitchum in Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* (1955), and of Terrence Mallick's *Badlands* (1973). This influence of film, character, and visual aesthetics appears first in *Bruce Springsteen: Songs* (1998) where he writes of the 'cinematic drama' of *Born to Run* and of the broader geographical and ideological space afforded by character-driven, rather than biographically oriented writing.

Throughout *The Promise* Springsteen again frequently invokes the American cinematic tradition, and others connected with the project echo this emphasis upon a visual, cinematic element to the construction of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. Drummer Max Weinberg refers to the album as a "vast cinematic landscape," manager/producer Jon Landau describes the album as the "sound of pictures," and Chuck Plotkin, brought in to help with the mixing, is lauded for his ability to "mix a sound picture." Springsteen also picks up on the notion of constructing characters for his songs rather than writing autobiographically described during *VH1 Storytellers*, and is here explicit about persona and casting, referring to the famous image on the album cover for *Darkness* as "my character in the story right now," a character markedly different than the one which would emerge on the covers of 1984's *Born in the USA*, *Tunnel of Love* (1987), and, without the E Street Band, on *Lucky Town/Human Touch* (1992). All of these 'characters' are also of course separate from 'Bruce Springsteen' the public face of the cultural icon whose story we learn, open-book-style, from the horse's mouth. Springsteen tells us so much about himself so often that he's rarely contradicted or questioned. But it is also clear that he's telling us 'just so' stories with a rare concern for the fixing and consistency of narrative.

Between *The Promise* (2010) and the Netflix premier of *Springsteen on Broadway* (2018) Springsteen is seen in numerous music videos, live concert

films, three short documentaries (*Houston '78 Bootleg: House Cut* (2010), *High Hopes* (2014), *Ties That Bind* (2015)) as well as a short film released via his website which did double duty as a music video of sorts for “Hunter of Invisible Game” (2015) from his album *High Hopes* released a year earlier. *Hunter of Invisible Game* is far more than a music video however, and indeed anyone seeking that aspect of the work is required to sit through nearly six-minutes of wordless cinema before the song begins—dreamy shots invoking Terrance Malick and the 2009 cinematic adaptation of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* in nearly equal measure, underscored by similarly atmospheric music featuring airy synths and steel guitar before the coherent rhythm of a string section segues into the song proper.<sup>35</sup> Clocking in at just over ten minutes, the film marked Springsteen’s directorial debut<sup>36</sup> (a credit shared with Thom Zimny) and follows The Protector, a character played by Springsteen who wanders a post-apocalyptic landscape, reunites a lost child with his family, and is simultaneously soothed and tormented by what seem to be memories of both a family and way of life irrevocably lost due to an unexplained societal cataclysm.

Much will be borrowed from *Hunter of Invisible Game* for 2021’s *The Middle*, including an approach to scoring and Springsteen’s adoption of a nameless, unifying figure. Of perhaps greatest interest however is that Springsteen is credited here as score composer for the nearly six-minute instrumental introduction, with Ron Aniello listed as the arranger and orchestrator for the segment. Springsteen’s adoption here of a compositional identity is an important moment in an evolution toward

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<sup>35</sup> This particular motif is deeply evocative of what will be heard on *Western Stars* (2019).

<sup>36</sup> It’s worth noting that to date Springsteen’s other directorial credits are for *Western Stars* (2019) and *The Middle* (2021).

personal and musical narratives that can be seen to unfold in *Springsteen on Broadway*, *Western Stars*, *Letter to You*, and *The Middle*.

### **Springsteen on Broadway: The Memoir Project as Moving Pictures**

In 2018, Springsteen teamed with Netflix to present a filmed version of his acclaimed Broadway show, which premiered in New York in October 2017. *Springsteen On Broadway* was wildly successful in its live format: the show was extended twice through December 2018, its 2021 reprise was one of the first major shows to open in New York following the pandemic, and tickets were routinely resold for thousands of dollars.<sup>37</sup> That said, *Springsteen on Broadway* in both iterations is something of an odd piece in that it does very little but reinforce and animate the official myth as already laid out in Springsteen's autobiography, *Born to Run* (2016), which was released the year before and accompanied by a nine-city book tour, audiobook, and soundtrack.

Unlike *Western Stars*, which would follow in 2019, *Springsteen on Broadway* is also not offering any aspects that might be considered new or additional to what the audience already understands of Springsteen the singer-songwriter. Taken together—ticket price, distance from concert performance, and relatedness to the *Born to Run* biography—the Broadway production was unlikely in any event to have appealed to anyone not already familiar with and fond of Springsteen. Rather, the production seems geared toward 'fixing the record' in the way that a book alone might

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<sup>37</sup> Face-value tickets for the 2021 reprise ranged from \$75-\$850 per seat, with the lowest price \$75 tickets limited to 32 seats per performance and the resale market pricing individual seats as high as \$5971 each. The original 236-performance *Springsteen on Broadway* run generated north of \$100 million across 2017 and 2018, not including resale ticket markups. [<https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2021/06/11/springsteen-on-broadway-ticket-cost/>]

not, enshrining Springsteen's particular self-narrative onto and *as* the record, straight from the horse's mouth. Following on from success as a songwriter, performer, producer, filmmaker, and author, it's worth noting that the production also served to legitimize Springsteen in yet another of the venerable arts—theatre—and even earned him a special Tony award along the way.<sup>38</sup>

Both *Springsteen on Broadway* and the autobiography it is based upon tell us a great deal about Springsteen as he would like us to have it, and the show—both live and on Netflix—lends something the book does not and could not: it both emphasizes and exposes Springsteen *as musician*. Springsteen here draws heavily on a concept and staging debuted in 2005 for *VH1 Storytellers* (for which he drew heavily from the 1998 book *Songs*), altering very little in its mix of storytelling and musical material and in its approach to stage blocking. While the actual content of the two shows varies considerably, with *Broadway* taking his autobiography as its source material and *Storytellers* presenting something of a less focused tour through his back catalogue, Springsteen's pacing and delivery during the spoken word portions are nearly identical in their use of phrase structure, pause for effect, and light guitar strumming to accompany and augment the spoken passages. The narration in *Storytellers* as with *Broadway* is clearly scripted rather than improvised, but also has clearly been learned and, despite the visible presence of tele-prompts, isn't being 'read' so much as performed. As with *Broadway*, Springsteen's musical and life partner Patti Scialfa joins him onstage for a duet ("Brilliant Disguise"), and he retires at

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<sup>38</sup> During the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown, Springsteen kept busy by inaugurating a radio show on SiriusXM Satellite Radio (*From My House To Yours*) and releasing a critically acclaimed podcast series with ex-US President Barack Obama entitled *Renegades*. A coffee table book of the same name was released in October 2021.

times to an on-stage piano. The inclusion of the piano—reprised for *Broadway*—breaks up both the physical and auditory staging as well as enabling Springsteen to insert some old-fashioned musical legitimacy via keyboard competency—not just a guitar player, this guy; Springsteen can play “real” instruments too.

While *VH1 Storytellers* does not have the same narrative core as *Broadway*, Springsteen does reuse key themes across both projects, including the importance of family, home and work, while also making the political aspect of his often-misunderstood, anti-war material clear (“the music works against the lyrics” he says of “Born in the USA”). In a key moment using handwritten notes as a prop, he tells us that the invitation to *Storytellers* was the first time he’d really thought about his music in some of these ways. This, given his earlier film *Blood Brothers* and the book *Springsteen: Songs* is simply untrue—theatrical hokum. Indeed, much of what Springsteen has to say here is deeply informed by 1998’s *Songs*, and much of the performances’ new narrative material (such as the framing of “Thunder Road”) will make its way into the documentary *Wings for Wheels* later the same year. Springsteen’s repetition and reuse of these statements and framing devices is part of a process of ‘fixing’ them in our understanding of him as an artist and songwriter; of developing ‘one answer’ to whatever question we might end up asking.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “There’s only one answer to each question; you don’t want to lie to these people.” Springsteen to Mike Greenblat, ‘Bruce Springsteen: The Return of the Native’ in *The Aquarian*, October 11, 1978, in Burger, Jeff. *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, Encounters*. Omnibus Press, 2013. Pg. 100

The treatment of “Born in the USA” across *VH1 Storytellers* and *On Broadway* is telling in this respect.<sup>40</sup> While Springsteen has of course worked to make clear the political intentions of “Born in the USA” nearly since the anthem’s release and misappropriation by aspects of the American political right, bringing this version to Netflix ensured that this quite specific and affective interpretation reached the widest possible audience. In *Springsteen on Broadway* the message is clear: Springsteen the musician can put on a show, and he doesn’t need the E Street Band to do it. While Springsteen had engaged in the core aspects of *Springsteen on Broadway* across the preceding decades—biographical narration while on stage, solo performance of his material, use of piano in performance, political clarification, etc.—The Netflix production of *Broadway* provided access to this curatorial exercise for both the widest possible cross-section of Springsteen’s fanbase (those not able to attend in person) as well as millions of more casual or curious viewers.<sup>41</sup> Netflix’s *Broadway* is an act of audience ‘solidification’ that sits at the heart of mainstream popular culture and serves to ‘fix’ both the Broadway performance itself as well as the autobiographical material on which it is based. It is simultaneously a touchstone document for

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<sup>40</sup> Springsteen made this point before during his *Ghost of Tom Joad* tour<sup>40</sup> which featured small halls and out of the way towns for 146 performances on an intermittent schedule between 1995-1997 and has been fondly referred to as the ‘shut the fuck up’ tour by fans. Given the size of the halls chosen for the *Joad* tour far fewer even committed fans were able to catch it than saw the original New York run of *On Broadway* let alone the Netflix audience. So low-profile (for Springsteen) was the *Joad* tour that biographer Dave Marsh has described it as having likely had no impact on widening Springsteen’s audience and there is relatively little documentation of it.

Marsh, Dave. *Bruce Springsteen on Tour: 1968–2005*. Bloomsbury USA, 2006. For a discussion of the *Joad* tour see Chapter 10, ‘Pilgrim in the Temple’.

<sup>41</sup> Approximately 88 million in just the USA and UK where *Springsteen On Broadway* has been available since its release. Netflix worldwide has some 200 million subscribers as of February 2021.

committed fans and a low-investment introduction to the Springsteen story as he wishes it would be told, both available on-demand via the world's most ubiquitous streaming service.

### **Western Stars: Composition and Cultural Value**

With 2019's *Western Stars* Springsteen departs significantly both in terms of the stories he seems to want to talk about himself and the cinematic means by which he seeks to accomplish this. The release of *Western Stars* in mainstream commercial cinemas and my attendance at a screening in New York City also helped to highlight Springsteen's rather remarkable and affective use of the cinema space as fan space.<sup>42</sup> In *Western Stars*, Springsteen uses both sonic and cinematic material to highlight and draw attention to something additional about himself as an artist, making important departures and distinctions from the rock'n'roll persona he has so frequently embraced and is so aligned with in the popular imagination.

*Western Stars* is an amalgam of sorts: in parts a live version of the studio album of the same name performed to a small, invited audience at Springsteen's own barn in Colt's Neck, New Jersey; and in parts a vehicle for narrative rumination on family, aging, work, songwriting, and America which follows on from the autobiography. Between concert sequences Springsteen is seen in anonymous, unplaced Western landscapes dressed vaguely like a cowboy, accompanied by either a horse or an El Camino. There is a quality to these sequences both cinematically and sonically which recalls *Hunter of Invisible Game* (2014), and which prefigures *The Middle* (2021), all films for which Springsteen is credited as (co) director.

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<sup>42</sup> And what this might potentially suggest, at age 75, for the future of Springsteen's live performance career.

For its primary audience — those not in the barn with Springsteen for the concert elements but those watching the final filmed product on-screen — *Western Stars* provides better seats than most are ever likely to obtain for a Springsteen concert and offers a level of intimacy that a concert does not. Springsteen speaks to us, explains his process to us, looks us in the eye down the camera lens. But it is not a live event from which we are meant to take our own meaning. Springsteen's narrating between songs is an act of sharing his process, but it is also one of fixing our interpretation of the work and of him as artist; a process which is aided by the curatorial gaze of the camera itself. In *Western Stars*, we see a marked change in the narrative around musical process — in what we are meant to notice, and in what we are meant to value. We move away from the processes of rock ('n'roll) that form the heart of Springsteen's earlier films and following from *Broadway*, are moved to see Springsteen in a more sober and serious light. These changes in foregrounding and highlighting are accomplished in large part by a change in approach to the use of the camera and shot framing and are aided by Springsteen's use of the cinema to open up a new fan space. Whereas Netflix's *Springsteen on Broadway* is positioned to capture the merely curious as well as the already dedicated fan, *Western Stars* seems to be preaching primarily to the converted — those who were most likely to embrace the film as part of the complex *Western Stars* ecosystem consisting of studio album, film, and live album soundtrack to the film.

*Western Stars* features Springsteen not alone and not with the E Street Band, but rather joined by a rhythm section, horns, and backup singers who are a mix of new and familiar faces, plus a thirty-piece 'orchestra.' Though the accompanying press materials frequently referred to the ensemble as a 'full' orchestra, the *Western Stars* stage is in fact filled by an 8-piece band (incl. Springsteen), a musical director/keyboardist, 2 French horns, 2



trumpets, 5 background singers, and a 15-piece string section for thirty-two musicians in total. Springsteen had made use of strings before – he included them in the mix on *Born to Run* (1975), experimented with them on the unused “Secret Garden” arrangement we were introduced to in *Blood Brothers* (1996), augmented segments of *Devils & Dust* (2005), *Magic* (2007), *Working on a Dream* (2009), and *High Hopes* (2014) with arrangements by Eddie Horst, included a live 8-piece string section in Brisbane, Australia (2014),<sup>43</sup> featured strings in a key section of the *Hunter of Invisible Game* film, and of course has had violinist Soozie Tyrell in the augmented touring version of the E Street Band since 1994. In a very different way however, the string section in *Western Stars* is foregrounded and given an increased sense of importance via its relationship to camera direction through the first two thirds of the film’s concert sequences. An editorial point is clearly being made via the framing of the string section, a point which is underscored by the more varied and dynamic approach to shot tracking adopted later in the film.

*Western Stars* begins with a series of disconnected shots (horses running, the open desert, Springsteen’s hand on a steering wheel, ancient barns listing in the sunset) over an atmospheric synth score leading into voice-over narration from Springsteen as he introduces the album (“a meditation on individual freedom and communal life”) which ultimately leads the audience to the performance venue – Springsteen’s barn. Some three and a half minutes into *Western Stars* the film’s first song – “Hitch Hikin’” – opens with the camera focused on Springsteen at center stage, spot lit. Thirty-five or forty seconds in, for the first entry of the ‘orchestra’

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<sup>43</sup> Springsteen played *The Wild*, *The Innocent*, and *the E Street Shuffle* in its entirety and made use of the string section for ‘New York Serenade’ as well as for a roof-lifting performance of ‘Staying’ Alive’ which opened the show.

both sonically and cinematically, the chosen shot is slightly overhead and into the string section; a lighted music stand and its sheet music forming the center of the shot. It's an odd choice: static, and with the written music fixed and dead center of the screen, at odds with the lyrics of a wanderer not keen on the rigidity of maps. The camera then tours the stage, checking in briefly with most members of Springsteen's band, all of whom, it should be added, are playing without the aid of music stands or visible charts. The camera's next glance into the string section, however, again makes a lit music stand its point of focus.

Throughout the performance of "Hitch Hikin'" the shots chosen are overwhelmingly of the string section players rather than the rest of the orchestra or band. Indeed, they nearly share screen time with Springsteen, and the presence of written charts, along with the concerted attention paid to the art of reading them, is clearly emphasized. The genre of filmed classical concerts (including the yearly TV offering of the BBC Proms) has provided a whole repertoire of camera shots from which to draw when working with orchestral subject matter, the vast majority of which serve to pull focus *away* from the static page and toward the dynamic action of the players and conductor.<sup>44</sup> Even here, as *Western Stars* develops, we observe a gradual shift toward more dynamic tracking shots into and through the orchestra: close ups of instruments, of bow arms, of the section entraining. The presence of musical materials eventually becomes incidental, rather than fundamental, a move which underscores that this early and pointed foregrounding of the written charts was not accidental, but editorial. The film's focus on highlighting the charts being used by the orchestra and the

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<sup>44</sup> See even a brief selection of the BBC Proms or filmed performances by internationally recognized orchestras available on YouTube.

musical director conducting from the side stage is pronounced during the first three songs performed, and the foregrounding of charts is often quite blunt throughout. During “Tucson Train,” for example, where the camera lingers sufficiently long on the musical director’s chart to enable the audience to read both the song’s title and several bars of music; nearer the end of the film during “There Goes My Miracle” which actually concludes with an image of the song’s chart; and during “Hello Sunshine,” which includes a brief appearance of the musical director conducting the strings to a close. These moments all feature a focus upon sheet music which clearly and rather pointedly contains notated pitches, and which also stand in marked contrast to the merely accidental capturing of musical material of this sort across all of Springsteen’s previous documentaries.

It is well worth noting as well that the invited audience for the *Western Stars* concert sequences isn’t standing, as is common with rock events including Springsteen’s, but is rather seated at small round tables lit with the soft glow of lamp light, cocktails to hand. The crowd is also silent and mostly still; the atmosphere that of a jazz club or chamber concert more than the pit at a ‘normal’ Springsteen show. Here there is no communal dancing or singing, indeed there is little sound at all from the audience beyond polite applause—a marked difference from other Springsteen and Springsteen-oriented shows, even black-tie events such as the Kennedy Centre Honors.<sup>45</sup> Taken together—the strings, the focus on written music, the hushed attention of the audience—*Western Stars* signals a different

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<sup>45</sup> The footage of Springsteen’s 2009 Kennedy Centre Honors is available on YouTube. John Mellencamp’s initially rather sober rendition of ‘Born in the USA’ as part of the evening’s music gives way to shots revealing the likes of Michelle Pfeiffer, Mel Brooks, Martin Short, Meryl Streep, Barack and Michelle Obama, and Dave Brubeck demonstrably responding (‘rocking out’) to the music whilst seated in formal wear.

behavioral expectation from us when listening to Springsteen. This is music of value, *Western Stars* tells us, and demands our attention. It is a marked shift away from Springsteen's legendary focus on the ecstatic needs of a rock audience at full roar and toward the wishes of the artist—to be taken seriously, and to be able to act that way.

One must also observe that *Western Stars* is not properly a live performance; it is not a concert film, but something else. In addition to and weaved between the concert elements the film features long sequences consisting of voice-over narration paired with atmospheric, Western imagery; a mute Springsteen ranging across a vaguely Western landscape while musing non-diagetically about life, love, aging, and inner demons. Much of the script for *Western Stars* follows firmly on from the autobiography and *Broadway* in providing a glimpse into Springsteen's past and private thoughts in a manner which is both intimate, and highly curated. Even the concert footage itself is not universally 'live' in the sense of being a chopped up but otherwise true commemoration of a performance for a small audience in Springsteen's barn. Rather, during the second to last song performed in the film, "Moonlight Motel," there was no audience at all, and the camera shows us chairs up on the tables and the barn empty other than for the band and crew. *Western Stars* is not a concert film in an orthodox sense but a film that includes simulated concert footage much in the way a music video might. The music actually happened, but it wouldn't have been it not for the camera being present.<sup>46</sup> There's also no sense of how many takes were required, or what sort of editing has gone into the knitting together of these live sequences.

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<sup>46</sup> There is also the opportunity for additional takes, false-starts, and similar studio-oriented practices historically denied by live performance.

Importantly for a film shown in theatres, *Western Stars* concludes by encouraging the audience to sit through the credits—the action of Springsteen and Scalfia lingering at the bar on-screen aids in this, and in keeping audience attention focused on the screen. At the screening I attended in New York, it was also advertised that bonus footage was to follow the film, thereby ensuring that very few left the auditorium until after the credits had fully rolled. It's during these credits that we learn that Springsteen, in addition to being the executive producer, writer, and co-director of the film, is credited with having composed the original score and having orchestrated the film with Ron Aniello. These last two are relatively new job descriptions for Springsteen,<sup>47</sup> and ones which traditionally link very closely to the reading and writing of precisely the sort of notation that Springsteen described himself as being unable to do (2016) and which *Western Stars* has taken pains to foreground.

Though released in 2018, Springsteen began initial work on what would become the studio album *Western Stars* as early as 2014, circling back to it with Aniello in both 2014 and 2018 before its release. Following these experiences on the studio album, Springsteen says they began to 'score the voiceover' sections of the film, which prompted those elements to expand and ultimately determine the shape of the finished product: "that's what turned it into a movie you know, rather than just a concert film."<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>47</sup> While Springsteen has numerous credits as a composer these are primarily linked to his role as a songwriter whether the works are performed by him or by others, and from the use of his music in various film and television productions. The use of composer here refers to instrumental music and seems thus far to be unique to: *Hunter of Invisible Game* (2014), *Western Stars* (2019), *The Middle* (2021). Springsteen seems to have claimed credit as an orchestrator only on *Western Stars* and *The Middle*.

<sup>48</sup> Springsteen 2019, <https://www.loudersound.com/features/bruce-springsteen-how-i-made-western-stars> [accessed Jan 31, 2022]

decision to turn *Western Stars* into ‘a movie’ as something distinct from a rockumentary or concert film led to one of the most interesting aspects of the *Western Stars* experience—Springsteen’s use of the cinema space as fan space.

### ***Letter to You* (2020)**

Springsteen’s next film release—2020’s *Letter To You*—would once again eschew the cinema in favor of streaming services, available exclusively as of this writing on Apple TV. But of course, *Letter To You* also finds us back in familiar territory with the E Street Band. In contrast to the areas of new focus highlighted in *Western Stars*, *Letter To You* harkens back to *Blood Brothers* with Springsteen at the head of the E Street Band: a committed, family-esque ensemble that, despite having weathered some changes over the years, is able to draw upon a wealth of shared understanding and experience. The E Street Band, Springsteen reminds us as the film opens, “is not a job, it’s a vocation. A calling. It is one of the most important things in your life and of course, it’s only rock and roll.”<sup>49</sup>

In addition to refreshing the communal, rock-based themes of Springsteen’s earlier filmed work, the cinematic choreography and camera work here also echo those earlier films. A dynamic camera offers shots of hands and instruments and not of music stands, *even though everyone has a music stand in some use*. Shots of lead sheets are not even incidental, but accidental—in contrast to *Western Stars*, in *Letter to You* there is almost no focus at all on the written materials of music. Much like earlier work, the narrative is that of the band, of Bruce as its leader, and of the collaborative creative process within—all of which stands in somewhat stark contrast to

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<sup>49</sup> Springsteen in *Letter to You*, 2020.

the work of the composer, arranger, and orchestrator—the positions occupied by Springsteen in *Western Stars* and *Broadway*.

Unlike *Western Stars* and *Broadway* which draw heavily from Springsteen's autobiography and are exclusively scripted monologues, the dialogue we hear in *Letter To You* is, one presumes, improvised, albeit perhaps judiciously edited, the result of actual studio conversations between band members. In contrast to the painstaking process behind *Western Stars*—on notation, orchestration, arrangement, and an ensemble so large it required a musical director—the main point of focus for the promotional material that surrounded both the album and film release of *Letter To You* was the simplicity of the recording process. The album and its accompanying film were apparently constructed with minimal overdubs/B-roll over the course of just one week. In an era of auto-tune, AI, and astonishingly sophisticated studio resources to support in-studio construction, Springsteen and the E Street Band need none of that. Almost as a kind of counterbalance to the studied nature and formality of both *On Broadway* and *Western Stars*, *Letter To You* makes it clear to everyone that Springsteen can still get it done old-school, bringing some mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century live-off-the-floor rock'n'roll street cred to the table.

### ***The Middle: Rock Musician as Statesman***

Springsteen capped things off in 2021 with his first foray into television commercials, releasing a two-minute 'film' for Jeep which premiered during half-time of the 2021 Super Bowl. Entitled *The Middle* and co-directed by Thom Zimny and Springsteen (who also starred, contributed

to the scripted narration,<sup>50</sup> and composed the score in conjunction with Ron Aniello) the spot contained no Springsteen songs or lyrics (to date no Springsteen song has yet been licensed for use in a commercial). Indeed, Springsteen plays no music on-screen, carries no instrument, speaks no dialogue, and no connection is explicitly made to who he is. We are meant to know already, and, more than that, it's clear that he is supposed to *mean*, or at least represent, something to us.

Aesthetically the commercial aligns with what he and Zimny had previously established with 2014's *Hunter of Invisible Game*, *Western Stars*, and *Letter to You*. All four projects depict a diegetically mute Springsteen wandering stark western landscapes in the guise of a hero, frequently leading a horse (but never riding). In all of these four films, reference is clearly made to the mythic American West, and Springsteen plays a vaguely cowboy-like character. So similar are the aesthetics here that one could easily imagine the Jeep commercial as having been pieced together from a series of outtakes from *Western Stars*, right down to the costuming.

Who or what is Springsteen meant to be here, and for what audience? In *Hunter of Invisible Game* his character is meant to be 'the protector' on 'a quest for humanity' seeking 'the spirit' in a post-apocalyptic landscape.<sup>51</sup> Is Springsteen offering himself in a similar capacity in the Jeep commercial, acting as a guide and hero seeking to lead a deeply divided America in the waning days of the Trump presidency toward a political and cultural middle ground? Certainly, many on both sides of the political divide thought so, and the response was both swift and polarized. Various

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<sup>50</sup> While I've not been able to find an official Springsteen source that confirms this, news reports are widely available which detail that Springsteen contributed to and partially adapted the script developed for Jeep by ad agency Doner.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3869092/>



corners of the internet lit up with spirited arguments for and against both Springsteen's perceived selling out and the ad's political messaging (too liberal/not liberal enough), and the controversy took a tangible real-world toll when less than a week after the ad's initial airing reports were made that Springsteen had been cited for driving while intoxicated in November 2020, having had a shot of tequila with fans met whilst riding his motorcycle in a New Jersey state park. Jeep swiftly pulled the ad. Ultimately the intoxication charge was dismissed by the court and Springsteen paid a small fine for having broken park rules.<sup>52</sup>

However, both the commercial itself and the various controversies it engendered do suggest an interesting, perhaps unique degree of political and moral signposting around a rock'n'roll musician. That Springsteen now occupies a somewhat unique political place within American culture is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that he was the only musician to perform at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Memorial held to the 9/11 attacks, where he sang a solo acoustic rendition of "I'll See You In My Dreams" from 2020's *Letter To You*. This was a somewhat surprising choice perhaps given the long association between Springsteen's *The Rising* and the 9/11 attacks, and the solo, acoustic arrangement of the song was maintained throughout the

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<sup>52</sup> While the court could not "sustain its burden of proof" regarding the charges of DWI and reckless driving, Springsteen did plead guilty to having consumed tequila while in the Gateway National Recreation Area in Sandy Hook, New Jersey. The judge noted that the law prohibiting this had been implemented just three years prior. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bruce-springsteen-hearing-dwi-charges-dismissed-1132609/>. Nevertheless, the incident has been lodged in public record as *The United States vs. Bruce Springsteen*, a fact now memorialized on innumerable items of fan-produced merchandise.

2023-2024 World Tour where on all but a rare handful of occasions it was used as a concert closer.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

It is neither surprising nor news that Bruce Springsteen has carefully managed and presented his personal persona throughout his career and has frequently augmented and reinforced particular aspects using transmedia approaches—recordings, performance, books, interviews, podcasts, photographs and films. That said, it's clear that there has been a particular urgency to this project over the last several years. While some of this can be attributed to the multi-platform 'memoir project' of 2016-2018,<sup>54</sup> other aspects seem designed to enlarge Springsteen's perceived and value and scope as an artist within the popular imagination. In particular the film projects *Broadway*, *Western Stars*, *Letter to You*, and *The Middle* provide evidence that Springsteen has been at work "fixing" three connected yet disparate narratives in the minds of both committed fans and more casual viewers: that of personal biography—let's set the record straight in so far as I would like it; that of the artist—there's more to me than three chords and the truth; and that of authentic, vintage-caliber rock 'n' roller—that there is a direct line from Springsteen to the well-spring of American rock sensibility. The most remarkable aspect of this project is the new focus upon notation, composition, and arrangement as evidenced first in *Western Stars*, and then with *The Middle*.

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<sup>53</sup> Exceptions include (though may not be limited to) Met Life 3 (Sept 9, 2023), two dates in Ireland where a Rainy Night in Soho closed in tribute to the recent passing of Shane McGowan (May 6 & 19, 2024), and the Sea, Hear, Now festival in Asbury Park, Sept 15, 2024, where "Jersey Girl" was used to close.

<sup>54</sup> Watson, 2021

At the same time, Springsteen seems to be moving to embrace more explicitly a public, politically aligned role which is rooted in his musical output though simultaneously adjacent to it. While Springsteen has never been shy of exposing his left-leaning politics having taken action against the use of his music by various Republican politicians,<sup>55</sup> spoken out in support of gay marriage as early as 1996,<sup>56</sup> cancelled a 2016 concert in North Carolina in support of trans rights,<sup>57</sup> and campaigned for Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012, for Hillary Clinton in 2016, and for Joe Biden in 2020. Nonetheless, politics has lately been foregrounded in ways which are perhaps unique in American popular music. While other stars from Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan to Kendrick Lamar have engaged themselves with politics, often of a high-profile nature, Springsteen's presence at multiple inaugurations, his association with 9/11, his association with ex-President Barack Obama (podcast, book), and his role as political voice-of-reason in Jeep's *The Middle* advertisement during one of the most divisive presidencies in American history is singular.

On October 4, 2024, Springsteen further added to unequivocal voicing of political leanings still considered something of a surprise by elements of his fanbase<sup>58</sup> by releasing a video endorsing Harris/Waltz 2024.

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<sup>55</sup> In 1984 Springsteen famously objected to the use of "Born in the U.S.A" by Ronald Reagan's re-election campaign and objected again to its use by Bob Dole in 2000 and Pat Buchanan in 2000.

<sup>56</sup> Judy Wieder, "Bruce Springsteen: The Advocate Interview" in *The Advocate*, April 2, 1996, in Burger, Jeff (2013), *Springsteen on Springsteen*. Pp. 235-245

<sup>57</sup> <https://brucespringsteen.net/news/2016/a-statement-from-bruce-springsteen-on-north-carolina> [accessed 03.03.22]

<sup>58</sup> Anyone interested is directed to the comments on the video at Springsteen's official Facebook page <https://fb.watch/v3rBds501L/> and to the online spat which developed surrounding major Springsteen fan group the Spring-Nuts' decision to remove, and then repost the video with the comments section redacted. This online spat went so far as to

While Taylor Swift's earlier endorsement on the night of the Democratic National Convention garnered far more mainstream press coverage, Springsteen's went much further—not just an endorsement of Harris, the spot is an explicit takedown of Trump. Trump is, Springsteen tell us, “the most dangerous candidate for president in my lifetime” and links back to *The Middle* in its simultaneous call for “a vision of this country that respects and includes everyone, regardless of class, religion, race, your political point of view or sexual identity ... That's the vision of America I've been consistently writing about for 55 years.”

Taken together the totality of Springsteen's filmed work represents not simply what Watson refers to as ‘the memoir project’ (*Born to Run*, *Springsteen on Broadway*) but a project which has been enacted, structured, and restructured for decades. Springsteen's attention to constructing and amending his persona has made use of the modalities of transmedia from at least 1996's *Blood Brothers* and includes written material (*Songs*, *Born to Run*, etc.), numerous film projects, public performances, television, podcasts, radio broadcasts, and an explicit and consistent use of the media interview as framing device for persona.<sup>59</sup> We are now to consider Springsteen the composer of scores alongside Springsteen the composer of rock anthems; Springsteen the artist alongside Springsteen and the E Street Band (with all that implies regarding the communal rituals of rock); and Springsteen the public figure, who now perhaps feels as if he has things to say that lie outside the realm of musical performance though which are

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involve activity on Twitter (X) with Amy Aiello Lofgren, wife of E Street Band guitarist Nils Lofgren.

<sup>59</sup> See *Talk About A Dream*, *Springsteen on Springsteen* (both 2013), and the recent Howard Stern interview (2023) amongst others.

connected to a career's worth of ruminating on the American condition in song.

Springsteen is now 75, and as Richard Elliot reminds us, "the retrospection allowed by [career] lateness and successful ageing is key here. Popular musicians with long careers provide rich source material for the study of persona, authenticity, endurance and the maintenance (and reinvention) of significant bodies of work."<sup>60</sup> As Springsteen continues to work through the latter stages of his career, it should perhaps come as no surprise to find him attempting to both make aspects of his legacy unequivocal and add to collective perceptions of himself as an artist. Convergence, Jenkins tells us, occurs as "each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives"<sup>61</sup> and, I'll add, those things which we imbue with meaning. Even rock stars. Springsteen, via an extended period of careful career positioning, slight shifts in presentation of persona, and the engagement of his fan base in an authenticating process that facilitates the layering of identity, both creates the media flow out of which individual fans may construct a personal connection to his artistic output and ensures coherence with an evolving and highly curated mythology.

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<sup>60</sup> Elliot, 19

<sup>61</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006, pp. 3-4.