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# BOSS

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The Biannual  
Online-Journal of  
Springsteen Studies

Volume 4 • 2020



Published by McGill University

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## **Mission Statement**

*BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies* aims to publish scholarly, peer-reviewed essays pertaining to Bruce Springsteen. This open-access journal seeks to encourage consideration of Springsteen's body of work primarily through the political, economic, and socio-cultural factors that have influenced his music and shaped its reception. *BOSS* welcomes broad interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches to Springsteen's songwriting and performance. The journal aims to secure a place for Springsteen Studies in the contemporary academy.

## **Submission Guidelines**

The editors of *BOSS* welcome submissions of articles that are rigorously researched and provide original, analytical approaches to Springsteen's songwriting, performance, and fan community. Inter- and cross-disciplinary works, as well as studies that conform to specific disciplinary perspectives, are welcome. Suggested length of submission is between 15 and 25 pages.

## **Contact**

To access *BOSS*, please visit <http://boss.mcgill.ca/>

Please address all queries and submissions to Caroline Madden (Managing Editor) at [Springsteenstudies@gmail.com](mailto:Springsteenstudies@gmail.com).

## **Cover Image**

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# Introduction

For Bruce Springsteen (and many of us), 2020 was a year of reflection and nostalgia. In *Letter to You*, Springsteen honors the ghosts of music past – those who have shaped his lifelong artistic journey. He invites us into his house of a thousand guitars, erected in his formative years by his first band The Castiles and cultivated by the E Street Band and countless other inspirations. This year, Springsteen also appeared with Bleachers on the song “chinatown,” adding a gruff resonance to its soft yearning. It is a unique collaboration that reinforces Springsteen’s continual expansion of his musical horizons.

In the spirit of artistic influences, *BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies* Vol. 4 explores Springsteen’s connection to other musicians. Barry David studies the Gospel roots and various interpretations of “Land of Hope and Dreams” from other artists such as Curtis Mayfield, Bob Dylan, and Pete Seeger. Brian Conniff explores Springsteen’s longtime kinship with Elvis Presley. Lastly, Alex Carpenter and Ian Skinner contrast the nationalistic themes of Springsteen and The Tragically Hip’s music. Prudence Jones reviews *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*, which offers a fascinating retrospective of Springsteen’s body of work and impact on popular culture.

We hope this issue will contribute to discussions about Springsteen’s ongoing legacy and wellspring of musical knowledge and inspirations.

Caroline Madden, Managing Editor

## Contributors

**Alexander Carpenter** is a musicologist and music critic. He is Professor of Music at the Augustana campus of the University of Alberta, where he teaches courses in music history, music theory, popular music and aesthetics. His research interests include the music of the Second Viennese School, post-punk music, the connections between music and psychoanalysis, and film music.

**Brian Conniff** is Professor of English at the University of Scranton, where for the past decade he was also Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He is the author of *The Lyric and Modern Poetry*, a book on the relationship between “lyricism” –involving ideas of music and transcendence--and the work of several modern and contemporary poets. His articles have appeared in a variety of scholarly journals, including *American Literature*, *African American Review*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Religion and Literature*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Logos*, *Catholic Education*, *Journal of Reading*, and *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, as well as scholarly books on Robert Hayden, Truman Capote, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, W.H. Auden, Robert Creeley, prison writing, and literature and law.

**Barry David** received his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto, his M.A. from Carleton University, and his B.A. from the University of King’s College at Dalhousie University. He has taught at St. Anselm College, Franciscan University of Steubenville, and Ave Maria University. He has written several articles in philosophy on topics in medieval philosophy, ethics, philosophy of God, and metaphysics; and is also co-editor of *Aquinas the Augustinian*, editor of *Passionate Mind*, and author of *Pursuing and Praising God: Augustine’s Confessions*. He teaches a wide range of courses in Philosophy and Humanities, covering topics in Classical Antiquity through Modern and Contemporary Culture.

**Ian Skinner** Ian Skinner is a graduate of the University of Alberta (BA in Music) and Dalhousie University (MA in Musicology). His academic research undertaken in these degrees focuses on Canadian folk music and Canadian popular music studies, most notably the music of The Tragically Hip and Drake. In 2017, his research on Canadian folk music for the Kodály Society of Canada was published by Cypress Music for the re-issued, two-volume folksong collection *Reflections of Canada*. His Master's thesis (2019)

integrates socio-geographic concepts of space, place, and identity with the music of Canadian rapper Drake. He is currently awaiting approval for a doctoral degree in Musicology at the University of Alberta. He now lives in Dawson Creek, BC, with his wife and two daughters.

# Everyday People: Elvis Presley, Bruce Springsteen, and the Gospel Traditixon

Brian Conniff  
University of Scranton

## Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

social and political views. Even more, Springsteen's recent pronouncements of his Catholic faith—especially in *Born to Run* and *Springsteen on Broadway*—might seem very distant from his praise for Elvis as a “Saturday night jukebox Dionysus” or an “Apollo.” Somehow, that striking figure on the television screen has continued to grow into something more complex: he is a rebel, a reactionary, a genius, a fool, a font of modern ideas, a cautionary tale, an inspiration, an embarrassment, and a precursor of the civil rights movement—often at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

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

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

two sides of Springsteen's long reflection on Elvis' life and music have helped him to move beyond a highly restrictive view of Catholicism, allowing him to explore and express his faith in some of his most compelling songs. Ultimately, Springsteen's Catholic imagination suggests a framework, derived largely from gospel and shaping his most recent work. This framework can help us to understand the place of these two musicians – yes, even Elvis – in a larger context of populist music, social progress, and collective redemption.

### **The Student of Elvis & Populist Traditions**

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

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

<sup>4</sup>Andy Greene and David Marchese. "The Ties That Bind: Bruce Springsteen' 25 Biggest Heroes." *Rolling Stone*. January 10, 2014. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/the-ties-that-bind-bruce->

Springsteen has felt the weight of Elvis' decline and death. For instance, in the spring of 1981, in the midst of *The River* tour, he transformed Chuck Berry's "Bye Bye Johnny" (a sort of prequel to "Johnny B. Goode") into "Johnny Bye Bye," a meditation on Elvis' death as the lonely conclusion—"They found him slumped up against the drain / With a whole lotta trouble running through his veins"—to his search for a "promised land" by way of Rock and Roll stardom.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the two years of recording sessions for *Born in the U.S.A.*, Springsteen re-wrote and re-recorded "Johnny Bye Bye" several times, while also working on a downbeat, mournful cover of Elvis' "Follow that Dream" (taken from the soundtrack of a forgettable 1962 film of the same title). Springsteen repeatedly rearranged, revised, and reinterpreted "Follow That Dream"—"I gotta follow that dream to find the love I need"—in versions that became slower, more mournful, and more ironic, as this song, too, came to express the ultimate isolation and despair of Elvis' particular dream of stardom. He has never released it.<sup>6</sup>

Springsteen also saw Elvis in concert twice—or rather, he saw two versions of Elvis. The first time was in 1972 at Madison Square Garden, in Elvis' first series of shows in New York City,

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[springsteens-25-biggest-heroes-32797](#). Springsteen used this story to express a wide range of thoughts about Elvis, generally confirming his early admiration and injecting a comic note.

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

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

when, according to Clinton Heylin, he “was still a magnetic performer with a command of the stage and a band he had made his own.” The second time was in Philadelphia in 1977, just a few months before Elvis’ death, when he was by all accounts “a shell of the former shell . . . a bulbous parody of that once-legendary performer . . . [who] could barely hit (or hold) any note higher than middle C.”<sup>7</sup>

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

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

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

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

<sup>9</sup> Fred Goodman gives much attention to – and sometimes overstates – Jon Landau’s influence on Springsteen’s early career. Landau worked as a film critic and then became an influential rock critic before working with Springsteen.

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

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

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Goodman notes that Landau's “favorite film” was John Ford's *The Searchers* and states that Springsteen's “new persona” in the later 1970s and early 1980s was based on the film's main character, Ethan Edwards. Goodman bases this claim on a review in which Landau refers to Edwards as “the archetypal American hero,” alienated from family, roots, and human contact, who is “condemned to wander the wilderness, this time in search of whatever solace without purpose he can find there.” Goodman, *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen, and the Head-on Collision of Rock and Commerce* (New York: Random House, 1997), 301. This description does generally coincide with Springsteen's view of Elvis in his later years, though not so much with Springsteen's persona or Springsteen himself. See my discussion of *Elvis Presley: The Searcher*.

and blues of the Mississippi Delta, old-time country, and especially gospel.<sup>10</sup>

For Springsteen, Elvis' greatest gift was his uncanny ability to channel, combine, and re-imagine these traditions. More than anything else, that was his "magic" – to borrow a suggestive bit of Springsteen shorthand for the relationship between the artistic imagination and performance.<sup>11</sup> At times, Elvis seemed to do it unconsciously, at unanticipated moments in a studio session or a performance. One particularly telling example, often presented as a biographical or historical landmark, occurred during his commercial recording sessions with Sam Phillips at Sun Studios in Memphis in 1954, when he was just 19 years old. This event has been described many times, perhaps most carefully by Guralnick in his biography of Phillips, but seldom with a sufficient appreciation for Elvis' eclecticism. For hours, these sessions plodded along unsuccessfully, with attempts to cover all kinds of songs and styles, from Ernest Tubbs to the Ink Spots to Dean Martin. Then, a rendition of Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's Alright, Mama" unexpectedly turned into something like a "fever dream" (a more sensationalized version of "magic"), which suddenly resulted in the invention of Rockabilly and the Elvis

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

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

persona (and according to some accounts by Guralnick and others, the invention of Rock and Roll itself).<sup>12</sup> In this particular origin story, the artist's gift resides in a power that is both combinatory and transformational (a logic consistent with the analogical quality of Springsteen's Catholic imagination). For reasons that are seldom made clear, the sources matter: crooners like Dean Martin seem impervious to this artistic transformation, whereas Delta blues musicians like Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup seem to invite it (and therein lies a good deal of controversy about race and appropriation). At the same time, the same gift exerts itself on the artist's personal identity: Elvis Presley becomes Elvis the persona. It is a formulation that grants the imagination extraordinary powers. It encourages outsized hopes, even a transformation of the collective American identity. And it almost inevitably subjects the artist to crushing disappointment.

For Springsteen, Elvis has always been the preternaturally gifted country boy absorbing influences song by song, note by note, sound by sound. It is significant that he started more or less nowhere, not even in Tupelo, exactly, but in that shotgun shack on the unpaved roads outside of East Tupelo. There, when he was no more than two years old, Elvis' parents would take him to the Assembly of God church, where his mother's uncle was the preacher, and he would sneak up towards the choir and sing along, even before he knew any of the words. There, by the time he was 12, he would cross back and forth between the white and black neighborhoods, hearing the music drifting out from the Armory dances, the jukeboxes in the diners and bars, the movie theatres, the

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



house parties, the Sunday congregations, and the tent revivals just down the street. Then, fatefully, at the age of 13, he moved with his family into one of the New Deal projects of the Memphis Housing Authority, where he would be among the growing number of American teenagers listening at night to local radio stations playing the blues, country, and gospel – and just as important, hearing the words and the intonations of the Sunday-night preachers. There, in the projects, after school, Elvis would put together his first band. And before long, he would soon find his way to Beale Street where he would hear great blues musicians like B.B. King, Little Junior Parker, and Rufus Thomas.<sup>13</sup>

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

Presley, in truth, belonged to no precise musical category, and the sources on which he drew were remarkably diverse and eclectic. Like many young people of his generation, Elvis Presley was largely a child of the media. His dress and his demeanor were partially shaped by the movies and television, while his musical tastes were affected by the radio. He listened to the country music favored by his parents, but he also heard the gospel music,

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

rhythm-and-blues, and mainstream pop music that boomed out over Memphis radio stations. Pop singer Dean Martin was just as appealing to Elvis as was country singer Red Foley or blues singer B.B. King.<sup>14</sup>

To appreciate Elvis' popularity and influence, it is important to understand him as a figure of this particular moment, with this sudden availability of various musical genres and an expanding economy in which teenagers suddenly had unprecedented access to disposable cash. Eager to establish cultural separation from their parents, these teenagers of the mid- to late-1950s were suddenly watching the latest stars on televisions, gathering at dancehalls, sneaking transistor radios into their beds at night, putting coins in jukeboxes, and watching films with soundtracks designed and marketed specifically for them.<sup>15</sup> In this proliferation of media, Elvis was soon inescapable. Of course, it did not take long for him – and his relentlessly opportunistic manager, Colonel Tom Parker – to realize that his stage presence could be translated profitably and seamlessly to the movies. And it did not take much longer for them to realize that promotions of popular films and records could build upon each other, extending his fame and fortune, and locking him into contracts that were designed to succeed commercially just as they were designed to fail artistically (in this regard, it is not surprising that Springsteen would begin to work seriously with film much later in his career, much more cautiously and with carefully circumscribed aims). At times, Elvis's own aspirations would get confused, as he sometimes wanted to become something

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

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

more enduring than a teen idol, with an appeal that crossed generations. But he became famous at a time in which Rock and Roll was increasingly associated with a distinct teen culture and teen rebellion: it was the brief era of “teens-gone-wrong films” and “teen delinquency scares,” often transparently linked to fears of race mixing.<sup>16</sup> With so much fear and anxiety regarding social change projected and marketed on records and popular films, Elvis could not resist the desire to be the next James Dean – as opposed to the last Dean Martin or Red Foley – for reasons completely obvious to the teenagers who filled his concerts.

Of course, the broad social forces of this historical moment – the expansion of the economy, the growth of a middle-class, the invention of youth culture, the rise of electronic media, the evolution of music marketing – all helped to generate an exaggerated sense of Elvis’ “originality,” and even the problematic and embarrassing mythology of “The King.”<sup>17</sup> In doing so, they also tended to obscure the longer history of his musical populism. As Springsteen would come to realize, particularly after he became famous, Elvis’ music was constantly drawing upon traditions that

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

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

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

had arisen from people and communities who were generally excluded from the post-war prosperity that fueled his rise. They had little connection to the youth culture of the day. They were not generally "middle class" or even "working class." In many cases, they were poor.

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

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

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

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

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

Just as Elvis' populist eclecticism arose from a specific local context, it was driven by a mix of good intentions, personal encounters, and commercial opportunism—all maddeningly entangled. Elvis owed his early success to two young white men in

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

Memphis, Dewey Phillips and Sam Phillips (no relation), who shared his devotion to black musicians across genres and his determination to promote their music to a wider (that is, mostly white) audience. Dewey Phillips had a nightly show on the Memphis radio station WHBQ where he played a wide array of music, mostly by black musicians for a black audience. Elvis and his teenage friends—along with “half of Memphis”—listened to Dewey Phillips' wildly eclectic show. According to Guralnick, “in the course of one fifteen minute segment, you might hear Muddy Waters' latest hit, a gospel number by the Soul Stirrers (with their great singer, R. H. Harris), Larry Darnell's 'For You, My Love,' and Wynonie Harris' 'Good Rockin' Tonight'” —“boogies, blues, and spirituals,” in the words of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*.<sup>20</sup> Elvis' early music and persona emerged directly from this remarkable era of Memphis radio, which Guralnick aptly describes as “an Aladdin's lamp of musical vistas and styles.”<sup>21</sup> And that was just one small part of it. Other radio shows of the day featured “hillbilly music and cornpone humor”; gospel music, including the Blackwood Brothers who had recently joined the First Assembly of God Church attended by Elvis and his family; the Saturday night broadcasts from the Grand Ole Opry; and big band broadcasts from the Peabody Skyway. And then there was the local station WDIA, which in 1949 had instituted an “all-black programming policy and billed itself as ‘The Mother Station of the Negroes.’”<sup>22</sup> On WDIA, B.B. King worked as a D.J. and performed live. The station's “personalities” included black history teachers and comedians and

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<sup>20</sup> Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 38-39.

the Spirit of Memphis Quartet, whose performances “made even the Carnation Milk jingle reverberate with feeling.”<sup>23</sup> From the start, Sam Phillips realized that Elvis “was like a sponge, soaking up every influence with which he came in contact.”<sup>24</sup> He knew he could cash in on just such a talent, and he could do so in the name – and, he believed, the reality – of social progress.

In his autobiography, Springsteen repeatedly reminds us how much his own sense of the rise of Rock and Roll depended upon the wide array of popular songs suddenly available on the radio. For that matter, throughout the autobiography’s early chapters, the radio virtually becomes a character in itself. In one of the most significant passages, he movingly recalls following his grandfather around the neighborhood, searching through the trash for radios, which he would then repair – “the resurrection is real” – and sell for five dollars in the migrant camps around Monmouth County, where “the mostly Southern black migrant population” harvested the crops in “dust-bowl thirties conditions.” Springsteen also fondly remembers his mother’s kitchen radio playing popular hits, the family’s car radio playing doo wop on evening drives, and of course the transistor radio he tucked under his pillow at night.<sup>25</sup> Out on Highway 33, at the edge of town, the local radio tower stands “near the huge Jersey Freeze ice cream cone, like a giant.” It brings more than music: it provides a connection to larger world, alive with possibility, with “stickey-voiced deejays playing ‘race records’” – in the midst of all the other “poets, geniuses, rockers, bluesmen, preachers, philosopher

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<sup>23</sup> Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Guralnick, *Sam Phillips*, 227.

<sup>25</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 9, 37, 44, 46.

kings" – coming to him over the radio waves.<sup>26</sup> The local becomes national, and vice versa, especially as the sounds of Elvis' Memphis arrive in Central New Jersey, even in Freehold (though more momentarily in New York City and Newark and Asbury Park).

From the very start of Elvis' career, Sam Phillips clearly understood the "controversy over race mixing" and the appeal of "the boy's natural sexuality." There is no doubt that he also anticipated the opportunity to profit from both. What often gets lost, though, in the ongoing controversies over Elvis and his legacy, is just how clearly Phillips also grasped what he called "the inherent *spirituality* of the music." "It wasn't just that this young kid had grown up in a religious environment, like so many of the rest of them," Phillips said, "It was how he mixed the sound, and exuberance, of spiritual music with blues and country in a way that no one else had before."<sup>27</sup> Predictably, Phillips exaggerates Elvis' uniqueness, yet he also points to his most vital influences. During the same brief time period, in and around 1954, when Elvis made those first records, he and his girlfriend would sneak away from the Pentecostal services they attended with his family, and head to the East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church. There, they would listen to the songs of the Brewsteraires with "featured soloist" Queen C. Anderson, and they would listen to the sermons of Rev. W. Herbert Brewster, a legendary preacher and prominent civil rights advocate whose songs were recorded by Mahalia Jackson and Clara Ward.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> Guralnick, *Sam Phillips*, 218.

<sup>28</sup> Guralnick, *Last Train*, 75. On a related note, at the same time, J.R. Cash, who would soon be known as Johnny Cash, came to Memphis, took a job as a door-to-door salesman, formed a band with his brother Roy and three other mechanics



Anthony Heilbut makes it clear that East Trigg “was not just another black gospel church.”<sup>29</sup> He describes Anderson as “by legend the greatest gospel singer the South has produced” and Brewster as “a beautiful example of the progressive impulses nurtured by gospel and developed in the freedom movement.”<sup>30</sup> As Randall J. Stephens notes, Elvis’ presence at East Trigg was likely to have been “considered inappropriate, or worse,” and so he would “sneak back to the First Assembly before services ended there.” From that point on, though, he would remain “an enormous fan of black gospel music.”<sup>31</sup>

More than anything else, it is this local context – with gospel deeply embedded in a vital religious community, in opposition to racial injustice, and in the early stages of the civil rights movement – that explains how, even to this day, Springsteen can consider Elvis (albeit ambivalently) a figure of social progress. Dr. Brewster and East Trigg were important in their own right. They were formative influences on Elvis. They contributed to broader movements in religion and popular music, as Brewster’s gospel compositions were broadly eclectic, among the first to incorporate blues and waltz forms.<sup>32</sup> Yet Dr. Brewster and East Trigg were also part of something even more significant. In the Memphis of Elvis’ youth, as in so many other places across the South, the early civil rights movement was largely based in the black churches. It was

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from the local Chrysler dealership, contributed his own gospel number, and also began recording at Sun. Guralnick, *Sam Phillips*, 242-43.

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

<sup>30</sup> Heilbut, 97-98.

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

<sup>32</sup> Heilbut, 99.

sustained by preaching and church music that, in turn, powerfully shaped its public expressions through music, rhetoric, and civic action. These same traditions would provide Elvis' music with its most enduring foundation. In perhaps the least remembered moment from those performances on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, at the end of his third and final appearance, he insisted on singing "Peace in the Valley" – written for Mahalia Jackson in 1937 by "the father of gospel music," Thomas A. Dorsey – as a promise to his mother, and accompanied by a plea for donations for refugees fleeing Hungary after the Soviet invasion. Dr. Brewster, himself, later said that Elvis' version of this song was "one of the best gospel recordings I've ever heard."<sup>33</sup>

Much like Springsteen, Elvis thought of music – and often gospel most of all – as his "vocation," that is, a "calling" in the specifically religious sense. From the start, it was true, as Wesley Morris has recently put it, that "The rockin' backwoods blues so bewitched Elvis Presley that he believed he'd been called by blackness."<sup>34</sup> Springsteen characteristically describes this attraction as a yearning for intimacy: for him, Elvis was "a singer, a guitar player who loved black musical culture, recognized its artistry, its mastery, its power, and yearned for intimacy with it."<sup>35</sup> This call

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted by Guralnick, *Last Train*, 75. Stephens points out that not all of these feelings were mutual. Whereas Brewster praised Elvis' gospel recordings, he was among those traditional Christians who disdained Rock and Roll and "preached against rowdy, lewd music that seemed to be infiltrating the churches." For her part, Jackson sharply criticized Elvis for what she called his "deliberate theft" of black religious music. Stephens, *The Devil's Music*, 41-42, 99.

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

<sup>35</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 41.

"by blackness" would endure, even into his final days, more than the blues or any other form of music. On a personal level, through some of his most difficult times, it was gospel, more than anything else, that sustained him. In the end, it was the influence of gospel tradition, even more than rhythm and blues, that would shape his legacy in popular music. Elements of gospel find their way into just about every aspect of Elvis' stage presence—his movements, his mannerisms, his vocal inflections, his interactions with his musicians and backing singers, and most of all his relentless desire to move a live audience. Joel Dinerstein has written that Springsteen's theories of "*performance-audience interaction* owe more to African-American gospel traditions of affirmation than to rock's calling cards of Dionysian revelry, adolescent rebellion, transgression, and Horatio Alger narratives." According to Dinerstein, these theories are grounded, like gospel and soul, in a "musical philosophy of community."<sup>36</sup> The same is true for Elvis, though, like many of his contemporaries, he constantly blurred the distinctions, always tenuous, between the older traditions and the "calling cards" of Rock revelry and rebellion.<sup>37</sup> His personal demise only shows—and Springsteen would say it was caused by—his drifting away from the philosophy of community he had once found in these older traditions.

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<sup>36</sup> Joel Dinerstein, "The Soul Roots of Bruce Springsteen's American Dream," (*American Music* 25.4, Winter, 2007), 441-76.

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

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

Moreover, as Stephens documents, Elvis was one of a number of highly influential popular musicians in the 1950s—including Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, James Brown, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, B.B. King, Tammy Wynette, and Johnny Cash—who were deeply influenced, personally and musically, by Pentecostalism.<sup>41</sup> Elvis came of age at a moment when many Evangelical churches—especially the Pentecostal and holiness churches, which were newer and less bound by tradition—were more willing than Catholic churches or mainline Protestant churches to incorporate popular music and instrumentation into their worship. At a time when "[t]he leap from unbridled sanctified

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<sup>38</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* 249

<sup>39</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* 249.

<sup>40</sup> Stephens, *The Devil's Music*, 43.

<sup>41</sup> Stephens, *The Devil's Music*, 27-64.

music to rock was not a great one," Elvis was just one of the performers who made the leap, and sometimes leapt back.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, throughout his career, Elvis continued to perform and record traditional gospel songs, including four albums devoted exclusively to the genre. But his broader legacy for popular music derives primarily from the crossing over—and even more the blurring of distinctions—between the religious and the secular, the church and the larger world, even the sacred and the profane. Of course, in general terms, he shared this impulse with many other popular musicians—in Rock and Roll, jazz, blues, country, and rhythm and blues. Yet in the late 1950s, he shared it directly and specifically with Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and James Brown. In this particular historical line of popular music, it was Lewis—the first cousin of the Pentecostal preacher and televangelist, Jimmy Swaggart—who was Elvis' closest analog. He too was raised as a Pentecostal in the Assembly of God church, and, according to legend, he was dismissed from an Assembly of God bible college in Waxahachie Texas "after he played a boogie version of 'My God is Real' in chapel."<sup>43</sup> This particular mix of faith and music would prove to be a great revelation—and an example to imitate—for a Catholic boy raised at that time in Saint Rose of Lima parish.

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<sup>42</sup> Stephens, *The Devil's Music*, 37.

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

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

From 1969 on—in Las Vegas, on tour, and in the studio—Elvis and the Jordanaires were usually joined by the Sweet Inspirations.<sup>44</sup> Often described as a black R&B "girl group," the Sweet Inspirations became seemingly omnipresent backing vocalists in popular music of the later 1960s and early 1970s. They accompanied, among many others, Aretha Franklin, Jimi Hendrix, Wilson Pickett, and T-Bone Walker—and in some of the odd twists typical of "backing" careers, the Bee Gees and The Killers. They also sang on Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl" and *Moondance* (and thus helped set the stage and provide the aftermath of Morrison's landmark album *Astral Weeks*, which, in the words of

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<sup>44</sup> At times, Elvis also worked with another male gospel group, The Imperials, who are often credited with breaking a "color barrier" in 1972 by adding Sherman Andrus as the first African American lead singer in an integrated mainstream Christian group.

Steve Van Zandt, became “like a religion” to Springsteen and the early E-Street Band). Just as much as the Jordanaires, the Sweet Inspirations had grown up with gospel woven into their DNA. They started performing as the Drinkard Singers, sometimes known as the Drinkard Four, a family gospel group formed by a devout Baptist named Nitch Drinkard in Savannah, Georgia, in the 1930s. After Nitch moved the family to Newark, New Jersey, to work in a factory during the Second Great Migration, his daughters became featured singers in the choir of the New Hope Baptist Church, from which they gained a devoted and devotional following throughout Central New Jersey.<sup>45</sup> They came to see themselves as “junior ambassadors – not just sowing the gospel but also reaping the benefits of singing God’s word in our own lives,” and did their part to spread the gospel sound from Newark through Asbury Park and much of Springsteen Country.<sup>46</sup>

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

### **The Cautionary Tale & Gospel Redemption**

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

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

Even as he presented Springsteen with the outrageous and irresistible idea of becoming a Rock star, Elvis also became his ultimate cautionary tale. Of course, as Springsteen started his career in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was well aware of the troubled Rock heroes – most famously, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison—whose self-destruction provided the tragic examples for his generation’s prevailing Romantic myth of the artist. By the early 1970s, it was a role that seemed destined to keep repeating itself. After the extraordinary promises of the 1960s, after Woodstock and Altamont, there was a common awareness, as James Miller writes, that Rock and Roll had been transformed “almost beyond recognition.” Rock had become “a new cultural form,” and now it needed a “once and future Messiah.”<sup>47</sup> Springsteen’s critics have often disagreed about the reasons for his sudden fame following the release of *Born to Run* late in the summer of 1975, but they have been virtually unanimous about the excessive expectations placed upon him. As Peter Ames Carlin describes it, without exaggeration, “The critical appraisals greeting *Born to Run* read like news accounts of the second coming.”<sup>48</sup> What these early critics, even the True Believers, never seem to have realized is just how clearly Springsteen understood – almost as

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

<sup>48</sup> Carlin, *Bruce*, 204.



soon as he found himself thrust into the role of Rock and Roll messiah – that he needed to become something very different.

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

Most basically, as Springsteen would write in his autobiography (expanding upon decades of onstage commentaries), Elvis had followed the path of many of Rock and Roll "heroes" by mistaking "unfettered personal license" for "real freedom."<sup>49</sup> The biggest problem with this "personal license" was not the sex or the drugs, though they obviously took their toll, and it certainly was not the music itself. The biggest problem was that the "connection between the man onstage and the fan had grown too abstract."<sup>50</sup> Elvis had lost not only his connection to the fans in the audience; he had also lost any recognizable sense of belonging to the communities from which he and his music had emerged. He had done so torturously, operatically, in slow-motion and stop-action, album by album, film by film, dollar by dollar, over nearly two decades.

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<sup>49</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 262.

<sup>50</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 266.

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

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

Springsteen's preoccupation with Elvis through this critical period in his own career has been carefully documented, especially his self-reflection and sense of loss in the months around Elvis' death. Highlights include a night at the Stone Pony, late in May of 1977, when Springsteen led a friend's band in a gyrating, Elvis-worthy rendition of "Jailhouse Rock."<sup>52</sup> Just a few nights later, he and Steve Van Zandt drove down to Philadelphia for one of Elvis' final shows at the Spectrum, after which they were so disheartened that they drove home scarcely able to talk. What they saw must have been disturbing, not just to devoted fans – they decided to sit in the middle of the audience, rather than among the VIPs – but to anyone capable of recognizing human tragedy. Reviewers described these final concerts as "a series of postures" by a man "too tired – or bored – to care," as "a depressingly incoherent, amateurish mess served up by a bloated, stumbling and mumbling figure who didn't act like 'The King' of anything, least of all rock 'n' roll," and many other words to the same effect.<sup>53</sup> And then, as they worked on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, they set up a shrine to Elvis in the recording studio – "his ghost hovered over our sessions," Springsteen writes – and passed around a copy of the tabloid biography, *Elvis: What Happened?*<sup>54</sup> During the same recording sessions, Springsteen wrote "Fire," hoping that Elvis might record it, and apparently sent him a demo, only to learn he had died before it arrived.<sup>55</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>55</sup> Heylin, *E Street Shuffle*.

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

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

Over the years, telling stories onstage, Springsteen has often echoed the iconoclastic Rock writer Lester Bangs, saying that "everybody remembers where they were when Elvis died."<sup>57</sup> Of course, very few of us actually do (even those of us who are old

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<sup>56</sup> Carlin, *Bruce*, 246-48.

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

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

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

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<sup>58</sup> Gilbert B. Rodman, "A Hero to Most?", 457-77.

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

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

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<sup>59</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 278.

<sup>60</sup> Bruce Springsteen, “Bruce Springsteen: By the Book.”

<sup>61</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 261.

<sup>62</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 265.

<sup>63</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 262.

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

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

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<sup>64</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 266.

<sup>65</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 265.

<sup>66</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 264.

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

And so, Springsteen began to consider how his relationship to “communities under siege” should be reflected in his bands, in his dress, in his performances, in his interactions with his audience, in his support of service agencies in the cities on his tours. But most of all, of course, this relationship had to be reflected in his songs. After the album *Born to Run*, the heart and soul of his music would

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<sup>67</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 264.

<sup>68</sup> Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 292.



no longer be an imagined Jersey Shore or the city streets across the river in an imagined New York City. In “My Hometown,” it was Freehold itself, with its own shuttered textile mill, vacant stores, and racial tensions. In “My City of Ruins” it was his alternate hometown of Asbury Park, with its long history of segregation and many of its buildings still shuttered and streets still empty from the racial revolt of 1970.<sup>69</sup> More often, it was another variation on Springsteen’s America, populated by displaced factory workers in Mahwah, New Jersey, and Youngstown, Ohio; under-employed construction workers in Johnstown, Pennsylvania; and migrant farmworkers in California’s Central Valley. It was found in the country songs of Jimmy Rogers and Hank Williams, in the protest songs of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, in the anthems of the civil rights movement, in Motown, in soul, and R & B, in New Orleans jazz, and in Delta blues.

For many of Springsteen’s most compelling later songs, though, the heart and soul of the music was gospel. Gradually, as he looked back to Elvis as a cautionary tale, he also looked farther back, to the version of Elvis that preceded his pathetic later isolation, and even farther back to the communitarian vitality of Elvis’ sources in populist traditions. As Marsh puts it, “In the

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

Pentecostal churches whose gospel music spawned so much of rock and roll, the purpose of music is to enhance interaction between congregation and performers. Often, what Springsteen idealized in early rock and roll music were attempts to achieve something similar.”<sup>70</sup> This interaction between congregation and performers has always been central to the gospel tradition, one of the main features distinguishing it from other traditions of black music. It allows for a kind of dialogue that can embrace “familiar topics of concern” at the same time that it reminds “everyone present of their roots.”<sup>71</sup>

Gospel has been part of Springsteen’s sound, in one way or another, from the beginning. When he broke up Steel Mill in 1971 to form a larger band (known at various points as The Bruce Springsteen Band, The Sundance Blues Band, and Dr. Zoom & The Sonic Boom, among other things), Delores Holmes (from a Gospel family in Matawan) and her friend Barbara Dinkins (who soon returned to singing in church) responded to an advertisement in the *Asbury Park Press* looking for assorted musicians and two women vocalists. Springsteen’s idea was that, in the first band in which he would establish himself as a front man (hence Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band rather than The Bruce Springsteen Band), he wanted a gospel sound. After a successful audition, the two women soon joined the constantly changing band, and for a while they were called “The Zoomettes.”<sup>72</sup> When Springsteen scaled the band down and finally arrived at the E Street Band, he abandoned backing singers for a while. Nonetheless, at least from

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<sup>70</sup> Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 266.

<sup>71</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 187.

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

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

Around the turn of the millennium, as Springsteen began to express his Catholic faith more openly, he also became more explicit about gospel's role in the evolution of his persona as a Rock and Roll "front man." In his commentary in *Elvis Presley: The Searcher*, Springsteen credits Elvis with inventing this role. For Springsteen, Elvis developed his front man persona directly from his own formative religious experiences, particularly as he adopted, on stage, some of the mannerisms and dynamics of an evangelical preacher, accompanied by a choir, performing to inspire and move a congregation. While there are many examples

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<sup>73</sup> Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 329-30.

of this adaptation in Springsteen's songs, perhaps the most significant is "Land of Hope and Dreams." In several respects, it is also a quintessential Springsteen song, demonstrating the deep relationships between his musical populism, his commitment to community, his religious faith, and his aspirations for social change.

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

journey on the Great Migration, into popular music at a crucial historical moment in 1965.

With this sequence of its parts, "Land of Hope and Dreams" enacts a movement from romantic escape and personal liberation to spiritual aspiration for a beloved community to collective action for social justice. By doing so from the structure of a love song, it embraces and ultimately fuses *eros* and *agape*, personal commitment and radical kinship, the quest for a new life, and the aspiration for a better society.

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

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<sup>74</sup> Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 225.

This song did not have a name. It didn't need one. But it contained echoes of a dozen songs, some older than Springsteen himself. There was Roy Acuff on "The Wabash Cannonball." The Impressions and "People Get Ready." James Brown aboard the "Night Train." Elvis Presley and Little Junior Parker on that "Mystery Train" – that one most of all. And also Johnny Cash's "Hey Porter," the blues yodels of singing brakeman Jimmy Rodgers, and the lonesome wail of the original Sonny Boy Williamson.<sup>75</sup>

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

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<sup>75</sup> Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 237.

<sup>76</sup> Marsh, *Two Hearts*, 237.

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

As “Land of Hope and Dreams” took on its more familiar form in the late 1990s, it drew more directly on the 1950s version of “This Train” by Sister Rosetta Tharpe.<sup>78</sup> In this respect, Sister Rosetta plays a role in this stage of Springsteen’s career similar to that of Big Mama Thornton early in Elvis’ career. This version of “This Train” is deeply grounded in the gospel tradition. It is also inescapably visceral, always on the edge between spirituality and sensuality, with the layers of knowing irony that would characterize Rock and Roll’s adaptation of its evangelical sources in the later 1950s. More specifically, it is also characteristic of Sister Rosetta’s own adaptation of Pentecostal church music for a broader, more secular audience, much as she transformed “My Lord and I” into “My Man and I” and “Rock Me in Thy Bosom” into “Rock Me.” For her, it was not much of a leap from *agape* to *eros*, from Sunday morning back to Saturday night. A similar irony enters “Land of Hope and Dreams,” as a song framed in the trappings of romantic love becomes a song of companionship, and as a song of escape and passion with a beloved person becomes a song of commitment and compassion for a beloved community.

By the late 1990s, Springsteen was familiar enough with these sources to adapt them readily for his own purposes. Most important, in “Land of Hope and Dreams,” he makes an emotional appeal and a theological claim through a very specific inversion of “This Train.” Even in Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s later version, the song relies conspicuously on a traditional assertion of a fundamental righteousness: “this train is a clean train / this train don’t carry no

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

liars." Her train carries those whose conduct has earned a passage to glory, making the point that it does so whether they are white or black, and she insists that it "don't carry nothing but the righteous an' a holy." Mindful of its historical context, the song is a moral assertion that righteousness has a place among the excluded and the oppressed. Granted, especially with the undeniable sensuality of Sister Rosetta's singing and guitar playing, the song invites sexual ironies, as Little Richard demonstrated when he used its declaration that the train is "built for speed" as a very different kind of tribute to Long Tall Sally. Nonetheless, this version of the song structures its moral order and draws much of its rhetorical force from the traditionally binary opposition of sinners and saints.

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

The song's concluding riff on "People Get Ready" – invoking the underground railroad and the civil rights

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<sup>79</sup> Yadin-Israel, *The Grace of God and the Grace of Man*, 131.



movement—further dramatizes and reasserts this common need, and the universal possibility of redemption, not in some afterlife but in the here-and-now. At the time of its release, one reviewer referred to “Land of Hope and Dreams” as “pure secular gospel” and wrote that the 1999-2000 Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band Reunion Tour was “as much traveling tent revival as reunion tour.”<sup>80</sup> These comments mostly get to the heart of the matter, but “secular gospel” is not a sufficient concept for this song, just as is not sufficient for Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s later version of “This Train.” These songs are not dilutions of the gospel tradition, as “secular” typically implies. They are calls for gospel redemption in—and of—their contemporary world.

Strange as it all might seem, Springsteen’s long career suggests that, without Elvis, he could never have adopted gospel in such compelling ways. At the same time, Elvis is turning out to be just one part of a project that continues to grow more ambitious both in its spiritual aspirations and in its hopes for collective redemption. In an interview about his album *Letter to You*, Springsteen says that his new song, “House of a Thousand Guitars,” is “about this entire spiritual world that I wanted to build for myself.” He compares it to the gospel song “I’m Working on a Building”: “That’s the building we’ve been working on all these years. It also speaks somewhat to the spiritual life of the nation. It may be one of my favorite songs I’ve ever written. It draws in everything I’ve been trying to do for the past 50 years.”<sup>81</sup> In other

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

<sup>81</sup> Quoted by Brian Hiatt in “Ghosts, Guitars, and the E Street Shuffle” (*Rolling Stone*, September 20, 2020). <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/bruce-springsteen-interview-new-album-touring-e-street-band->

words, “House of a Thousand Guitars” is also a sequel to and an expansion of “Land of Hope and Dreams.” It shows how fully Springsteen has come to see his work as part of a living tradition, grounded primarily in gospel, that seeks redemption in community—and a tradition that seeks the redemption and restoration of communities. Of course, he also realizes (past his 71<sup>st</sup> birthday) how much work remains to be done before all the misfit riders on that train—the saints and sinners, the whores and gamblers, Elvis and Sister Rosetta, and the rest of them—are included in the same congregation, the same “spiritual world,” the same beloved community. And as strange as it might seem to a contemporary audience, in more traditional Catholic terms, whatever these riders might have done along the way, those still living are all still open to grace, still capable of finding their way into a communion of saints. Not coincidentally, the album also includes “Ghosts,” a big, autobiographical anthem in which Springsteen speaks about being alive in the presence of the departed “saints” from his own past. *Letter to You* is likely to require another broad reassessment of this already very long career, one informed by these traditions and just beginning to express their principles of restorative justice.

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[1059109/](#). While its origins are uncertain, “I’m Working on a Building” seems to have been an African America spiritual before becoming an early standard for B.B. King, the Carter Family, and Bill Monroe. Elvis Presley recorded it on his 1960 gospel album, *His Hand in Mine*.

*BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies* 4 (2020)

# Signifying (and Psychoanalyzing) National Identity in Rock: Bruce Springsteen and The Tragically Hip

Alexander Carpenter and Ian Skinner  
University of Alberta, Canada

## Abstract

This article addresses the broader issues of national identity in popular music, while focusing on Bruce Springsteen as an icon of "Americanness." Springsteen's ideas about American identity – and especially how identity is tied to place, and to abstract notions like the American Dream – are addressed through an analysis of the song "Born to Run." This analysis examines how the elusiveness of American identity and the American Dream are embedded in the musical features of the song itself, including aspirational melodic structures and successions of non-resolving chords that signify a sort of never-ending pursuit. Springsteen and his music are also juxtaposed here with the music of the Canadian band The Tragically Hip, who are widely considered "Canada's band" by the Canadian media, and whose music is reputed to capture the essence of the Canadian identity; however, as in Springsteen's music, the articulation and expression of national identity proves problematic, and "The Hip" often resort to musical processes – especially harmonic stasis – that suggest not only the vast emptiness of the Canadian landscape, but also a kind of fruitless encircling of "Canadian-ness" as something that can never be fully grasped or realized.

The popular, journalistic and scholarly discourse surrounding Bruce Springsteen has long made it clear that Americanness is central to his musical identity. An informal survey of recently published monographs, for instance, finds reference to Springsteen's "American vision," or describes the rocker as an "American poet and prophet," or links him and his music directly to the "American tradition." Springsteen's central place in the American cultural imagination offers a cogent foil to the problem

of Canadian national identity, in both a general sense and in popular music in particular. After Gord Downie, the singer of the popular Canadian rock band The Tragically Hip, revealed his diagnosis of terminal brain cancer in 2016, “The Hip” soared to national prominence: the band undertook a highly-publicized farewell tour, with the final concert broadcast on national television and attended by the Canadian Prime Minister. The group was celebrated by fans, journalists and scholars alike as “Canada’s band,” and Downie’s subsequent death in 2017 sparked a period of public mourning and gave rise to countless elegies for the “unofficial poet laureate” of Canadian music.

If Springsteen’s American identity can be described as sometimes changeable—especially in its critical/political manifestations—then The Hip’s connection to Canadian identity must be described as downright nebulous. The band has openly disavowed any nationalistic agenda, and its brand of generic, folksy blues-rock—notwithstanding references to Canadian places, people and historical events in some of its song lyrics—is very difficult to map onto a coherent representation of “Canadian-ness,” whatever that might be. In an effort to disentangle some of the complexities and ambiguities of the discourse of national identity in popular music, this paper compares Bruce Springsteen and The Tragically Hip—two so-called national musical icons—focusing on the relationships between musical style and aesthetics, identity and place. We conclude that both Springsteen and The Hip serve as symbols for the representation of national identity, but in very different ways: Springsteen is an “American body” whose songs musically signify an engagement directly with American people and places, real and imagined; on the other hand, The Hip takes an

oblique approach that situates it – psychoanalytically – as a locus of desire and as a placeholder for the construction of a polysemous Canadian identity.

### **Music, Nation, Place and Identity**

Musicologist Ricard Taruskin, writing on nationalism and national identity in European art music, notes that a certain imprecision and vagueness necessarily attends any attempt to define a concept like “nation” or the concepts that underwrite it, like “shared historical experience”; in the end, he asserts, the definition of a nation depends on a “negotiation of the relationship between the political status of communities and the basis of their self-description, whether linguistic, ethnic (genetic/biological), religious, cultural or historical.”<sup>1</sup> In Taruskin’s context, musical nationalism, as a form of cultural self-description, typically refers to the inclusion of indigenous (usually eastern European) folk music elements in art music: folk melodies, rhythmic patterns associated with ethnic dance forms, and harmonic practices related to folk traditions.

However, Taruskin also invokes a theory of European musical nationalism that relates neatly to the Canadian-American context at the heart of this paper, namely that it can be oppositional and reactionary. Nationalism in European art music arose in the 19th century explicitly in reaction to the hegemony of the German art music tradition: it was, in other words, a movement in reaction

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Taruskin, "Nationalism," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000050846>.

to a “dominant culture.”<sup>2</sup> In the Canadian-American context, as we discuss below, Canadian identity is often predicated on what Canada is not—that is, that Canada is not America, and Canadian culture is defined in part through its ongoing resistance to the overwhelming influence of American culture. This presents a primary challenge, namely defining identity in the negative.

Another challenge of discussing national identity in music—and specifically, in popular music—according to Rob Boffard, is the recent homogenizing globalization of music: it is “a situation brought about by the massive sameness of chart music and the colossal amounts of money thrown around by the big record labels and media companies. Simply put, when all music created for the charts sounds the same...there’s no point in having national identity.”<sup>3</sup>

Much of the recent scholarly literature concerned with music and the representation of national identity focuses mainly—though not exclusively—on non-Western music and on how music functions as a text used to articulate place and space, how it explores ethnicities and diasporic cultures, and how it exists as a key component of the various “ethnoscapes” that constitute the increasingly globalized and constantly shifting populations of our

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<sup>2</sup> Taruskin, “Nationalism.” As Taruskin observes, western European nation-states like Germany and France, as cultural hegemonies, do not have nationalistic musical traditions; those countries on the margins or outside of Western Europe do.

<sup>3</sup> Rob Boffard, “National Identity in Popular Music,” *Aesthetica* 46 (2017), <http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/national-identity-in-popular-music/>. This was not always the case, according to Boffard, who cites Bruce Springsteen in particular as a singer-songwriter who was able to express a sense of national identity through place, to “use the concrete and metal landscape of New Jersey to root his music, and people loved him for it.”

world.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of the issue of national identity in the music of Springsteen and The Tragically Hip, we argue here, are place and space: for Springsteen, it is the American heartland, broadly speaking—more narrowly, it is working-class neighbourhoods, desiccated and haunted factory towns, the Jersey shore; for The Hip, it is something more amorphous—a more poetic and phantasmal Canada constituted through invocations of hockey, fleeting glimpses of places across the Canadian landscape, and decontextualized morsels of Canadian history. There is a strong desire in rock historiography to link sites and sounds, whether it be a particular recording studio, a neighbourhood, a city or a region. Indeed, as Connell and Gibson argue, this sense “of finding geographical roots for musical sounds and styles, of locating the artist or the scene in physical space, is a dominant theme in the music press, artist biographies and ‘rockumentaries’.”<sup>5</sup> The effect of place, and the identities it can represent, manifests itself across the whole field of musical production, from the content of song lyrics to the choice of genre, from the visual representation of an artist or band to the sound of the music itself. The “sound” of a place is a hazy and complex construct, necessarily linked to a wealth of factors, from the local cohesiveness of groups of musicians—constituting a particular sonic “scene”—to socio-economic and socio-cultural realities (say, the intersection or collision of rich and poor, urban and rural, or black and white in a given location), to the relationships between large and small musical landscapes (urban New York versus the backwaters of

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<sup>4</sup> See Sheila Whitely, Andy Bennett and Stan Hawkins, eds. *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> John Connell and Chris Gibson, *Soundtracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place* (London: Routledge, 2002), 91.

New Jersey, for instance)<sup>6</sup> and of course the deployment and reception of musical signifiers (the Seattle sound of the grunge era, for instance, which is aurally marked by strong dynamic and textural contrasts, thick midrange timbres and dropped tunings, idiosyncratic guitar distortion, dissonant solos, etc.). With respect to Springsteen, Neil Daniels makes the contentious argument that there is a definable “Jersey sound,” audible in well-known rock artists ranging from Springsteen to Bon Jovi, which includes not only a certain raw, “blue-collar” quality, but also dance elements drawn from the strong Italian presence on the Jersey shore, along with R&B and soul influences.<sup>7</sup> Rob Kirkpatrick suggests that the Jersey sound is an admixture of various pop sounds and styles – notably the Stax sound, Phil Spector’s wall of sound, elements from Motown, blues and psychedelia – all “coming together on the shores of New Jersey, where water met sand, rich met poor, black met white, boardwalk life met New York bohemia, California surf met Philadelphia soul, and music’s past gave birth to rock ‘n roll’s future.”<sup>8</sup>

While Kirkpatrick’s account of the genesis of a Jersey sound is somewhat romantic and whimsical, it links usefully to the notion of place as a sonic locus. In this depiction of the Jersey shore, specific geographical elements of place play a part, albeit a metaphorical one: sounds meet and mix at the actual physical point where sea and land meet and mix. Geography and identity are intrinsically linked, and traditionally music has always been part of this equation. Regions of the world that are isolated and

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<sup>6</sup> See Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks*, 92-93.

<sup>7</sup> See Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks*, 92-93.

<sup>8</sup> Rob Kirkpatrick, *The Words and Music of Bruce Springsteen* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 2



geographically extreme seem to produce music that is specific to place and intimately tied to the cultural identities of the people who live there. Iceland is a prime example, and the unique sound of Icelandic pop music, typified by the very unusual vocal melodies and timbres associated with singer-songwriter Björk and the band Sigur Rós, is commonly attributed to the island nation's remoteness, its desolate landscapes, and the country's folk beliefs.<sup>9</sup> As Tony Mitchell maintains, Iceland's music is often characterized in romantic terms, with music as a necessary product of the country's natural beauty and ruggedness, noting that many scholars assume that "a relational affinity exists between the natural environment and autochthonous activity."<sup>10</sup> Mitchell also offers a cogent warning about such assumptions, however, namely that they are reductive and often tied to tourism marketing schemes. These assumptions make simple claims about complex relationships between musical practices and nature; in the case of Iceland, Mitchell avers, landscape plays less of a role in the dissemination of Icelandic music: for Icelandic musicians, "landscape" in relation to music is actually a clichéd notion they prefer to avoid.<sup>11</sup>

This all certainly applies to Canadian music and is worth keeping in mind. The association between nature/geography and cultural production in Canada has a long history. Landscape art –

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<sup>9</sup> Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks*, 94.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Mitchell, "Music and Landscape in Iceland," in *The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in Nordic Countries*, ed. Fabian Holt and Antti-Ville Kärjä, pp. 145-162 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 145.

<sup>11</sup> Tony Mitchell, "Music and Landscape in Iceland," in *The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in Nordic Countries*, ed. Fabian Holt and Antti-Ville Kärjä, pp. 145-162 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 145-146.

perhaps most notably, the Group of Seven's famous depictions of northern Ontario and the Great Lakes—has long dominated the Canadian cultural imagination; Canadian literature, likewise, has often focused on place, and on the harshly oppressive and foreboding qualities of the country's natural world. The canon of Canadian art music, as represented in the works of composers like Harry Sommers and Violet Archer, includes descriptive and austere-sounding instrumental pieces with titles like *North Country* and *Northern Landscapes*, intended to reflect the coldness and desolation of much of Canada. In popular music, singer-songwriters attempting to define a distinctive Canadian sound in music took cues directly from Canadian literary figures like Robertson Davies, whose writing featured "strong regional ties and a receptiveness to the influence of climate and geography."<sup>12</sup> Historically, Canadian popular musicians have typically approached the question of Canadian identity in two main ways: fleeing from it, adopting a more marketable, generic North American pop/rock sound that does not draw upon signifiers of place or cultural identity (examples range from The Guess Who, Shania Twain, and Nickelback to Avril Lavigne and Justin Bieber); or taking a more parochial approach dependent upon signifiers of regional—though not necessarily "Canadian"—musical practices (for example, Scottish/Irish folk music on the East Coast, or country/folk-derived music in the Prairies). The Tragically Hip seem to have taken a different tack entirely, creating in many of its songs what we argue is a very nearly empty musical space—perhaps not unlike the vast undifferentiated emptiness of much of

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<sup>12</sup> Tom Harrison, "Popular Music" *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2006. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/popular-music/> - .

the country, but at the same time no-place: it is a “libidinal space,” where desire is focused—around which fans, music critics and academics alike can and do construct notions of Canadian nationhood and identity.

### **Springsteen and Signifying America**

There is an abundance of literature on Springsteen that presupposes his “American-ness.”<sup>13</sup> Music critics regarded Springsteen as an “American archetype” as early as the mid-1970s, coincident with the release of *Born to Run*<sup>14</sup> and his rise to national rock stardom. Springsteen’s very credibility as an artist, Connell and Gibson insist, is based on a distinctly American image of “class, place, nation (and himself) that Springsteen created...[m]ore than most other performers, Springsteen sought to emphasise the relationship between place, community and identity.”<sup>15</sup> Numerous scholars have gone so far as to theorize about Springsteen’s American-ness as it relates to his masculinity and his body. In this view, Springsteen literally embodies American-ness—especially during the *Born in the U.S.A.* era—through the presentation of a

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<sup>13</sup> See Jim Cullen, *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Donald L. Deardorff II, *Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2010); Louis P. Masur, *Runaway Dream: Born to Run and Bruce Springsteen’s American Vision* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009); Jimmy Guterman, *Runaway American Dream: Listening to Bruce Springsteen* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005); Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zoltan and Mark Bernhard, eds.

<sup>14</sup> Masur, *Runaway Dream*, 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks*, 42.

working-class, heteronormative masculine body: a muscular, labouring body at work on the stage, representing a range of political positions and possibilities, including a Rambo-like body at once evoking and criticizing American military might and Reagan-era exceptionalism, or a working-class body representing both the promise of the American work ethic and the exploitation of the labouring class.<sup>16</sup> As Bryan Garman has argued, “Springsteen’s sexuality, like Rambo’s, was inextricably bound with national interests.”<sup>17</sup>

Springsteen’s lyrics are rife with verbal signifiers of American identity. His songs contain frequent references, for example, to recent events in American history, most notably the Vietnam War and its lasting effects on American society, and the aftermath of 9/11. Many of his songs are firmly rooted in place – typically, small-town U.S.A., and more specifically, Asbury Park in New Jersey – or are “road songs” that invoke America through populist tributes to working-class people and working-class landscapes.<sup>18</sup> As an American bard, Springsteen is directly linked to American cultural heritage and tradition via the musical legacy

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<sup>16</sup> See Klaus Heissenberger, “An All-American Body? Springsteen’s Working-Class Masculinity in the 1980s” in *The Embodiment of American Culture*, Heinz Tschachler, Maureen Devine, Michael Draxlbauer, eds., pp. 101-110 (Münster: Lit Verlag Münster, 2003). Jim Cullen echoes Heissenberger, describing Springsteen’s physical transformation from a “skinny, bearded, unkempt...Beat street poet” to the subject of “teen fantasy,” appearing in the “Dancing in the Dark” video as a representative of a vital “vibrant, working-class white male heterosexuality” that contrasted starkly with the androgyny of Prince and Michael Jackson, and with the hyper-sexualized image of Madonna. See Cullen, *Born in the U.S.A.*, 119-120.

<sup>17</sup> Bryan Garman, *A Race of Singers: Whitman’s Working Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 222-223.

<sup>18</sup> Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks*, 42.

of Pete Seeger; thematically, many of Springsteen's songs address—and often criticize and problematize—explicitly American concepts and themes, most notably “the American dream” and the struggle to achieve it, but also “the quest for fulfillment,”<sup>19</sup> or what Masur characterizes more expansively as “escaping and searching...redemption and connection.”<sup>20</sup>

As Springsteen himself asserts, “I’ve spent 35 years writing about America, its people, and the meaning of the American Promise.”<sup>21</sup> But how do his songs signify national identity musically? Consider an iconic song like “Born to Run,” from the eponymous 1975 album that Springsteen insists contains “the primary questions I’d be writing about for the rest of my work life.”<sup>22</sup> A lot of ink has already been spilled over “Born to Run,” and the song’s contribution to Springsteen’s emergence as a major artist is already well documented. What is of interest here is how the song functions as a musical embodiment of so many of the nationalistic themes attributed to Springsteen’s songs, specifically the American Dream, questing, and a sort of desperate striving for something ineffable, something more.

A song like “Born to Run,” as historian Joshua Zeitz observes, emerged out of Springsteen’s rejection of American soft rock: the song might be quintessentially American by dint of its whole-hearted assault on the easy-listening pantheon—The Bee Gees, Elton John, Chicago, The Carpenters—dominating the pop

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<sup>19</sup> Deardorff, *Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Masur, *Runaway Dream*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde, “Introduction: The Bard of Astbury Park” in *Reading the Boss*, ed. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight, pp. 1-20 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 18.

<sup>22</sup> Springsteen, quoted in Masur, *Runaway Dream*, 4.

charts in the early seventies, music that failed to connect with blue-collar listeners on the Jersey Shore.<sup>23</sup> The *Born to Run* album as a whole arguably serves as a kind of negative image of this music, drawing instead from other, more robust and deeply-rooted American musical traditions like R & B, jazz, Motown, and funk for its core sound.<sup>24</sup> Zeitz contrasts Springsteen directly with James Taylor in this period, characterizing Taylor as a purveyor of “I-rock,” as something of a navel-gazer: an introspective singer-songwriter who espouses a cerebral, melancholy liberalism in his intimate “songs about the self.” Springsteen, by contrast, eschews this inward turn and instead “embod[ies] the lost ‘70s – the tense, political, working-class rejection of America’s limitations” through music that is big and boldly extroverted in term of sound.<sup>25</sup>

Much has already been made of the political elements of “Born to Run,” and specifically its class consciousness and its affinities with contemporaneous blue-collar political activism of the 70s. Musically, however, the song tells a very different story about the American Dream. As music journalist Kyle Smith counters, “Born to Run” is a different sort of working-class statement: “It’s a celebration, not a rejection. It’s a barbaric yawp. It’s a blaze in the dark, a cry of pride amid desolation.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Springsteen himself seems to uphold this interpretation of the song, suggesting that the American Dream – as it appears in “Born to

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<sup>23</sup> Joshua Zeitz, “Born to Run and the Decline of the American Dream” *The Atlantic* August 24, 2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/08/born-to-run-at-40/402137/>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Kyle Smith, “Elites Just Don’t Understand ‘Born to Run’” *NY Post* August 26, 2015. <https://nypost.com/2015/08/26/liberals-just-dont-understand-born-to-run/>

Run” –is not about success as such, but rather it has to do with optimism, opportunity, and the freedom to strive for something better: “that everyone was going to have an opportunity and the chance to live a life with some decency and a chance for some self-respect.”<sup>27</sup> Reflecting on the genesis of the song in a *Rolling Stone* interview, Springsteen characterizes “Born to Run” in a decidedly apolitical way, as a song of “enormous longing, tremendous longing...It’s just about ‘Hey, you’re gonna take that step into the next day and nobody knows what tomorrow brings’...it continues to speak to that part of you that is both exhilarated and frightened about what tomorrow brings...that’s how it was built.”<sup>28</sup>

When Springsteen speaks about how “Born to Run” was built, we find ourselves in interesting and important territory, in what the ethnomusicologist and semiologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez identifies as the “poietic” dimension of music, or the realm of the creative process: the realm of composition, structure and intention.<sup>29</sup> Springsteen talks in poietic terms about the origins of the song, allowing that it has sonic elements borrowed from guitar legend Duane Eddy, that Roy Orbison’s arrangements influenced the whole album, and that Springsteen was seeking to create a record with a particular sonic signature that linked directly to the emotional and lyrical content of the songs: “I wanted it to sound enormous and I wanted it to grab you by your throat and insist that

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<sup>27</sup> Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Zeitz, “*Born to Run* and the Decline of the American Dream.”

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Brian Hiatt, “Bruce Springsteen on Making ‘Born to Run’: ‘We went to extremes’” *Rolling Stone*, August 25, 2015. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/bruce-springsteen-on-making-born-to-run-we-went-to-extremes-20150825>.

<sup>29</sup> See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 11-12.

you take that ride, insist that you pay attention, not just to the music, but to life, to feeling alive, to being alive.”<sup>30</sup>

If the song “Born to Run” embodies anything, it is Springsteen’s longing, not his political activism. The song’s harmonic language makes this clear: most of the chords in “Born to Run” feature suspensions—the holding-over of tones from one chord to the next in a play of consonance and dissonance. While suspended chords are commonplace in rock and pop, and typically provide ornamental dissonance, they are used in “Born to Run” in a particularly pervasive and purposeful way. The chord progression underlying the song’s melodic hook and verses is an archetypal blues-rock progression in the key of E major: I-IV-V, or E-A-B. But the V chord (B) in this progression—the chord of greatest harmonic tension, typically creating cyclicity by demanding a return to the stability of the I chord (E, the tonic)—is made even more tense by being a chord with added dissonances: it is seventh chord—B7, in this case, a chord with an extra note on top, spelled B-D#-F#-A—but also a suspended chord—its nomenclature is B7sus4.

Using a seventh chord in this context is not unusual at all, but the suspension is worth some comment. The “4” in the chord’s nomenclature is an added, non-structural tone positioned at the interval of a fourth above the root of the chord (an E above B in this chord: the full spelling of the chord is B-D#-(E)-F#-A). The suspended fourth is expected to resolve harmonically, downwards by a half step to a structural tone, the third note of the V chord (D#). In “Born to Run,” this suspension does not immediately resolve—

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<sup>30</sup> Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Hiatt, “Bruce Springsteen on Making ‘Born to Run.’”



the pitch E is pervasive in the accompaniment and the vocal melody, and so is heard clearly as a dissonant suspension against the B chord, especially in the song's opening measures, where the bass line does not move but rather holds a steady E as a pedal point below and a high keyboard part rings out the pitch E from above — and the progression simply cycles back to the tonic chord and starts again. (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: "Born to Run," reduction of the first five measures

The figure shows a piano reduction of the first five measures of Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run". The music is in 4/4 time and the key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The bass line consists of a steady eighth-note pattern on the pitch E. The right hand features a similar eighth-note pattern in the upper register. The chord progression is as follows:
 

- Measure 1: E major chord.
- Measure 2: E7sus4 chord, with a note labeled "(min 7 leap)" in the bass line.
- Measure 3: A major chord.
- Measure 4: B7sus4 chord, with a note labeled "B7sus4 (suspension is unresolved)".
- Measure 5: E major chord.

 The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the fifth measure.

The suspended note E in the B7sus4 chord is also an anticipation—as such, a kind of doubly dissonant gesture. The

suspension never resolves; the anticipation “resolves,” but only when the phrase cycles back to the beginning, and the note E held over from the B7sus4 chord is simply subsumed into the E chord that begins the phrase: (in other words, the note E in the B7sus4 chord anticipates the arrival of the E chord to which it belongs). What is the sonic effect of all of this? An increase in the phrase’s tension—a sense of mild unease, that something has been left unresolved. Metaphorically, such unresolved harmonic tension stands—as it has done for centuries—for some of the key affective-thematic qualities that Springsteen attributes to “Born to Run,” namely longing and searching.

The song’s striking main melodic riff likewise conveys some of these metaphoric affective-thematic traits (see Figure 1). The riff contains a large upward melodic leap of a minor seventh (from the note B up to the note A), creating an unprepared dissonance—an appoggiatura—that promptly resolves down by step to the note G#. Such large, sometimes dissonant upward melodic leaps in tonal music can signify many things, but are almost always potent expressive gestures and are commonly used to represent intense emotional states, especially longing, yearning and aspiration.<sup>31</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> Consider, for instance, the historical importance of a large melodic leap, followed by dissonant, unresolved harmony in its most famous iteration: the so-called “Tristan chord” heard in the Prelude to Richard Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde*—a now-iconic melodic-harmonic gesture standing for longing, and for “suffering and insatiable desire.” See Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, “Death Drive: Eros and Thanatos in Wagner’s ‘Tristan und Isolde,’” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 11, no. 3 (1999): 273.

A large leap like the one in “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” provides a more anodyne example, but it likewise represents hopeful longing: musicologist Walter Frisch argues that the octave leap at the beginning of the vocal melody, underscored by shifting jazz-inflected harmonies, “captures the uneasy blend of hope and anxiety that lies at the core of Dorothy’s personality.” See Walter

riff continues with an unexpected downward tumble to C#, scale degree 6 in the song's key, before moving back upwards to conclude on tonic note (E), but via a three-note neighbour figure (E-F-E) that is not strongly conclusive. This melodically ambivalent phrase – with its heroic, searching leap followed by an inconclusive ending – coupled with the unresolved harmonic suspensions and pervasively optimistic major mode creates the musical underpinning for the song's lyrics and for what Springsteen hopes to express in "Born to Run": namely a potent version of the American Dream that is literally a "runaway dream" – not necessarily something that is lost, but rather something that is meant to be relentlessly pursued, as part of a hopeful, and perhaps endless search for greater meaning and dignity in life. If this is not clear enough, consider the song's strong rhythmic syncopations in the pre-chorus, also building the tension, and especially the song's extended bridge, which comprises a literal chain of suspended chords, a succession of mildly unstable sonorities that compulsively thrusts the music ever-forward in a play of tension-and-release (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: "Born to Run," harmonic reduction of bridge

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Frisch, Arlen and Harburg's *Over the Rainbow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 59.

Large upward melodic leaps are also a readily recognizable aspect of the expressive vocabulary of film music: the famous *Star Wars* title theme, for instance, features a succession of large leaps that represent hope, heroism and achievement. See Emilio Audissino, *The Music of John Williams: Jaws, Star Wars, Raiders of the Lost Art and the Return of the Classic Hollywood Music Style* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 154.



It is a romantic musical vision, built to surge forward and serving as a musical metaphor for questing, longing, and striving, for being in one place but looking to be elsewhere. This, coupled with the song's "enormous sound," serve Springsteen's self-described purpose as a songwriter, a purpose that is especially apposite with respect to "Born to Run," namely to "measure the distance between the American dream and American reality."<sup>32</sup>

### **The Tragically Hip: Canada's Band?**

As noted in the introduction, the now-legendary Canadian rock band The Tragically Hip has seen a sharp spike in media attention in recent years, beginning with lead singer Gord

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Mark Hagen, "Meet the New Boss," *The Guardian* January 18, 2009.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/jan/18/bruce-springsteen-interview>. Here, we observe that, from a semiotic perspective, Springsteen's "measur[ing] of the distance between the American dream and American reality" via songs like "Born to Run" hints at the structure of musical semiosis as Nattiez describes it: a tri-partite process in which composition and intent –the poietic dimension – gives rise to the "music itself" – this is the dimension of the (sonic) trace; the trace is the middle ground on which the music as constructed object meets its auditors and is received and interpreted in light of a vast array of factors and contingencies – the esthetic dimension. In the case of Springsteen's "Born to Run," the "American dream" as Springsteen imagines and interprets it, is "built" into the song at the poietic level; the song itself is the trace; and the song's intended meaning encounters what Springsteen calls "American reality" at the esthetic level when it is heard and placed into a socio-cultural context. See Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, pp. 11-12.

Downie's terminal cancer diagnosis in the spring of 2016 and continuing until his death in the fall of 2017 and beyond. The onslaught of media coverage surrounding Downie and The Hip sparked a renewed interest in the band's music and has brought to the fore the truism that The Tragically Hip is "Canada's band." As a corollary, the band's music and especially Downie's lyrics have been interpreted by journalists, music critics and fans as somehow reflecting Canadian nationalism and national identity. The members of the band, however, have disavowed the suggestions that The Hip is any kind of nationalist band and have insisted instead that they never intended their music to provoke Canadian patriotism.<sup>33</sup> Downie's published comments about the way he has portrayed Canada in his writings reveal that his intent was to primarily critique and problematize Canadian identity rather than celebrate it.<sup>34</sup> In a 2016 interview on Canada's national television service, the CBC, Downie admitted that, though his lyrics mention Canada often, he never wrote about it in a "nice" way, and that he was not able to explain Canadian nationhood, asking "What is it

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<sup>33</sup> "I'm not a nationalist...I started using Canadian references not just for their own sake, but because I wanted to pick up my birthright, which is this massive country full of stories." Gord Downie, quoted in Michael Barclay, "How We Will Miss Gord Downie and the Tragically Hip," *Macleans*'s October 17, 2017. <http://www.macleans.ca/culture/how-we-will-miss-gord-downie-and-the-tragically-hip/>

<sup>34</sup> As Robert Morrison has observed, the band's "vision of Canada is beset by tragedy and injustice, but also lifted by beauty, humour, and courage. Most of all, at their finest, they urge us to rethink the present, and to imagine a more generous and accepting future." See Morrison, "Remembering Gord Downie Through his Lyrics," *The Conversation* August 17, 2017. <http://theconversation.com/remembering-gord-downie-through-his-lyrics-82507>.

about this country that is not a country?"<sup>35</sup> This perspective is expounded upon in the official statement Downie's released in conjunction with his *Secret Path* project in 2016, a ten-song album and graphic novel based on the true story of Chanie Wenjack, a young First Nations boy who froze to death after running away from a residential school in northwestern Ontario. Downie's statement, like his album, exposes Canada's dark past of neglect and abuse of indigenous people, which has provoked considerable division in the country. As Downie insists, "Chanie haunts me... We are not the country we thought we were."<sup>36</sup> At the end of the statement, Downie suggests that, though the thought of Canada not being a country is not a popular one, Canadians can only begin to call their nation "Canada" once they allow themselves to learn the truth of Canada's disturbing past. Nationhood, in this view, is constituted through and determined by a solid knowledge of the past. It is an interesting claim, given that The Hip's body of work – notwithstanding the claims to the contrary by journalists and fans – offers at best a fragmented and deconstructed account of Canadian history.

### **The Problem of Canadian Identity**

Scholars who have tried to tackle the issue of defining Canadian identity have often been halted by the country's vastness, diversity, and concomitant ambiguities. As noted above, the answer to the question of a Canadian national identity often comes

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<sup>35</sup> CBC News, "Gord Downie Exclusive Interview," *The National* Oct. 13, 2016. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/thenational/gord-downie-exclusive-interview-1.3804422>.

<sup>36</sup> Gord Downie, "Statement by Gord Downie," *Secret Path* Sept. 9, 2016. Date of access 2 March, 2018. <http://secretpath.ca/>

via a comparison between Canada and the United States. It is typically formed as the assertion that Canada is not America and that Canadian national identity is different from the loud nationalism found in the United States. The flaw in this approach is that it does not offer a positive definition of Canadian identity but rather relies on a negative one based on “othering.”<sup>37</sup> Millard, Riegel, and Wright likewise expose the shortcomings of this approach and reject the notion that Canadians are “retiring, unassertive, and diffident,” arguing that Canadian nationalism is now strikingly similar to extroverted American nationalism and that the “myth of diffidence” is only sustained because it serves as a way of differentiating between Canadian and American nationalism.<sup>38</sup>

The inability to agree on a unifying and unified definition of Canadian identity can have negative effects on Canadians’ self-concept. These negative effects can be viewed through the lens of social identity theory, which suggests that one’s self-concept is comprised of both personal identity and social identity. In order to maintain self-esteem, these two components of one’s self-concept must uphold a positive self-image. One of the ways to do this is through identification with, and favoring of, an *in-group* and the subsequent othering of the *out-group*. This could explain why Canadians often compare themselves in the negative with the

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<sup>37</sup> See Olaf Kuhlke, “The Geography of ‘Canadian Shield Rock’: Locality, Nationality and Place Imagery in the Music of the Rheostatics,” in *Sound, Society and Geography of Popular Music*, ed. Ola Johansson and Thomas Bell, pp. 161-180 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 166-167.

<sup>38</sup> Gregory Millard, Sarah Riegel and John Wright, “Here’s Where We Get Canadian: English-Canadian Nationalism and Popular Culture,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 32, no. 1 (1990): 11.

United States and derive from this comparison a sense of national identity and pride.<sup>39</sup>

Social identity theory also presents Canadians with a problem: theorists suggest that people have a natural drive to build a positive self-concept by bolstering their private and public identities, but the inability of Canadians to reach a consensus on Canadian identity—their in-group—puts them at an immediate disadvantage in achieving a positive self-concept. From the social identity theoretical perspective, then, the innate need to arrive at a specific and stable definition of their public identities has arguably caused Canadians to grasp at any definition or source that is presented to them.<sup>40</sup>

Evidence of this need for definition can be found in the famous Molson Canadian's "I am Canadian" ad campaign, which ran from 1994-1998 and 2000-2005. The beer company's attempt to provide a clear definition of "Canadian" relied on a nationalistic branding of Canada. These ads—especially the notorious "Rant," which originally aired in 2000—were directed at Canadians and Americans as they aired in both countries and focused on debunking Americans' popular misconceptions of Canada while at the same time reinforcing Canadians' popular arguments for what makes them distinct. This ad campaign, though popular, still did not arrive at a substantial definition of Canadian identity that went beyond beavers, Prime Ministers, and pronunciation of the letter 'Z'. Furthermore, the Canadian nationalism presented in these

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<sup>39</sup> See Garold Lantz and Sandra Loeb, "Country of Origin and Ethnocentrism: An Analysis of Canadian and American Preferences Using Social Identity Theory," *Advances in Consumer Research* 23 (1996): 374-378 *passim*.

<sup>40</sup> See Lantz and Loeb, "Country of Origin and Ethnocentrism: An Analysis of Canadian and American Preferences Using Social Identity Theory."



commercials was predicated on anxiety over American nationalism and “othering.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Seeking (and Finding) National Identity in Music**

For many Canadians in search of Canadian identity, The Tragically Hip and its music seem to offer one. As early as their second LP *Road Apples* (1991) the band had already begun to be labeled as markedly Canadian. In 1995, *Maclean's* magazine asserted that “the Hip’s dark and edgy songs dealing with forgotten hockey hero Bill Barilko and drowned Group of Seven painter Tom Thomson are pure Canadiana.”<sup>42</sup> Since this initial labelling in the 1990s, The Tragically Hip continue to be branded as “Canada’s Band,”<sup>43</sup> and the band and lead singer/songwriter Downie have been regularly characterized as iconic national spokespersons by major mainstream news outlets in Canada and the U.S. The claims that The Hip is a distinctly Canadian band have been justified in many ways by journalists, fans, and music critics, who cite the band’s lack of international success and strictly Canadian appeal—here, again, defining the band as Canadian by virtue of what it is not, namely popular in the United States—its support of up-and-coming Canadian artists, and the references to

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<sup>41</sup> See Kuhlke, “The Geography of ‘Canadian Shield Rock,’” 161-162.

<sup>42</sup> The article is archived on the website of *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. See Nicholas Jennings, Kyle Shaw and Robin Ajello, “Canadian Rock Music Explodes.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canadian-rock-music-explodes/>

<sup>43</sup> Michael Barclay, Ian Jack and Jason Schneider, *Have Not Been the Same* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2011), 652.

Canadian places and history in Downie's lyrics as proof of their Canadian identity.<sup>44</sup>

A surfeit of news reports that confidently named The Tragically Hip as uniquely Canadian and even a locus for national unity followed lead singer Gord Downie's cancer diagnosis in the spring of 2016. Unsurprisingly, the idea of The Hip as "Canada's Band" became something of an unavoidable cliché during this period due to the widespread promulgation of this interpretation. Indeed, how else should Canada understand The Hip when the country's Prime Minister attends the band's final concert – subtitled "A National Celebration" – and boldly asserts that "Gord and The Tragically Hip are [an] inevitable and essential part of what we are and who we are as a country."<sup>45</sup> This statement is just one of many like it that have populated news feeds since May 2016.

The Tragically Hip's catalogue does contain a number of songs with Canadian references, for example, names of famous Canadians (Hugh MacLennan, Tom Thompson, Northrop Frye, Joni Mitchell), names of Canadian towns or cities (Toronto, Churchill, Springside Park, Bobcaygeon), and historic Canadian events (the disappearance of Tom Thomson, the October Crisis, the death of Bill Barilko, the incarceration of David Milgaard). It should be noted, however, that while the band is feted for its promotion of

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<sup>44</sup> Kate Heartfield, "How The Hip Reinforce the Canadian Personality," *Ottawa Citizen*, August 7, 2016.

<http://ottawacitizen.com/opinion/columnists/heartfield-how-the-hip-reinforce-the-canadian-personality>. See also Gordon Capel, "Damned If they Do and Damned if they Don't: The Inferiority Complex, Nationalism, and *Maclean's* Music Coverage, 1967-1995." Master's Thesis. University of Waterloo, 2007.

<sup>45</sup> CBC Music, "An essential part of who we are!: Justin Trudeau on the Tragically Hip," *cbcmusic.ca*, Aug. 21, 2016.

<http://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/12563/justine-trudeau-on-the-tragically-hip-kingston>.

Canada and its inclusion of Canadiana in its songs, its corpus of 13 studio albums and over 160 songs contains just a few dozen songs that could be said to contain Canadiana. Of this subset of songs, many contain what are at best oblique “Canadian” references—for example, to hockey and hockey rinks, frozen lakes, pine trees, and prairie winds. Those songs that refer directly to places or people often mention them in passing: a place name, such as “Toronto,” appears only in the song’s title; or the name of a historically significant Canadian person—such as the novelist Hugh MacClennan—appears as the dedicatee of a song; or famous Canadians—such as literary scholar Northrop Frye—appear in annotated footnotes to song lyrics. Even an iconically “Canadian” song like “Bobcaygeon,” with its references to Toronto and to a real event in Canada’s past—an anti-Semitic riot in the 1930s—and its romantic invocation of an eponymous cottage town in southeastern Ontario, is only nominally concerned with Canada: the historical event hinted at in the song is a backdrop to a contemporary love story, and the song apparently only contains a reference to the town of Bobcaygeon because it was a close rhyme with the word “constellations” in the song’s refrain.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Journalist Adrian Lee recounts that “Downie himself has admitted he didn’t choose the town for any specific reason. ‘You could use any small town, really,’ he said in 1998. ‘Bobcaygeon rhymes with constellation. . . sort of.’ [...] ‘There really isn’t a romantic, beautiful reason they wrote that song as far as I can tell, and as far as we talked about it,’ said Andy Keen, who directed *Bobcaygeon*, a concert doc about the Hip’s sold-out show there in 2011—a Heritage Moment equivalent of Roger Waters playing *The Wall* in Berlin. Keen and crew interviewed roughly 25 locals—and although they appreciated the song, ‘they were a people who didn’t really have too much of a relationship with it. It became this soundtrack for them, but also for so much of cottage country in this province and this country.’ [...] Indeed, even if it resonates widely, the Hip’s mythical Bobcaygeon no longer quite exists, if it ever really did.” See Lee,

Musically, it is remarkable how many Tragically Hip songs make use of drones. That is, musical stasis is something of a hallmark for the band, with a significant number of songs in its catalogue relying on static harmonies supporting vocal melodies with a very narrow range. Why is this important? Given the paucity of ready-made “Canadian” musical signifiers, and the fact that there are many different conceptions of Canadian identity, it is clear that the arbitrary symbolic signifiers that are meant to refer to Canadian identity are even more loosely used and interpreted because the very concept they stand for has no stable definition. In this context, The Hip’s music can really only be construed as Canadian by virtue of the musical space that it creates: if Springsteen’s American-ness can be said to reside in the ways he measures the space between dream and reality in the American cultural consciousness, then The Hip can be said to occupy a (musical) space around which fans and commentators can project and construct notions of national identity. This desire to situate the songs of The Hip and the band itself as uniquely and specifically Canadian can be understood via the lens of musical semiotics. While Springsteen deploys musical signifiers of longing and desire in a song like “Born to Run” to map out the literal and metaphoric space between the American Dream and reality, The Tragically Hip and much of its oeuvre serve as empty signifiers – creating a locus around which polysemous texts can be created and interpreted as “Canadian,” but at the same time can never reach the stable object

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“Searching for the Tragically Hip’s Mythical Bobcaygeon,” *Maclean’s* July 15, 2016.

<http://www.macleans.ca/culture/arts/searching-for-the-tragically-hips-mythical-bobcaygeon/>

that is “Canadian identity.” This creation of meaning, and of Canadian identity via The Hip and its music, is described below through the analysis of two Hip songs and through contemporary psychoanalytic theory that helps to explain the nature of the desire for identity, and its pursuit.

“At the Hundredth Meridian” – a song on The Hip’s 1992 album *Fully Completely* – is often a first choice for fans and journalists seeking Tragically Hip songs with Canadian signifiers.<sup>47</sup> The song’s title, repeated in the chorus, refers to the geographic point at which “the Great Plains begin,” or in terms of Canadian landmarks, the city of Brandon, Manitoba (though the song never references anyplace in Canada directly – indeed, the lyrics begin with the words “Me debunk an American myth?”). Downie’s lyrics describe the plains as a vast, desolate place: “left alone to get gigantic / hard, huge and haunted,” and offer poetic observations of the landscape: a bumpy “corduroy road,” shoulder high weeds, and a rusted Ferris wheel and wires off in the distance – evocations of the Canadian prairies as a neglected, abandoned space.<sup>48</sup> Among

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<sup>47</sup> Jeff Ferreras cites “At the Hundredth Meridian” as quintessentially Canadian, but mainly by virtue of the fact that Downie wears a hat with the name of a Canadian national park on it for the song’s video. See Ferreras, “The Tragically Hip Taught Us About Being Canadian These 11 Times,” *Huffington Post* May 24, 2016.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/05/24/tragically-hip-canadian-history\\_n\\_10116384.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/05/24/tragically-hip-canadian-history_n_10116384.html). The song appears in a list of Hip songs about Canadian places compiled by *Macleans*’ magazine, though it should be remembered that the hundredth meridian is also an important American geographical feature, marking off many significant geographical, climatological, political, and historical boundaries. See Amanda Shendruk, “Mapped: The Canadian Locales in The Hip’s Iconic Songs,” *Macleans* June 30, 2016.

<http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/mapped-the-canadian-locales-in-the-tragically-hips-iconic-songs/>

<sup>48</sup> The Tragically Hip, “At the Hundredth Meridian,” *Fully Completely* MCA 1992.

these haunted relics, death is also a recurring theme, and the narrator describes taking his life in his hands, and invokes a raven carrying a skull, burial, exhumation, and re-burial.

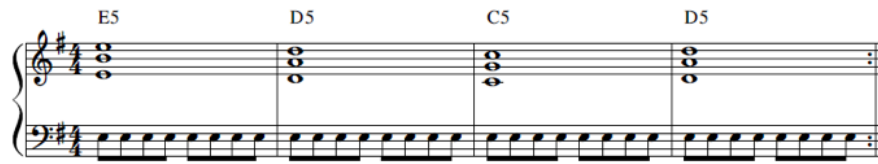
The vocal melody of “At the Hundredth Meridian” is low-pitched and monotonous through the verses, acting as a kind of drone; the guitar riff that plays through the verses of the song supports this droning vocal melody: the guitar simply oscillates between an open fifth built on the tonic (D5) and a subtonic chord (C5) in each measure. The chord on the subtonic is significant not only because it is a common compositional trademark of many Tragically Hip songs, but also because it is an example of how stasis and space are present in the band’s music. Instead of using a natural leading tone that would give listeners the sensation of closeness to the song’s tonic (the “home” note, or note of resolution, which is “D” in this case) a half step away, The Tragically Hip displace the leading tone (the note “C-sharp” in this case, which points the ear to the tonic as the note of resolution) from the tonic by a whole tone (to the note “C”) This creates a sense of moving a full step away and back rather than a slight leaning and readjustment; at the same time, while the progression consists of two chords, this oscillation feels harmonically static because there is no tension in the voices of the chords: the gravitational pull between the chords is rather weak. The themes of barrenness, stagnation, and death in the lyrics and the monotony of the vocal line and harmonic progressions combine to paint a bleak portrait of the (empty) prairies – a starkly unpopulated song that contrasts sharply with Springsteen’s Americana-infused sketches of places and the people inhabiting them.

“Fifty Mission Cap” – also from *Fully Completely* – is another Hip song frequently cited for its Canadian references. The song refers directly to hockey player Bill Barilko, who played in the NHL for the Toronto Maple Leafs from 1947-1951. Barilko is famous for scoring the winning goal in the 1951 Stanley Cup final between Toronto and Montreal, and for having disappeared under mysterious circumstances while returning from a fishing trip in northern Quebec in the summer of 1951 (his small plane crashed in northeastern Ontario). The song “Fifty Mission Cap” ties Barilko’s disappearance to the Maple Leafs’ subsequent decade-long playoff draught; the year Barilko’s body was found, 1962, the Leafs finally won another Stanley Cup. Downie’s song mythologizes Barilko’s story, and has itself become intimately entwined with Canadian hockey culture. The song is another clear instance of The Hip building a song on drones. As with “At the Hundredth Meridian,” but even more so, “Fifty Mission Cap” places a monotonous, halting, spoken-sung melody above a harmonically static accompaniment: in the song’s verses, the bass provides a tonic pedal point, while the guitar moves through a cyclic, modal pattern of chords.<sup>49</sup> (see Figure 2)

Figure 2: “Fifty Mission Cap,” reduction of harmonic progression in verses

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<sup>49</sup> In terms of texture and compositional approach, it seems to us that songs like “Fifty Mission Cap” and “At the Hundredth Meridian” are distinct from Springsteen’s deeply-rooted folk and rock approach, and more reminiscent of the often-abstruse songs of Jim Morrison and the Doors.



Like “At the Hundredth Meridian,” one could hear the musical stasis and spaciousness of this song in part as a musical invocation of geographical vastness and emptiness—in this case, the vast wilderness of northeastern Ontario.

Lyrically, the song seems to be pure Canadiana, exploring and mythologizing hockey history. It is not clear, however, how seriously listeners are meant to take this song as statement about hockey as it informs national identity: Downie provides some meta-textual commentary at the end of the first verse, seeming to reveal the origins of the song’s lyrics as merely some on-hand trivia (again, in sharp contrast to Springsteen’s studied approach to Americana)—“I stole this from a hockey card/I keep tucked up under/My fifty-mission cap.”<sup>50</sup>

### **The Hip, Springsteen and Identity: The Lost Object of Desire**

With respect to The Hip and Canadian identity, songs like “Fifty Mission Cap” and “At the Hundredth Meridian” serve as a locus for the desire of Canadian consumers of the band’s music to create Canadian identity. In semiotic terms, the songs—and by extension the band—function as flexible signifiers in a kind of feedback loop: the songs and the band are consistently lauded as

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<sup>50</sup> The Tragically Hip, “Fifty Mission Cap,” *Fully Completely* (MCA 1992).



emblems of Canadian identity by fans and commentators, such that they have become de facto emblems of Canadian identity. This is possible not because of a studied, Springsteen-like engagement with the nation's social, political, musical and cultural history – a multi-layered American “authenticity” that is predicated on fans identifying with Springsteen, the accessibility of his music, and his connections to artists and styles bearing the imprimatur of authenticity and American-ness<sup>51</sup> – but rather because the relative lack of musical activity allows listeners to not only focus on the lyrics, but also to impose the meaning that they think they find and recognize.

The Slovenian theorist and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, who uses psychoanalytic theory and semiotics to explore meaning in popular culture, draws on the work of Fredric James to argue that some cultural objects – like Beethoven's “Ode to Joy” theme, or the shark in *Jaws* – have been used and interpreted in so many different ways that they have become floating signifiers, seemingly capable of bearing an infinitely vast range of meaning. In semiotic theory, a signifier that does not have a precise signified is called an empty signifier: “a signifier that absorbs rather than emits meaning.”<sup>52</sup> *Jaws* serves as an example of an empty signifier insofar as there are many interpretations of what the shark stands for (capitalism, the threat of immigration, the dangers of emergent

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<sup>51</sup> See John Sheinbaum, “‘I’ll Work for your Love’: Springsteen and the Struggle for Authenticity,” in *Reading the Boss*, ed. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight, pp. 223-242 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, s.v. “Floating Signifier,” by Ian Buchanan. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-254?rskey=15jkP3&result=251>.

sexuality, the threat of the natural world, etc.), all of which are both correct and incorrect.<sup>53</sup> Meaning circles round these objects and their final meaning remains undetermined. An interpretation informed by psychoanalysis would argue that the object is the cause of the desire for meaning, but not meaning(ful) itself – the object gives rise to desire, but is not the object of desire.

The Hip functions as the object that gives rise to desire – the desire for a stable identity. The attribution of Canadian identity to The Hip and its songs is an example of what Rex Butler, writing on Žižek, ideological critique, and semiotics, describes as a “performative, fundamentally self-referential operation, in which it is not so much some pre-existing meaning that things refer to as an empty signifier that is retrospectively seen as what is being referred to.”<sup>54</sup> That is to say, as Žižek argues about the shark in *Jaws*, when we enter into the interpretation of such an empty signifier – in this case, an iconic movie monster that can represent many things – and its correspondence to “the truth of contemporary society,”

we already have something to say about society (some point to make about the environment, sexuality or capitalism), which [we] the attribute to the shark...What is not seen is that the circularity according to which the shark is seen as embodying certain tendencies that have already been attributed to the shark.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See Žižek’s analysis of *Jaws* in Sophie Fiennes’ 2012 documentary film *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*. *Critical Theory*.

<http://www.critical-theory.com/watch-zizek-jaws-fascism/>.

<sup>54</sup> Rex Butler, “Slavoj Žižek: What is a Master Signifier?” *Lacan.com*. Date of access 23 Feb., 2018. <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-signifier.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Butler, “Slavoj Žižek: What is a Master Signifier?” Curiously, Gord Downie wore a now-iconic *Jaws* T-shirt as part of his on-stage outfit for The Hip’s final tour in 2016. What can this possibly mean? Fans of the band speculate, among

The attribution of Canadian identity to The Hip is a “self-referential operation” that we fail to recognize: we approach The Hip, thanks in part to the raucous media discourse surrounding the band, as a “Canadian” band—our analysis and interpretation of the band’s music, as Butler says, “already has something to say” about this. As an empty signifier, an object giving rise to our desire, the band and its music are a placeholder: an open and empty space in which a nebulous Canadian identity can come into being via ideas about the band and Canadian identity that are already formed, and seem in retrospect to be a natural fit. As Žižek asserts, the desired object, the object of the drive, “is ultimately indifferent and arbitrary,” but “if an object is to take its place in a libidinal space” — the space held open by The Hip, as we argue—“its arbitrary character must remain hidden.”<sup>56</sup> The Hip, in this psychoanalytic formulation, function as the object — as “any object” — that

can occupy the place of the Thing [but] it can only do so by means of the illusion that it was always already there, i.e. that it was not placed there by us...Although any object can function as the object-cause of desire — insofar as the fascination it exerts is not its

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other things, that the shark on the t-shirt symbolizes Downie’s cancer. It is worth noting that one of The Hip’s nominally Canadian songs, “The Dark Canuck” (*Canuck* is a euphemism for a Canadian), also makes a reference to *Jaws*. The song’s lyrics are rather abstruse, but seem to hint strongly at autobiography and the struggle of the artist as they make literary allusions and explore the duality of inside and outside. Downie sings, “You can cast your doubts/Turn them inside out/Hang them upside down/Till their art falls out.” The song concludes with a verse describing a drive-in movie: “In the clouds of blood at the end of Jaws/In the misted cars honking their applause/At the drive-in double feature/At the heart of dark enough/It’s Jaws and The Dark Canuck.” See The Tragically Hip, “The Dark Canuck,” *In Violet Light* (Universal 2002).

<sup>56</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 33.

immediate property but results from the place it occupies in the structure—we must, by structural necessity, fall prey to the illusion that the power of fascination belongs to the object as such.<sup>57</sup>

Contrasting Springsteen and The Hip with regard to this desire for a stable or coherent national identity, a song like “Born to Run” can be described as dramatizing this desire and the process of seeking. Springsteen already defines his project as a songwriter as navigating the gap between (American) dream and reality. Our analysis of Springsteen’s “Born to Run” points out the use of modestly dissonant harmonic and melodic practices—suspended chords and weak resolutions—as signifiers of unresolved longing. We would argue that Springsteen’s longing follows a circumscribed path, albeit one between two imaginary possibilities: dream or reality. By contrast, much of the music of The Tragically Hip, relying as it does on drones and musical stasis, embodies a circular—and arguably, more quintessentially romantic—journey, namely, the endless circuit of desire—in this case, for a stable Canadian identity—that has no end, but rather takes pleasure from its perpetuation. Where Springsteen deploys musical signifiers of longing and desire, Hip songs are often comprised of signifiers of lack (as heard in the absence of harmonic direction, drone, monotone): that is, of the very thing that gives rise to desire and pursuit of the lost object.

## Conclusion

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<sup>57</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 34.

Springsteen is America's bard. Gord Downie is Canada's unofficial poet laureate. The Hip are Canada's band. Where does this leave us, with respect to our understanding of the relationship between national identity and popular music? Springsteen is somehow fully, or at least more fully present as a signifying body, literally the embodiment of American-ness; The Hip and Downie, by contrast, as floating signifiers, are a source of disembodied sound that invites imaginative interpretation and whose meaning is only clarified as the source becomes present—as Peter Garret from the band Midnight Oil seems to imply, as he attempts to explain how and why The Hip have such rabid Canadian fans but no impact internationally: “You don't make sense of the musical vision and the fabric of the lyrics until you see the band. I feel like unless you saw them, you weren't going to get the full picture. They were Canada's best-kept secret.”

National identity is a chimera. Springsteen's runaway American Dream and blue-collar sensibilities do not reflect the totality of the American experience; nor do the cerebral, poetic musings of Downie and The Hip capture the essence of Canadian identity. In each case, place and space play a role in expressing something about identity; however, in the end, Springsteen and The Hip create two very different types of spaces. Springsteen's music is rooted in real places, and his songs contain dramatic accounts of spaces populated by characters having real experiences and striving to live meaningfully within those spaces. On the other hand, Tragically Hip songs are often full of empty spaces: described in the lyrics but also present in the music, mirroring in some ways the vast, relative emptiness of Canada but more importantly providing spaces around which the desire for a stable, unified sense

of Canada and Canadian-ness – or “One nation under Gord,” as one of Canada’s national newspapers trumpeted<sup>58</sup> – can circulate but never be satisfied. Two points of clarity emerge from the comparison of Bruce Springsteen and The Tragically Hip: one, notions of national identity are necessarily imprecise and vague; and two, representing national identity is a form of negotiation, in which relationships between the political, social, cultural (and psychological) realms are discovered, created, and imagined.

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<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Hayward, “One Nation Under Gord” *The Globe and Mail*, August 19, 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/one-nation-under-gord-fans-share-their-memories-in-a-tragically-hip-tourdiary/article31466982/>.

# **Bruce Springsteen's "Land of Hope and Dreams": Towards Articulating and Assessing Its Inclusiveness**

Barry David  
Ave Maria University, Florida

## **Abstract**

I focus on two things that are well known about Bruce Springsteen's song, "Land of Hope and Dreams." First, it has decisive roots in earlier American songs employing 'the moving train' as analogue to God's Church and His eternal plan for humanity. In this respect, 'the moving train' carries its passengers, who prominently embrace a normative moral imperative, from an imperfectly happy place in this world to a completely happy destination beyond this world. The influencing songs apparently include: "People Get Ready" by Curtis Mayfield, "This Train"/"This Train Is Bound For Glory" by each of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Big Bill Broonzy, and Woody Guthrie, Johnny Cash's "This Train is Bound For Glory" (a.k.a. "The Bible Train") and Bob Dylan's "Slow Train Coming." Secondly, and more importantly, it is also agreed that *LOHAD* is distinguished from its influences by presenting an 'inclusive' message. This has two principal components. In the first place, it is that God's Love ultimately guides all persons towards, within, and to the end goal of his eternal community of Love, to the 'Land of Hope and Dreams,' that is formally established in the afterworld. Secondly, everyone in this world (both 'saints and sinners' and 'whores and gamblers') shares in this goal. Therefore, Springsteen's train, unlike his predecessors' trains', proclaims the redemption and redeeming of all rather than the redemption and redeeming of some. According to *LOHAD*, everyone, whether they know it or not, is on God's train.

## **Introduction.**

The goal of this essay is to articulate and assess the inclusive character of Bruce Springsteen's song "Land of Hope and Dreams"

(*Lohad*: 1998/9, 2012)<sup>1</sup> from his *Wrecking Ball* album.<sup>2</sup> Towards this end, my essay focuses on two things that are well known about “Land of Hope and Dreams.” First, it has decisive roots in earlier American songs employing ‘the moving train’ as analogue to God’s church and eternal plan for humanity.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the train carries its passengers from an imperfectly happy communal life in this world to a blissful communal life in an afterworld, *and* these passengers prominently embrace a moral imperative that distinguishes their community. Second, and more important, it is also agreed that *Lohad* is distinguished from its influences by presenting an unequivocal ‘inclusive’ message.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I use *Lohad* to signify Springsteen’s song and I employ *LOHAD* when referring to Springsteen’s notion of God’s gift, to humanity, of heaven (and therefore of a heavenly community).

<sup>2</sup> According to Springsteen Lyrics, *Lohad* was originally written in late 1998-early 1999 and developed until finally recorded on *Wrecking Ball* in 2012. "Bruce Springsteen Lyrics". 2018. *Springsteenlyrics.com*. Accessed January 29. <http://www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics.php?song=landofhopeanddreams>; Springsteen, Bruce. 2017. *Born to Run*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.;

In this essay, I rely on the lyrics from the *Wrecking Ball* recording presented. *Springsteenlyrics.com*. <https://www.springsteenlyrics.com/> For general discussion of the protest element in Springsteen’s music, including some study of of *Lohad* (77-9), see Vaernewyck, Michiel. 2014. "Meet Me In The Land Of Hope And Dreams: Influences Of The Protest Song Tradition On The Recent Work Of Bruce Springsteen (1995-2012)". Master's, Ghent University.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example; "Land of Hope And Dreams". 2019. *Revolve.Com*. Accessed January 29. [https://www.revolvvy.com/topic/Land%20of%20Hope%20and%20Dreams&item\\_type=topic](https://www.revolvvy.com/topic/Land%20of%20Hope%20and%20Dreams&item_type=topic). and "Land of Hope And Dreams". 2018. *En.Wikipedia.Org*. Accessed January 19.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land\\_of\\_Hope\\_and\\_Dreams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_of_Hope_and_Dreams).

<sup>4</sup> This is well noticed by Sheehy, “This Train: Bruce Springsteen as Public Artist,” in *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*, (edd.) Jonathan



In the first instance, I consider *Lohad*'s musical inheritance to include: "This Train" / "This Train Is Bound For Glory" (1939-58) by each of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Big Bill Broonzy, and Woody Guthrie; "People Get Ready" (1965) by Curtis Mayfield, Johnny Cash's "This Train is Bound For Glory," a.k.a. "The Bible Train" (1977); and 2016 Nobel laureate Bob Dylan's "Slow Train Coming" (1979). Using this as my springboard, I then claim that *Lohad*'s inclusiveness has two principal components that provide the song with a significant measure of philosophical support. On the one hand, it is that God's love, the ultimate motive behind God's plan and betterment of contemporary community, guides all persons towards, within, and to the goal of God's eternal community – to the heavenly, metaphoric "Land of Hope and Dreams (*LOHAD*)", formally established in an afterworld. On the other hand, everyone in this world (both 'saints and sinners') shares in and is being prepared for the eternal goal by participating in earthly community. Hence, "You don't need no ticket ... You just thank the Lord ...."

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- D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers (NJ.; Rutgers University Press, 2019; "Land of Hope & Dreams, This Train, And People Get Ready". 2018. *Chimesfreedom*. Accessed January 29. <http://www.chimesfreedom.com/2012/03/06/land-of-hope-dreams-this-train-and-people-get-ready/>;
- Symynkywicz, Jeffrey. 2008. *The Gospel According To Bruce Springsteen*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Yadin-Israel, Azzan. 2016. *The Grace Of God And The Grace Of Man; The Theologies Of Bruce Springsteen*. Highland Park, NJ: Lingua. 131.
- Gardner, Andrew. 2016. "The Theological Virtues According To Bruce Springsteen". *The Biannual Online-Journal Of Springsteen Studies* 2 (1): 63-90. doi:10.26443/boss.v2i1.31.

Therefore, Springsteen's train, unlike his predecessors' trains, explicitly proclaims the redemption and redeeming of all, rather than the perfection and perfecting of some, *and* includes the imperative to work for a better community in the here-and-now. According to *Lohad*, then, each person, whether they know it or not, is on God's train insofar as each is a social being. Finally, if God's love establishes His perfect (and therefore universal) community in the hereafter, it follows not only that participating in contemporary community but also, especially, that conscious effort to improve community – notably signified by Springsteen's concluding refrain "Come on this train, people get ready" – are preparatory to that end. Hence, *Lohad* advocates hope for all. Those upholding contemporary community or otherwise, and/or the community's advantaged and disadvantaged, will ultimately attain *LOHAD*, but also each will ultimately work to improve contemporary community.

#### **Lohad's Musical Inheritance.**

This section traces *LOHAD*'s musical background by considering earlier American songs employing 'the moving train' as analogue to God's church and His eternal plan for humanity. In particular, it analyzes "This Train"/"This Train Is Bound For Glory" by each of Broonzy, Tharpe, and Guthrie; Cash's "This Train Is Bound For Glory" (a.k.a. "The Bible Train"); Dylan's "Slow Train Coming"; and Mayfield's "People Get Ready."<sup>5</sup> Although these songs have significant differences, they agree on several

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<sup>5</sup> Since I assess *Lohad*'s inclusivism, I analyze its musical predecessors in light of my understanding of their inclusivism and influence on *Lohad* rather than in strictly chronological order.

matters. This is not only, as stated before, that ‘the moving train’ carries its passengers from an imperfectly happy place in this world to a completely happy destination beyond this world<sup>6</sup> but also that the destination and train both mandate a moral imperative that can benefit contemporary society and are, in various ways, inclusive. On the one hand, each song considers God’s eternal plan in terms of what ultimately results in the afterlife for those who, by God’s gift, behave well in the here-and-now – that is, embrace the gift’s normative moral imperative – and how embracing that imperative can better structure contemporary community. On the other hand, each song holds that while the train’s passengers are being guided to heaven, those on the outside are not. As such, both the afterworld and this world are divided between the train’s passengers and non-passengers. Yet each song implies, albeit in various ways, that the makeup of those travelling on the train is, to some extent, inclusive rather than exclusive. In this respect, each of these musical predecessors advocate that both the train and heaven encompass more of humanity than what belongs to any single institutional Christian confession and, in some instances, to any form of institutional Christianity at all.

**“This Train,” Bill Broonzy (1893-1958).<sup>7</sup>**

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<sup>6</sup> Dylan’s “Slow Train Coming” differs, to some extent, from the other songs since its primary concentration on the welfare of contemporary community in relation to an impending divine judgement makes its focus on God’s kingdom constituting the afterlife implicit.

<sup>7</sup> For study of his life and contributions see: Greene, Kevin D. 2018. *The Invention And Reinvention Of Big Bill Broonzy*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. and Riesman, Bob. 2012. *I Feel So Good: The Life And Times Of Big Bill Broonzy*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.

According to Broonzy's 1956 recording of "This Train," the train, which signifies God's church or community, "is bound for glory," for the ultimate governance or ordering of humanity *in the afterlife* ("When you go there you don't come back"); moves at a very rapid speed ("This train is built for speed ... Fastest train you ever did see"); is the only way to the glorious destination ("This train don't fit no transportation"); and is colored black ("This train is solid black").<sup>8</sup> Taken altogether, this description of the train suggests that God's victory is assured and is now occurring, and gives the color black a kind of pride. It is possible that Broonzy, an Afro-American, wants 'whites' and 'blacks' alike to see that the black color, a nonessential train characteristic, is fine with and even favored by God. Therefore, white people who discriminate against black people on the basis of color act against common sense (and consequently against God) by setting something non-essential (color) over something essential (personhood). Although Broonzy appears to favor the color black, his message entails that no person should discriminate against another on the basis of color: ("No Jim Crow and no discrimination on This train ... This train don't care if you white or black ... Everybody's treat'd just like a man.").

Who is on the train? And how do they behave? According to Broonzy, the decisive characteristic is neither race nor vocation but a righteous and holy lifestyle, by which he strongly implies some kind of explicit religious affiliation: "This train ... Don't carry

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<sup>8</sup> I use the lyrics reported at Big Bill Broonzy, "This Train," accessed at "This Train Lyrics - BIG BILL BROONZY". 2017. *Oldielyrics.com*. Accessed 7 December.

[https://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/big\\_bill\\_broonzy/this\\_train.html](https://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/big_bill_broonzy/this_train.html).

nothing but the righteous an' holy." To his mind, this lifestyle excludes: "gamblers ... whiskey drinkers ... high flyers [those who are sinfully ambitious] ... liars" and, as stated before, those discriminating on the basis of skin color. Thus, Broonzy maintains that the train's passengers share the common characteristic of embracing a religiously grounded moral code or imperative that respects persons, viewing others as ends-in-themselves rather than as means to ends. While the train's passengers, probably churchgoers, uphold the value of persons, those on the outside exploit others, using them as means to the end of achieving some kind of personal satisfaction within a presumably good human community. Broonzy implies, therefore, that contemporary community would be improved if more people adhered to the moral imperative, but whether that happens or not, things will be rightly ordered when the train finishes its journey. At that time, the holy and righteous shall be vindicated and rewarded whereas (presumably) the unholy and unrighteous are condemned and punished.

Based on our principal focus, it is interesting to note that Broonzy's teaching is inclusive to a degree. Although only some persons share in the train's ultimate glory, these are united by adhering to a religion-grounded moral imperative rather than by a specific religious confession. In other words, the train's passengers likely adhere to Christianity, but some might adhere to a non-Christian confession. Broonzy implies, therefore, that the decisive factor determining membership on the train consists in embracing a religion-grounded moral imperative which both upholds the welfare of contemporary community and brings its adherent to heaven.

**“This Train,” Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915-73).<sup>9</sup>**

Tharpe’s “This Train” (1939/1942)<sup>10</sup> shares Broonzy’s identification of the train with God’s community and concern with a moral imperative. Although it makes no obvious mention of ‘racial’ discrimination, it is less inclusive on account of identifying the moral imperative with membership in the Christian church. According to Tharpe, the train “bound for glory” “has left the station,” “takes on every nation,” and is “the prettiest train... ever ... seen.” In this respect she holds, with Broonzy, that the train represents God’s church or community, is the standard by which the nations of the world are judged, and is well on its way to being formally established in the afterlife. There, humanity will be rightly ordered so that the train’s passengers will be vindicated and rewarded while those on the outside will be condemned and punished. However, unlike Broonzy’s concentration on the train’s black color, Tharpe claims only that the train is pretty. This

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<sup>9</sup> Her life and contributions are considered by Wald, Gayle. 2007. *Sister, Shout! The Untold Story Of Rock-And-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe*. Lee's Summit, MO: Beacon.;

Cosby, James A. 2016. *Devil’S Music Holy Rollers and Hillbillies: How America Gave Birth to Rock And Roll*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co.;

and Heilbut, Anthony. 1997. *The Gospel Sound*. NJ: Limelight Editions.

<sup>10</sup> I rely on the lyrics reported at "Sister Rosetta Tharpe - This Train Lyrics | Songmeanings". 2017. *Songmeanings*. Accessed 9 December.  
<http://songmeanings.com/songs/view/3530822107858979849/>

characterization shows a concern with the train's attractiveness to all persons, implying a universal focus.

As noted above, Tharpe shares with Broonzy a strong emphasis on a moral imperative but she explicitly identifies this with being redeemed by Jesus (note the evangelical aspect to her song). On the one hand, she maintains that "This is a clean train" (an oft repeated refrain) which prohibits "jokers," "tobacco chewers," "cigar smokers," "pop shooter[s]," and "whiskey drinker[s]." On the other hand, however, she maintains that those wanting passage on the train "better get redeemed" since the train's passengers are "riding in Jesus' name" and therefore "must be holy." In this respect, Tharpe equates the moral imperative with right relationship with Jesus. While she agrees with Broonzy, then, that people ought to treat each other as ends-in-themselves rather than as means-to-ends and that contemporary community would be better off if more people adhered to that dictum, she explicitly holds that the ability to behave as such is determined by being related to/redeemed by Jesus Christ. In this respect, Tharpe is less inclusive than Broonzy. While both share the view that only those embracing a moral imperative grounded in religious practice shall enjoy the train's ultimate glory and contemporary community would benefit by practicing that imperative, Tharpe holds that that imperative belongs exclusively to a Christian mindset. Her teaching is inclusive since it encompasses a wide variety of Christian denominations. But, all things considered, it is less so than Broonzy since, although he shares the view that the moral imperative is based in religious commitment, he implies that the imperative can be accessed by theists external to institutional Christianity. Therefore, while Broonzy infers that the moral is

available to Christian and to non-Christian alike, Tharpe limits the imperative to Christians.

**“This Train is Bound for Glory,” Woody Guthrie (1912-67)<sup>11</sup>**

Guthrie’s “This Train is Bound for Glory” stands in the tradition of Broonzy.<sup>12</sup> According to Guthrie, the train “bound for glory” is “streamlined and a midnight flyer.” In this respect, he asserts the traditional view that the train represents God’s community, travelling through this world to be formally established in the afterlife; includes some portion of humanity rather than all (hence the train is “streamlined”); and is fast-moving and consequently assured of reaching its destination. God’s plan shall be accomplished, and a portion of humanity will enjoy it, the song suggests. Guthrie also joins with Broonzy and Tharpe by upholding a rigorous moral imperative that both guides its adherents to heaven and can improve contemporary community. But, as Guthrie does not explicitly identify the imperative with Christianity, his outlook is more akin to Broonzy’s inclusivism than to Tharpe’s. How so? Guthrie asserts that the train excludes

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<sup>11</sup> For study of his life and contributions see: Stadler, Gustavus. 2020. *Woody Guthrie: An Intimate Life*. Summit, MO: Beacon Press;  
Cray, Ed. 2006. *Ramblin’ Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie*. New York: W.W. Norton.;  
Klein, Joe. 1999. *Woody Guthrie: A Life*. New York: Delta Publishing;  
and Guthrie, Woody. 1983. *Bound for Glory: The Hard-Driving, Truth Telling, Autobiography Of America’s Great Poet-Folk Singer*. New York: Plume Publishing.  
<sup>12</sup> “This Train Is Bound for Glory”. 2017. *Woodyguthrie.Org*.  
[http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This\\_Train\\_Is\\_Bound\\_For\\_Glory.html](http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This_Train_Is_Bound_For_Glory.html).



“gamblers,” “big shot rambler,” “liars,” “smokers,” “small time jokers,” “con men,” “wheeler dealers,” “rustlers,” and “two bit hustlers,” since it carries “nothing but the righteous and the holy.” Yet, unlike Tharpe, Guthrie does not specifically identify “the righteous and the holy” with membership in the Christian church. Therefore, while Guthrie shares Broonzy’s and Tharpe’s view that only some persons share in the train’s ultimate glory, his lyrics suggest an agreement with Broonzy that membership on the train, and consequently adherence to the moral imperative, is determined by membership in some religious confession – which may or may not be Christian. As with Broonzy, however, it is unclear whether Guthrie’s inclusivism is ultimately rooted in Christ or if Christ is rooted in something superior governing a variety of religious confessions.

**“The Bible Train,” Johnny Cash (1932-2003).<sup>13</sup>**

By contrast, Cash’s inclusivism in “The Bible Train” is more limited since it is closer to Tharpe’s than to Broonzy’s and

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<sup>13</sup> For study of his life and contributions see *inter alia*: Laurie, Greg, and Marshall Terrill. 2019. *Johnny Cash*. Nashville, TN: Salem Books.; Light, Alan. 2018. *Johnny Cash*. NY: Smithsonian Books.; Streissguth, Michael. 2006. *The Biography*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press Inc., N.Y.; Urbanski, Dave. 2003. *The Man Comes Around: The Spiritual Journey Of Johnny Cash*. AK: Relevant Books.; Cash, Johnny. 2003. *Johnny Cash: The Autobiography*. CA: HarperOne. "Home". 2017. *Johnny Cash Official Site*. <http://www.johnnycash.com/>; and "Johnny Cash". 2017. *Biography*. <https://www.biography.com/people/johnny-cash-9240610>

Guthrie's.<sup>14</sup> To begin with, Cash's train, named "the Bible train," is initially stationary, presumably because its journey includes various stops to allow people the opportunity to climb aboard ("The Bible train is in the yard now and it's waiting...."). Moreover, Cash joins Tharpe by maintaining that the train is attractive to all – suggesting that what the train represents, presumably the pathway to eternal life, is universally appealing. Cash also states that, after some people have boarded the train while others have departed, the train leaves the station and "the man on the caboose with a long white beard says, 'This train is bound for glory.'" This man represents wisdom born of experience and he sings the above (and more) for two reasons. On the one hand, his song benefits those on the train by reminding them of their good decision, and, on the other hand, his song reminds those left behind at the station of what they have rejected. Cash, therefore, shares the traditional view that the train represents God's community, travelling through this world and to be formally established in the afterlife; includes some portion of humanity rather than all ("Some won't ride ... Some ride but not all the way"); and is assured of reaching its destination ("This train is bound for glory"). So, God's plan is being accomplished, and only a portion of humanity will enjoy it. Finally, since Cash's song is hortatory, it finishes by asking the "children" if they want to ride the Bible train and exhorts them to "Get on board this holy train."

Cash also joins with his predecessors by upholding a rigorous moral imperative that would benefit contemporary

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<sup>14</sup> "This Train is Bound For Glory". "This Train Is Bound For Glory."  
<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/johnnycash/thistrainisboundforglory.html>.  
Accessed 9 December.

community, but unlike Broonzy and Guthrie, he explicitly identifies that imperative with membership in the Christian church. Therefore, Cash's train excludes those who, being "bored and impatient" concerning the train's nature and journey, practice drunkenness or adultery, and/or other vices ("but there's a lot more to get off than different reasons") as well as "liars," "false pretenders," and "backbiters" –since (as Tharpe had said) "This train is a clean train" that "nobody rides ... but the righteous and holy." Moreover, Cash explicitly identifies the latter with membership in the Christian church. As noted before, he names his train "the Bible train" since its members are "in the church." Hence, Cash sings that "Everybody rides it in Jesus's name." In this respect Cash, like Tharpe before him, equates the moral imperative with the right relationship with Jesus. While he agrees with Broonzy and Guthrie that people ought to treat each other as ends-in-themselves rather than as means-to-ends and that contemporary communities would be better off if more people did so, he holds that the ability to embrace that principle is determined by having a relationship with Jesus Christ.

In this respect, Cash's teaching (like Tharpe's) is inclusive since it encompasses a wide variety of Christian denominations. But it is less inclusive than Broonzy and Guthrie's doctrine since the latter focuses on a moral imperative that (at least as far as this world goes) transcends institutional Christianity. Unlike Broonzy and Guthrie, Cash maintains unequivocally that the requisite moral imperative is somehow identical to Christ and, therefore, only those confessing Christ in this life can share in His "glory." Hence, while the train's passengers willingly receive Christ's gift, behave accordingly, and are ordained for "glory," all others, apparently

rejecting Christ's gift and lifestyle, are ordained for condemnation.

**"Slow Train Coming," Bob Dylan (1941 –)**<sup>15</sup>

For its part, Dylan's train enlarges the inclusivism represented by Broonzy and Guthrie since it includes religious and non-religious persons alike.<sup>16</sup> It is significant, I think, that Dylan's train is both slow moving and unstoppable (hence the famous, oft-repeated chorus: "There's [a] slow, slow train coming up around the bend."). He claims, therefore, that God's eternal kingdom, though somewhat hidden from view in this world, will ultimately be accomplished. But in something of a departure from the previously analyzed songs, Dylan's slow-moving train implies that God is immensely patient, wanting to give *all people* ample opportunity to join God's train. (I will return to this point later, since it bespeaks Dylan's relatively greater inclusivism.)

Dylan also exhibits a resolute moral imperative that, if practiced, would benefit contemporary society. But, in a departure from his inheritance, this imperative is universally accessible because Dylan's song emphasizes the responsibility each person has for the good of contemporary community. At the outset, Dylan asserts his concern with the moral welfare of his friends, country,

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<sup>15</sup> For biographical materials see *inter alii*: Shelton, Robert, Patrick Humphries, and Elizabeth King. 2011. *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan*. NY: Omnibus Press.

McDougal, Dennis. 2014. *Dylan: The Biography*. NY: Wiley.

<sup>16</sup> "Slow Train Coming."

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bobdylan/slowtrain.html>. Accessed 9 December.

and world at large—by which I take him to mean both religious and non-religious persons. Dylan worries that both parties embrace “earthly principles” to the effect that each, in some way, practices injustice to gain selfish enjoyment of some common good. Each party, in other words, exploits some members of the community for the sake of obtaining something for themselves that properly belongs to the welfare of the entire community. On the one hand, Dylan’s friends, whether “lost ... or found,” exhibit disordered behavior, concern with power, honor, fame, and wealth. On the other hand, Dylan’s country (the U.S.A.) is being controlled by Arab foreign oil powers who want power and wealth. In general, the problem is that man has supplanted God as the source of value, right and wrong, and, consequently, of reward and punishment. As Dylan sees it, the powerful, imitating and employing Satan, have subordinated the moral imperative to their own wayward impulse to exercise power for the sake of personal advantage. In other words, they substitute the power of service with the service of power. Thus, Dylan sings that “Man’s ego is inflated, his laws are outdated, they don’t apply no more ... Fools glorifying themselves, trying to manipulate Satan.”<sup>17</sup>

What does this mindset entail? A culture of deceit, to Dylan’s mind, is pervaded by a variety of evil doers, including: “Big-time negotiators” (persons claiming that Truth is what people agree to, rather than something objective); “false healers,” like fake psychologists, claiming to heal, for the sake of money and power; “woman haters,” perhaps false feminists, claiming to uphold the

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine. 412-425. *The City of God*. 4.27, 10.27-29, 30, 32.

Dylan’s indictment of religious hypocrisy in his era echoes Augustine’s indictment of religious hypocrisy in his era.

welfare of women but actually denigrating them; and “Masters of the bluff and masters of the proposition” (persons wanting to get what they want by claiming to be true what they know is false). The worst evil doers, however, are those employing religion as means to satisfy their selfish desire. While these persons “talk about a life of brotherly love,” they instead line their pockets and/or help others do so by advocating starvation and thirst. “People starving and thirsting, grain elevators are bursting / Oh, you know it costs more to store the food than it do to give it”. According to Dylan, these use the veneer of a doctrine of good will to pursue social status. Instead of upholding human dignity, they propound doctrines catering to the false designs of the powerful and influential.

Finally, Dylan recognizes his own limited power in the battle against moral relativism and/or indifference insofar as someone he loves is in a bad relationship that he cannot persuade her to leave. Dylan writes, “Well, my baby went to Illinois with some bad-talking boy she could destroy / A real suicide case, but there was nothing I could do to stop it.” In this respect, Dylan recognizes the reality of personal responsibility. On the one hand, it is beyond his power to prevent that bad relationship (since his loved one has chosen it). On the other hand, Dylan is upset by seeing, both in this instance and elsewhere, his “loved ones turning into puppets,” denying their personal responsibility, properly grounded in the moral imperative, by subjecting themselves to some person-denying dogma or ideology. Hence, Dylan underscores his disapproving disposition by exclaiming disdain for the popular ideologies of “economy” and “astronomy” What is meant by this? Each ideology denies the primacy of personhood.

On the one hand, those speaking of the 'economy's welfare' might propound a self-justifying rationalization to subject the welfare of some to others. On the other hand, those speaking of 'astronomy' might deny human dignity by maintaining that human events are not determined by responsible choice-making but by impersonal forces beyond human control, by the movements of the stars and planets. Both ideologies, then, countenance injustice by maintaining that some impersonal force governs human affairs. But since the train is moving, Dylan implies hope that, as his own spiritual awakening and disapproval of injustice show, God will somehow supply what human action lacks. In other words, Dylan hopes that his loved ones might eventually be awakened to the truth.

What, then, is Dylan's antidote to the moral relativism spoiling contemporary community, to the "earthly principles they're gonna have to abandon"? The second verse of "Slow Train Coming" suggests that the antidote consists in some kind of a spiritual awakening. In this respect, Dylan certainly has in mind his own conversion to Christ whereby his spiritual awakening occurred. Concerning the latter, Dylan writes, "I had a woman down in Alabama / She was a backwoods girl, but she sure was realistic / She said, Boy, without a doubt, have to quit your mess and straighten out / You could die down here, be just another accident statistic."<sup>18</sup> But I think Dylan does not mention conversion

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<sup>18</sup> Apparently, this refers to Dylan's girlfriend at that time. She had a conversion to Christ while they were a couple and inspired Dylan towards his conversion. Dylan sings of her influence in *Slow Train's* "Precious Angel." See "Bob Dylan Finds God - A Classic Article From The Vaults". 2017. *The Guardian*. Accessed December 9.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/sep/11/bob-dylan-classic-article>.

to Christ as such because he grounds the moral imperative within spiritual values, brought about by a spiritual awakening, generally conceived. Dylan's patriotic concern with the U.S.A. gives evidence for this since his prominent mention of Thomas Jefferson in verse four, after indicting moral relativism, underscores the view that America is founded on and embraces common spiritual values rather than a specific religion.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the American republic is pluralist concerning religion. It welcomes many religions, but is united concerning certain spiritual and moral values that those religions, and consequently the American citizen, should uphold.

Hence, "Slow Train Coming" maintains that everyone, whether religious-minded or otherwise, acknowledges and can embrace the moral imperative. But "Slow Train Coming" also holds that a secure grounding requires some kind of spiritual awakening that likely includes, at minimum, recognition of personal immortality, moral responsibility, and God's establishing an eschatological community whose members ultimately instantiate the fullness of moral responsibility. Dylan, I think, makes a

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"The turning point for Dylan came when the girl he'd been living with became a committed Christian. She promptly moved out on him as she'd attained a new set of values. The depth of this commitment caused him to set about investigating for himself. She is now immortalized as the Precious Angel who was "the one/ To show me I was blinded/ To show me I was gone."

<sup>19</sup> As a Deist, Jefferson rejected claims concerning the divinity of Christ but esteemed his moral teachings and, on the supposition that the American people would be theistic in their private lives, he famously advocated for the separation of State administration from Church administration. For study of Jefferson's religious convictions see: Muñoz, Vincent Phillip. 2009. *God and The Founders: Madison, Washington, Jefferson*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 70-116; and Frazer, Gregg L. 2012. *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders: Reason, Revelation, And Revolution*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.



Jeffersonian view of private religion function as a kind of standard and filter, on the one hand, for religious practice and, on the other, for citizenship. To his mind, non-religious persons can uphold the imperative but only religious persons can firmly embrace it. The former can and should strive to adhere to the imperative, but they are probably more likely to veer away from it, towards moral relativism, since they lack a spiritual awakening setting them into a religious tradition wherein both they and the imperative are securely grounded. Hence, religious persons properly embrace the moral imperative by recognizing that it is grounded in authentic religion and universal in scope. Nevertheless, Dylan holds that both religious and non-religious persons share the responsibility of improving contemporary community by conforming it to the imperative to the degree it is known.

It is obvious, therefore, that Dylan joins each of his predecessors by upholding a rigorous moral imperative, but he is distinguished by claiming that the imperative is universally accessible and, consequently, that each person is responsible for improving the human community. On the one hand, Dylan agrees that people ought to follow the moral imperative and, consequently, treat each other as ends-in-themselves rather than as means-to ends; that contemporary community would be better off if people did so, and that people will ultimately be rewarded for embracing the imperative and punished for forsaking it. On the other hand, however, he does not claim (with Tharpe and Cash) that the ability to embrace the imperative is determined by having *an explicit relationship* with Jesus Christ. In this respect, Dylan's teaching is akin to that of Broonzy and Guthrie since it distinguishes an imperative that transcends institutional

Christianity. But Dylan's teaching exceeds Broonzy and Guthrie's by maintaining that the imperative is accessible to all persons, including the non-religious. Dylan positively claims that passage on the train is determined by embracing a moral law that is best accessed *via* a variety of religious confessions available to everyone. Moreover, Dylan implies that the imperative is ultimately grounded in Christ. So, what unifies Dylan's outlook? The key distinction is likely the supposition that Christ, and consequently the moral imperative, is present to each. Additionally, the breadth of Dylan's approach is underscored by the fact that his train is slow-moving. For this implies the notion that God exercises patience towards all persons, giving each the opportunity to climb aboard God's train.

It is well known that Dylan's album *Slow Train Coming* celebrates his conversion to Christianity.<sup>20</sup> But the song "Slow Train Coming" implies a significant distinction between embracing Christ explicitly and embracing Him implicitly. Dylan recognizes that his personal spiritual awakening and espousal of the moral imperative is rooted in his conversion to Christ. However, in agreement with Thomas Jefferson, Dylan also claims that *in this life* spiritual awakening and loyalty to the moral imperative are available to people through some religious mediums that are not Christian. Moreover, Dylan appears to move beyond Jefferson and others by claiming that the moral imperative is accessible to everyone, even to the non-religious. Therefore, since Dylan teaches that anyone who, in this life, embraces the moral imperative is loyal

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the characterization of *Slow Train* in "Slow Train Coming". 2017. *En.Wikipedia.Org*. Accessed December 9. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow\\_Train\\_Coming](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_Train_Coming).

to Christ, he implies that Christ makes Himself accessible to a variety of religious and non-religious or secular traditions. Dylan's overall doctrine, then, differs from his predecessors for two closely related reasons. First, it focuses principally on the welfare of contemporary communities and second, it is more inclusive since, while grounded in Christ, it includes many forms of institutional Christianity, many non-Christian religions, and non-religious persons. Dylan's view of Christ allows him to take an unprecedented view of the scope of the moral imperative.

**"People Get Ready," Curtis Mayfield (1942-1990)<sup>21</sup>**

In "People Get Ready"<sup>22</sup> Mayfield presents an inclusive teaching, but it is not as broad as Dylan's (or, for that matter, as Broonzy's and Guthrie's) since Mayfield seems to claim, with Tharpe and Cash, that passage on the train is determined by having an explicit relationship with Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, although Mayfield's song pre-dates Cash's and Dylan's, I analyze it now because, as Springsteen's *Lohad* will suggest, its focus on the gratuitous nature of God's gift together with the human response

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<sup>21</sup> For study of his life and contributions see: Mayfield, Todd, and Travis Atria. 2016. *Traveling Soul: The Life of Curtis Mayfield*. IL: Chicago Review Press. and Werner, Craig Hansen. 2004. *Higher Ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, and the Rise and Fall Of American Soul*. New York: Crown Publishing.

<sup>22</sup> I rely on the lyrics from "Curtis Mayfield - People Get Ready Lyrics".

2017. *Azlyrics.Com*. Accessed December 7.

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/curtismayfield/peoplegetready.html>.

For helpful discussion of this song see: "People Get Ready".

2017. *En.Wikipedia.Org*. Accessed December 9.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People\\_Get\\_Ready](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People_Get_Ready).

thereto of gratitude implies a more robust inclusiveness than Mayfield advances.<sup>23</sup>

Mayfield's train has a traditional character; the train is moving towards its destination ("There's a train a comin'"); its journey and destination includes baptism ("There's a train to Jordan"); it is picking up passengers all across the U.S.A. ("Picking up passengers coast to coast"); and its ultimate meaning will be manifested to all ("There's no hiding place / Against the Kingdom's Throne"). Mayfield, therefore, shares the commonplace view that the train represents God's community, travelling through this world and to be formally established in the afterlife, includes some portion of humanity rather than all, and is assured of reaching its destination. So, God's plan is being accomplished and only a portion of humanity will enjoy it. Like his predecessors, Mayfield also upholds a moral imperative that is beneficial to contemporary communities. But, in this instance, community is divided between those who are *grateful* to the Lord and those who, like "the hopeless sinner who would hurt all mankind / Just to save his own," use or exploit others to attain some particular goal or subordinate the common good.

In this respect, Mayfield, like Tharpe before him and Cash later, equates the moral imperative with right relationship with Jesus. While Mayfield agrees that people ought to treat each other as ends-in-themselves rather than as means-to-ends, and that

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<sup>23</sup> It is commonly agreed that this aspect of Mayfield's "People Get Ready" strongly influences Springsteen's inclusivism in *Lohad*. See, for example: "Chimesfreedom - Pophistory: Music, Movies, History, And Life.". 2018. *Chimesfreedom*. Accessed January 29. <http://www.chimesfreedom.com>. and "Land". 2018. *En.Wikipedia.Org*. Accessed January 29, and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land>.

contemporary community would be better off if more people did so, he holds that the ability to embrace that principle is determined by having an explicit relationship with Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, there is something novel within Mayfield's claim that membership on the train is determined by embracing Christ's moral imperative. This is because Mayfield focuses on an aspect of the imperative (also noticed, but not concentrated on, by Cash pertaining to gratitude towards the Lord. "Don't need no ticket / You just thank the Lord.") In this respect, Mayfield emphasizes that God freely gives the gift of faith that causes passengers to be on the train in the first place. In other words, the passengers are such because they have received an unmerited gift from God, which, logically, causes their gratitude as well. On this basis, the train's passengers are encouraged to love their enemies, to "Have pity on those whose / Chances grow thinner." Presumably, this is because the passengers should recognize that what distinguishes them from the sinner is not something that is ultimately in human power. It is neither their "baggage" nor "ticket," but God's unmerited gift of grace. So those 'in' the Lord ("Among those loved the most") are strongly encouraged to have a disposition of gratitude toward the One who gives them the gifts of faith, baptism, and, finally, eternal bliss. And this gratitude should motivate them to love both friends and enemies. We note, however, that Mayfield's focus on God's unmerited gift is not only novel but implies something more profound. This is because Mayfield's notion of the primacy of God's unmerited gift promises something more than his song delivers. For if, by Mayfield's principle, God is self-sufficient and humankind is fundamentally receptive to God's gift, it should follow that God ultimately gives

His gift to each and that each gratefully attains membership in God's kingdom.

That said, it is obvious that Mayfield—like Tharpe, Cash, and Dylan (in a way)—embraces a form of Christian inclusivism. Together with Tharpe and Cash, Mayfield makes it evident that the train's passengers practice Christianity, and his train is open to a wide number of Christian confessions. However, unlike what we encountered in Broonzy, Guthrie, and Dylan, Mayfield identifies the moral imperative with membership in the Christian church. Hence, the difference between being a train passenger or otherwise is not determined by loyalty to a universally accessible imperative but by embracing Christian gratitude and exhibiting the specific religious acts and moral activity this entails. In one respect, then, Mayfield's inclusivism is expansive since it includes a wide variety of Christians. In another respect, however, it is restrictive since it leaves no place for those without an explicit relationship with Christ and/or the moral imperative. In this respect, Mayfield's message falls short of Broonzy and Guthrie's message—and it is especially distant from Dylan's "Slow Train Coming." Yet, as stated before, Mayfield's song *implies* a more inclusive doctrine than each of the above. For by focusing on the free and unmerited nature of God's gift, it is suggested that the latter can ultimately be applied to all persons, not only to those within institutional Christianity but also, in some manner, to everyone on the outside.

#### **Analyzing "Land of Hope and Dreams" by Bruce Springsteen<sup>24</sup>**

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<sup>24</sup> Recent studies of Springsteen's life and contributions include: Springsteen (2017), Cohen, J.D. and J. Skinner Sawyers, 2019, *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*. Rutgers University Press.; Hiatt, Brian. 2019. *Bruce Springsteen*. 2019: Harry N. Abrams.;

This section studies Springsteen's *Lohad* by considering its relationship with the aforementioned songs constituting its musical inheritance. On this basis, we notice *Lohad's* unparalleled inclusivism since, unlike any of its predecessors, this song instantiates the concept of a self-sufficient God, in particular God's goodness, into the entire human race so that the latter's orientation towards *LOHAD* causes it to participate in, but especially to augment, contemporary community.

The inclusivism Springsteen advances in *Lohad* is more expansive than its predecessors due to its unique claim that *God is accessible to all and ultimately received by all, and man's proper disposition towards God consists in a kind of gratitude that issues in*

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Carlin, P.A. 2012. *Bruce*. NY: Atria Books.;  
 and "Bruce Springsteen". 2017. *En.Wikipedia.Org*. Accessed December 9.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce\\_Springsteen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Springsteen).  
 Fine bibliographies are also provided by P. Symynkywicz (Symynkywicz 2008: 194-197)  
 and Yadin-Israel, (Yadin-Israel 2016: 189-98). Welcome study of the spiritual dimension within Springsteen's music is given by Yadin-Israel (Yadin-Israel 2016: 181), writing that "the biblical and theological themes in Springsteen's songs are elements—alongside memories, thoughts, imaginings—that he has assimilated in his mind and artistically reworked in lyrics.... all these are more the result of intuitive artistry than bookish erudition... And so, it falls to the scholar of Scripture and theology to provide an account of the ways Springsteen has woven these elements into his work, thereby revealing a hitherto unappreciated dimension of his artistry." But see also Symynkywicz, (Symynkywicz 2008: 185), who gives a general account of Springsteen's theology, writing that: "The essence of Springsteen's good news is not just that there is a power which moves through human history transcending differences, liberating that which lies captive, and healing all wounds. His even better news is that this divine power lives and moves through indisputably common, fallible, imperfect people like us." My interpretation agrees both with Yadin-Israel that Springsteen's spiritual claims are principally intuitive and with Symynkywicz concerning their meaning.

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*community building*.<sup>25</sup> In one way, Springsteen integrates and develops both Mayfield's emphasis on the primacy of a grateful disposition for God's unmerited gift and Dylan's emphasis on God's universal accessibility or omnipresence in the human community. This is because Springsteen's unparalleled focus on the primacy of God's unmerited gift allows him to link together Dylan's teaching on divine omnipresence in the human community with Mayfield's teaching on gratitude. In this regard, then,

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<sup>25</sup> Springsteen seems to trace his inclusivism to friendship with Jesus Christ. In his words (Springsteen 2017: 17): "As funny as its sounds, I have a "personal" relationship with Jesus. ... I believe deeply in his [i.e. in Jesus'] love, his ability to save ... but not to damn ... enough of that." Springsteen maintains that his affiliation with Christ derives from his Catholic upbringing, and that his Catholic roots run deep. In his words (Springsteen 2017: 17): "as I grew older, there were certain things about the way I thought, reacted, behaved. I came to ruefully and bemusedly understand that once you're a Catholic, you're always a Catholic. So I stopped kidding myself. I don't often participate in my religion but I know somewhere ... deep inside ... I'm still on the team." For discussion of Springsteen's relationship with Catholicism see: "Andrew Greeley On The Catholic Imagination Of Bruce Springsteen". 1988. *America Magazine*. <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/100/catholic-imagination-bruce-springsteen>. Accessed 13 February, 2018.

"Andrew Greeley On The Catholic Imagination Of Bruce Springsteen". 2018. *America Magazine*. Accessed February 13.

<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/100/catholic-imagination-bruce-springsteen> Accessed 13 February 2018; and, with helpful bibliographies, (Gardner 2016: 64-72, 89-90, and Yadin-Israel 2016: 10-14.)

While Greely (1) maintains that Springsteen "perhaps without knowing or understanding it, is a Catholic *meistersinger*," and Gardner's study of *Wrecking Ball* concurs (70-1), Yadin-Israel holds otherwise. To his mind (12), "Springsteen's Catholic upbringing informs his writing ... But it is analytically inadequate to reduce his artistic expression to biographical terms." This analysis of *Lohad* suggests that while Springsteen identifies himself as Catholic, and his experience of Catholicism influences his music, his teaching is, as Yadin-Israel implies, unique.



Springsteen places “new wine in skins.” His principal point is neither that God is present to all humans by their participation in community (Dylan’s emphasis), nor is it that Christians owe gratitude to God (Mayfield’s teaching). Rather, standing beyond Dylan and Mayfield, Springsteen claims that God establishes all persons in the community *and* disposes them towards gratitude for it because (beyond Dylan and Mayfield) God’s unmerited gift entails that the entire race is structured for and will ultimately receive God’s unmerited gift of *LOHAD*. Hence, Springsteen claims, against Dylan, that God ultimately establishes in God’s eternal community all persons, that any gratitude towards community represents gratitude towards God and that all persons will *ultimately*, in *LOHAD*, be grateful to God. Moreover, Springsteen asserts, against Mayfield, that God is present to all persons in contemporary community, that gratitude for community represents gratitude towards God and, as above, that God ultimately establishes the entire race in God’s blissful afterlife community. Put differently, Springsteen promulgates a moral imperative, mandating the augmentation of contemporary community, which is accessible to all, ultimately received by all, and governed by an eschatological claim. It is evident, therefore, that Springsteen’s cardinal assertion concerning *LOHAD* both integrates and develops his inheritances so that *Lohad*’s inclusivism surpasses what is found within its kindred musical ancestors.

What lies beneath Springsteen’s unique vision? And how is it signified by the song’s title, “Land of Hope and Dreams”? To begin with, Springsteen holds that since everyone, whether they know it or not, is structured by the innate desire for *LOHAD*, for

membership in an entirely perfect community,<sup>26</sup> and since everyone is intrinsically communal, then everyone—whether upholding community or (*contra* Dylan) subordinating it to some private good—implies the good of community. At minimum, each enjoys and/or establishes what, at least for him/her, is a better community.<sup>27</sup> (As we will see below, this pursuit of community begins with merely human communities but both implies and ultimately terminates in *LOHAD*, in a divine-centered community constituting the afterlife.) In any event, Springsteen claims that since everyone belongs to a community, everyone has access to God and his moral imperative. Moreover, since man's proper response to experiencing and enjoying community—both human-centered and divine-centered—consists in gratitude, that disposition must prevail to progress on the train and ultimately attain “the land of hope and dreams.” Springsteen maintains, then, that God is accessed by sharing and working to improve the community. Hence, “land of hope and dreams” has two related meanings: the community one presently belongs to and properly augments, and the universal eschatological community (*LOHAD*) God establishes in the afterlife. According to Springsteen's song, the former participates in and leads to the latter.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Augustine's, *Confessions* 1.1.1: ‘the human heart is restless until it rests in God’; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 2.1, *obj.* 1 and *ad* 1 concerning man's innate orientation towards happiness, identified ultimately with God; and U2's song, ‘I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For’ (U2, “I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For,” Track #2 on *The Joshua Tree* Island Records, 1987)

<sup>27</sup> Symynkywicz (Symynkywicz 2016), writes: “We may never see this land of hope and dreams with human eyes within this lifetime. But we know that it truly abides, as an almost heavenly vision, out on the horizon's edge. It is toward that vision—toward realization of these deeper hopes and dreams—that all our actions in this world must be pointed.”

Springsteen maintains that all members of contemporary community, whether presently grateful or otherwise, are destined to attain God's "land of hope and dreams."<sup>28</sup> But it can be hard to square this claim with what is stated above. For if Springsteen asserts that persons can have a positive or negative attitude towards community ("This train / Carries saints and sinners"), why does he assert that the "land of hope and dreams," and, consequently God's moral imperative, is ultimately received by all? Does Springsteen deny personal responsibility? Part of the answer is found in recognizing Springsteen's unprecedented emphasis on divine eschatology and allied claim that God's gift permeates the human journey from beginning to end. Springsteen's principal claim is not that God's gift structures persons to have *the opportunity* to attain to and enjoy the 'land of hope and dreams' – for this suggests that humanity's *telos* of God's gift might be definitively accepted or rejected. Rather, it is that God's gift to each person of *LOHAD* that structures each person and governs his/her journey to *LOHAD*. Therefore, God's gift of *LOHAD* entails helping people to become grateful. This refers both to those who, in this life, are grateful to a degree and those who, in this life, are more ungrateful than grateful—for example, the song's "losers, gamblers, thieves, and lost souls," who subordinate the good of community to some private good. In short, Springsteen suggests

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<sup>28</sup> As Symynkywicz, (Symynkywicz 2016: 137), writes: "The honored and despised, the foolish and the wise—all people are welcome on board this train as it proceeds on its journey. All people are needed to complete the full panorama of human being. All must be saved if there is to be any hope for any of us." Camus, Albert, and translated by Herbert Read. 1956. *The Rebel*. New York: Vintage Books.: 304, who writes: "if all are not saved, what good is the salvation of one only?" To Camus' mind, the teaching that man has a blissful end beyond this world implies universal salvation.

that God's gift entails developing and/or correcting everyone (whether in this life or, it is implied, in an afterlife) so that each attains *LOHAD*. Thus, insofar as Springsteen envisions it, the nature of God's gift is both accessible to all and finally received by all, so that everyone will ultimately embrace God's moral imperative.

### **Springsteen's Train**

How, then, does Springsteen describe his train? And what does it mean? From beginning to end, Springsteen asserts that his train is moving towards the 'land of hope and dreams,' i.e. towards manifesting the meaning of human life. What evidence is given at the outset that everyone pursues "the land of hope and dreams"? Springsteen claims that everyone seeks friendship and companionship ("Well darlin' if you're weary / Lay your head upon my chest"). In this respect, Springsteen joins the implicit to the explicit. For if "the land of hope and dreams' is friendship par excellence, then pursuing friendship means that one implicitly pursues the "land of hope and dreams." Unlike earlier musicians, Springsteen does not describe the train's speed but instead mentions that the train is noisy ("Thunder's rollin' down this track"). Presumably, this is because Springsteen's train is both making known to all the meaning of life and is the way to realize it. It seems, moreover, that noting the train's speed would be irrelevant since, as everyone will attain "the land of hope and dreams," no one will finally miss the train. None are left behind because the train is omnipresent. Why does the train have "big wheels"? Because it carries the whole of humanity to its destination. It is also possible that the train's "rolling through

fields" represents travelling through places that are either not yet or are incompletely civilized, on its way to what civilization really is "the land of hope and dreams." Here too, then, Springsteen seems to ally the implicit with the explicit.

Springsteen also mentions how "sunlight streams." This can mean that the sun of our hopes and dreams is partly hidden in this world: hence, again, "Well you don't know where you're goin now / But you know you won't be back." However, as "Tomorrow there'll be sunshine / And all this darkness past," it follows that the passengers ultimately arrive at "the land of hope and dreams." In the end, therefore, the train's destination, and therefore its meaning, will be entirely visible since it is entirely accomplished. Springsteen also states that the train's "steel wheels" sing and "Bells of freedom" ring. What can this mean? To begin with, it is probably that the train's wheels are well built, and their singing signifies the happy destination towards which the train is travelling. Moreover, "Bells of freedom ring'n" tells people to board the train to attain complete freedom by building community in the here-and-now and journeying to *LOHAD*. We see, therefore, that Springsteen agrees with his predecessors that the train represents God's community, travelling through this world to be formally established in the afterlife, and is assured of reaching its destination. To Springsteen's mind, the train represents the accomplishment of God's plan. However, as noted before, Springsteen stands apart from his predecessors by maintaining that God's plan is that *everyone* ultimately boards the train since everyone really desires and finally attains "the land of hope and dreams."

### **Springsteen's Moral Imperative**

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In conjunction with each of his predecessors, Springsteen upholds a moral imperative, but, like Dylan alone, he judges that the latter is universally accessible insofar as it properly consists in community building. His song maintains, however, that this attitude is *developmental*, growing to fullness by stages. Since it is unclear to those standing at the beginning what community building ultimately entails, Springsteen writes, “Well you don’t know where you’re goin now / But you know you won’t be back.” To my mind, Springsteen distinguishes four stages in community building having the common foundation of cultivating some kind of friendship, i.e. recognition that others are properly embraced as ends or as irreducible (rather than as means to ends or as reducible),<sup>29</sup> that surpasses, but should include, one’s immediate family, and for which one is properly grateful.<sup>30</sup>

The first kind of friendship or community-building (verse 2) pertains to adolescence. It is built on the discovery that life so far lived, in conjunction with one’s immediate community is not “the land of hope and dreams” or “the promised land” but that the latter might be found or established somewhere else in this world. Although these friends wrongly think *LOHAD* can be established here, their friendship is authentic insofar as each value the other as irreducible, and they rightly seek to establish a better community. Springsteen writes, “Well darlin’ if you’re weary / Lay your head

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<sup>29</sup> Although this view of friendship is developed through the Western tradition, it is initially set forth by philosophers like Aristotle (384-322 B.C). He considers friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics*, books 8-9 (Aristotle. ~340 BC *Nicomachean Ethics*).

<sup>30</sup> Marsh’s view of Springsteen’s account of friendship in *Lohad* in “To Set Our Souls Free: A different view of Bruce Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball*.” While Marsh maintains that Springsteen’s account of friendship in *Lohad* is of one sort, I argue above that it consists in several related sorts.

upon my chest / We'll take what we can carry / And we'll leave the rest." So, the friends join together and perhaps move elsewhere in pursuit of "the land of hope and dreams" because they think it can be found or established elsewhere. (This mindset is found in Springsteen's songs, "Thunder Road," "Born to Run," and "The Promised Land.")

The second kind of friendship or community-building (verse 4) seems akin to marriage, whereby people pledge loyalty and fidelity to each other for the remainder of their lives. It presupposes key aspects of the previous kind of friendship, but is based on a more balanced view of "the land of hope and dreams." In the latter regard, it is mutually recognized that no merely human community is *LOHAD* but that one's immediate community, and communities in general, can share in that ideal through upholding human dignity. So, while living with the common hope of enjoying *LOHAD*, the partners promise to help each other cultivate and enjoy the goods that share in *LOHAD*, and console one another concerning what is experienced here that disappoints.

The third kind of friendship, or community-building (verses 6-8), presupposes the second but is more universal in scope, since the sharing in *LOHAD* one wants for one's native community is also wanted for *community at large*. The love one has for members of a preferred community is now transposed onto community at large, though it is immensely complex. It includes "saints," that is, those upholding community with gratitude and acting to improve it—whether they are theists ("Faith will be rewarded") or persons of good will ("sweet-souls departed"); those who have been wounded by communities (including the "broken-hearted" and

perhaps “losers” and “whores”);<sup>31</sup> and “sinners,” (those subordinating community to the welfare of some particular community). It is recognized that since everyone in community is, in fact, pursuing *LOHAD*, then everything done and/or suffered in community is done and/or suffered on that account. What ethic or imperative governs this kind of friendship? Based on the second friendship’s recognition that this life participates in *LOHAD*, it is that one strives to build a community that cultivates and enjoys what this life shares in *LOHAD*. So, by embracing others as ends, one works for a “land of hope and dreams” that participates in *LOHAD*. (This mindset is found in the songs “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” and “Jack of All Trades.”)

Finally, the fourth kind of friendship, eschatological at heart (verses 9-11), is centered in gratitude towards God, since it is recognized that God’s gift governs all. It is because God gives the gift of *LOHAD* to all that each seeks *LOHAD* and community. Hence, gratitude towards God and the goal of contemporary community is humanity’s right disposition since we recognize God’s *unconditional love for* those building, suffering, and subordinating community. Springsteen writes,

Come on this train  
People get ready  
You don’t need no ticket  
All you gotta do is, just get on board  
On board this train

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<sup>31</sup> I interpret this group to include those who have been treated by others as means, things, or as reducible. It may include what Springsteen means by “losers” and “whores” to the extent that they have been treated by others as things.



What ethic does this imply? It includes everything belonging to the third form of friendship but is centered on a disposition of gratitude towards God, recognizing that God will help build contemporary communities and ultimately supply (in an afterlife) whatever is lacking in the community/communities of this world. On the one hand, its adherents strive to build a community which cultivates and enjoys what in this life shares in *LOHAD*. On the other hand, its adherents recognize that God somehow uses all communities and attitudes thereto, both the good and the bad, as means to establish *LOHAD*. (This outlook is also found in “Jacob’s Ladder.”) Therefore, as previously stated, Springsteen’s goal in distinguishing the third and fourth kinds of friendship is not to whitewash human evildoing, but to show that it can be limited in the here-and-now by human effort, and is ultimately defeated by God’s gift of *LOHAD*. Hence, Springsteen sings “people get ready” so that, in light of and to prepare for God’s gift, people will do their best to improve their community.

### **Comparing *LOHAD*’s Moral Imperative**

While Springsteen, therefore, joins with his predecessors by upholding a moral imperative ordered to augment contemporary community, his account of the latter’s nature and ultimate role is significantly different. This might be explained in the following related reasons. Unlike those identifying the imperative with membership in the institutional Christian church (Tharpe, Cash, and Mayfield) or in the latter together with some similar religious institution (Broonzy and Guthrie), Springsteen (like Dylan, but differently) anchors it in his notion of a God who stands both beyond and in all communities (ecclesial or otherwise), and governs and is accessible within each community. So, Springsteen’s

divinely grounded moral imperative is accessed by everyone because, as God has structured each by and for *LOHAD*, each intrinsically belongs to and, in some manner recognizes the good of the community. Therefore, while Springsteen claims with every predecessor that only some in this life adhere positively to the imperative, he also maintains (contrary to every predecessor) that everyone adheres to it in some way. Why is that? On the one hand, everyone engages in community; on the other hand, God's will to establish *LOHAD* is why community (and therefore humanity) exists, and is what those striving to improve community aim at. Finally, while Springsteen agrees with Mayfield and Cash that God's gift is unmerited and, with Mayfield, that man's proper response to His gift consists in grateful adherence to God's imperative; he maintains, contrary to *Lohad's* entire musical inheritance, that God will ultimately establish the entire race in gratitude. Hence, the scope of Springsteen's moral imperative is unprecedented since it encompasses all persons, including Christians and non-Christians alike, properly motivates its adherents to improve their native community, and is ultimately embraced by all. (I believe this outlook is found in Springsteen's songs, "I Wanna Marry You" and "If I Should Fall Behind.")

### **Conclusion**

Studying Bruce Springsteen's *Lohad* in conjunction with its kindred musical inheritance discloses that *Lohad's* inclusivism is both unique and defensible. In the first place, it is obvious that *Lohad's* message contains, in many ways, what is found in the song's rich predecessors. *Lohad* agrees with claims by Tharpe, Broonzy, Guthrie, Cash, Dylan, and Mayfield that God has

established a train, a community in this world leading to God's blissful community constituting the afterlife, and that the train's passengers embrace a moral imperative leading them heavenward and that properly improves their contemporary community. In addition, Springsteen concurs, especially with Dylan, that the moral imperative is accessible to everyone. Moreover, the moral imperative's principal object is community in general rather than some particular church or religious affiliation (suggested by Tharpe, Cash, and Mayfield); those embracing it positively exhibit gratitude (Mayfield); and it is ultimately grounded in upholding God as Lord (Tharpe, Cash, Dylan, and Mayfield).

How does *Lohad* depart from its inheritance? Because of its *twofold claim* that all persons by recognizing, even implicitly, the good of community stand in immediate relationship with God and pursue *LOHAD*, and enjoy it in the afterlife. *LOHAD*, therefore, is not distinguished by the claim that the moral imperative is universally accessible within contemporary community—that doctrine is shared with Dylan's "Slow Train Coming." The moral imperative is coupled with the assertion that *all* pursue and ultimately enjoy *LOHAD*. Therefore, unlike any of its predecessors, Springsteen's train includes "saints and sinners, winners and losers, whores and gamblers, and lost souls."

The latter claim, however, can prompt some to wonder if Springsteen unwittingly upholds a doctrine of moral relativism. For if, in his view, each traveler *eventually* embraces God's will, has human responsibility been negated? Is Springsteen, in the end, instructing people to behave however they please? Does his account of *LOHAD* undercut emphasis on improving one's native community? Although we touched on this matter before, it requires

recapitulation and further explanation, since it is obviously the chief objection to the vision Springsteen articulates in *Lohad*. My response here will consider the matter first on the theoretical level and secondly in terms of human activity. In the former regard, our study of *LOHAD* discloses that its doctrine contains, rather than denies, a universal moral imperative. *Lohad*'s distinction between forms of friendship, however interpreted, recognizes the difference between approaching one's community well or badly, between embracing and augmenting the common good (thereby recognizing and cultivating universal human dignity), or subordinating the common good to some particular good (thereby denying human dignity). Indeed, as our analysis of *LOHAD*'s identification of both the first, second, third, and fourth forms of friendship shows, Springsteen holds unequivocally that people should embrace the good of community according to the moral imperative since this would benefit themselves as well as their community. Above all else, all people should be embraced as ends instead of as means.

More important, though, our analysis shows that Springsteen views the train and its destination from a pronounced eschatological perspective that sets therein the moral imperative, identified with pursuing the common good. As noted above, *Lohad* does not ignore the importance of the moral imperative, and therefore improving contemporary community, but considers it from the perspective of God's goal for humanity. Springsteen's determining view implies that God's purpose, the perspective from which *Lohad* is written, entails that each person in the here-and-now, to some extent, embraces the moral imperative, and will *ultimately* embrace the moral imperative in an afterlife. That

process, to Springsteen's mind, *begins* here insofar as some explicitly embrace the moral law while others do so implicitly – including negatively (that is, the “lost souls” who subordinate the common to some particular good)<sup>32</sup> but *finishes* in an afterlife. The train he writes about, which is capable of holding the whole of humanity, is moving towards its destination, *LOHAD*. It is true, then, that Springsteen places more emphasis on divine purpose, on what he thinks God ultimately brings about, than on the moral imperative. However, Springsteen's emphasis on humanity's intrinsic pursuit of community (and, by that fact, of *LOHAD*) is necessarily allied with some affinity for the moral imperative. If we are social beings, we are also moral beings – even if, somewhere along the way, we require help to see and/or embrace that.

Hence, it is probably because some do not recognize *Lohad's* over-arching eschatological perspective that the issue of moral relativism arises. Springsteen is less concerned with considering the formal mechanics structuring the interplay between God and humankind, than with God's reason for that relationship in the first place. In the overall scheme of things, human conformity to the moral imperative, and therefore improving the welfare of contemporary community, has paramount importance. But these are secondary, since they are *included* within Springsteen's notion of God's ultimate purpose. Looked at from a theoretical perspective, therefore, Springsteen's vision holds, since it is composed of more significant and less significant parts.

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<sup>32</sup> As suggested before, Springsteen's teaching implies that an afterlife entails human development. For if, on his view, each eventually embraces *LOHAD*, then an afterlife governed directly by God must entail bringing people to the full relationship with *LOHAD* that He deems appropriate.

What about the strictly practical aspect of Springsteen's vision? For tension remains since, by Springsteen's principles, it is obviously humankind, rather than God, who needs to embrace the moral imperative. Since we, moreover, are in *process* towards *LOHAD*, it is better for us in the here-and-now to augment rather than negate authentic community. Thus, human cooperation with God in the here-and-now requires significant emphasis.

Springsteen seems to think that this requirement can be upheld. How so? Not by theory but by practice. As mentioned before, *Lohad* presents accounts of friendship. But this is not for strictly theoretical purposes; Springsteen's examples obviously intend to encourage his audience to participate *positively* in God's plan. However, if that is not enough, one can look elsewhere in Springsteen's *corpus* to find emphasis on good practice. For example, in *The Rising's* "Into the Fire" Springsteen calls his audience to embrace, through God, faith, hope, and love. By this manner, Springsteen asks God to give people what they need so they can participate *positively* in God's plan and consequently build community in the here-and-now. In agreement with *Lohad's* doctrine, this musical prayer aims to bring together the divine, as principal cause, and the human, as God's dependent. Hence, Springsteen confesses his dependence on God by asking God's help to do God's will.

All told, *Lohad's* inclusiveness implies profound theoretical and practical validation. Springsteen exhorts his audience to work for the improvement of their native community so it can align itself

with enjoyment of God's blissful community in the afterlife. As he sees it, what is genuinely good for one is genuinely good for all.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This essay has benefitted from *BOSS's* anonymous reviewers and editorial staff. I am grateful for their helpful comments and editorial work. Perhaps a subsequent essay of mine will consider the relationship between *Lohad's* inclusivism and certain relevant contemporary, religious and/or non-religious, forms of inclusivism. This might help to explain both some of the underlying causes and the profound significance of Springsteen's vision.

## Reviews

*Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*, edited by Jonathan D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019. 270 pages).

*Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*, a collection of essays divided into seven thematic sections and released to commemorate Springsteen's seventieth birthday, brings together personal reflections on Springsteen fandom with analytical and artistic pieces. The collection reflects the scope of Springsteen's impact, which extends across the cultural, political, personal, literary, and musical realms as well as over time and space. *Long Walk Home* also features photographs by Frank Stefanko, Rocco S. Coviello, and June Skinner Sawyers.

The contributors to this edited volume come from a variety of professions, including novelist, poet, professor, critic, biographer, musician, photographer, and politician. They score somewhat lower on cultural than professional diversity. As editors Jonathan D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers note, "unforeseen changes" in their roster of authors led to a higher ratio of "middle-aged American straight white men" to writers from other countries and from underrepresented groups (5). While the demographics of the contributors resemble the audience at many North American Springsteen concerts, this circumstance is unfortunate because the perspectives from those voices less frequently heard are some of the most compelling parts of the book and more of them would only make it stronger. Nonetheless, the writers who appear in these pages are eloquent, their stories compelling, and the book as a whole is a refreshing mix of styles and genres. One might finish an analytic essay and turn the page to find a poem. Each contribution is short so the collection lends itself to sampling a few pages here and there, and yet the chorus of voices is so pleasing that one easily could devour it from cover to cover.

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The book aims to examine Springsteen's legacy, in particular "at the personal level" as it has impacted people from all parts of the world over fifty years and counting (2). For this reason, contributors (all of whom are Springsteen fans) were encouraged to get personal. The prompt that elicited each text in this diverse collection was simply, "Why Springsteen?" (4). Its title, *Long Walk Home*, references a song of the same name on Springsteen's 2007 album *Magic*. In the context of the book, "long walk home" reflects both the journey on which Springsteen's music takes his avid listeners and the ways in which Springsteen has inspired, comforted and healed his fans on their own journeys.

Part I, titled "Springsteen Stories," contains four personal reflections by self-described fans on their connections to Springsteen and his music. The pieces range in length from a page and a half to eight pages and encompass both personal connections (e.g. Frank Stefanko, who photographed Springsteen for the cover of *The River* album, among other things) and connections solely through Springsteen's work (e.g. Deepa Iyer, who immigrated to the U.S. from India and found in Springsteen's music a way of understanding her complex feelings about her new country). These essays feel like connecting with fellow fans in the parking lot before an E Street Band show. Everyone has a Springsteen story – often about a first concert, a life-changing mixtape made by a friend, or, best of all, meeting Bruce himself – and sharing those stories creates bonds. Starting the collection with these (literal and figurative) Bruce encounters welcomes us into the company of friends and fellow travelers as we embark on an exploration of Springsteen's significance.

Part II, "Springsteen, Politics, and American Society" turns to professors for an examination of Springsteen as an icon of American culture. The pieces in this section explore and analyze Springsteen's evolving relationship with politics, from the understated – the way he addresses the social conditions that shape lives in songs on *The River* and

*Nebraska* –to the explicit—songs like "American Skin (41 Shots)" and appearances at Barack Obama's campaign events. Surprisingly (and wonderfully), this rather academic section includes a poem. Paul Muldoon's "At the River" evokes the settings of Springsteen songs and combines the language of politics with the terminology of auto parts.

Part III, "Springsteen Live," is a brief interlude in which we return to personal reflections. As one might expect, the section devoted to Bruce's live performances takes readers on a lively tour of some legendary shows. Our guides are famed music journalist Greil Marcus, singer-songwriter Wesley Stace (AKA John Wesley Harding), and essayist David Ulin. In addition to the shows, these pieces encompass the related activities of camping out for tickets and bootleg collecting. As in Part I, the nostalgia is strong and the writing vivid.

In Part IV, "Springsteen the Artist," *Springsteen on Broadway* is the thread that runs through a diverse group of selections. Appropriately, a section that includes an interview and a listicle as well as more traditional essays, Part IV illustrates the range Bruce achieves in his storytelling. In the first piece, "Brilliant Disguise: The Completely True Fictional Adventures of Bruce Springsteen" Peter Ames Carlin deftly weaves together the fantastical yarns Springsteen would spin on stage (e.g. God handing down an eleventh commandment to Bruce and Clarence in the woods of New Jersey), Carlin's own work of short fiction about Springsteen engaging in various unexpected heroics, and Bruce's introspective musings from the Broadway stage about The Boss, his persona on other stages. The next three selections consider influence—the influence Springsteen has on individual songwriters, like Martyn Joseph ("The Welsh Springsteen"), the influence Springsteen has on the public discourse ("This Train: Bruce Springsteen as Public Artist"), and the influence author Flannery O'Connor had on Springsteen ("Born to Write: Bruce Springsteen, Flannery O'Connor, and the Songstory"). In the last of these pieces, Irwin H. Streight explores how Springsteen structures a narrative and crafts characters much as a short

story author might. Part IV concludes with "Ten Great Springsteen Moments (and Five Iconic Concerts)." Befitting a section that identifies Springsteen as an artist, Kenneth Womack's list format recalls a museum exhibition catalog.

Part V, "Springsteen, Sex, Race, and Gender," begins with Natalie Adler's exploration of Springsteen's "performance of masculinity" as a facet of his showmanship that in fact "allows him to reveal the smoke and mirrors behind the construct of masculinity" ("Our Butch Mother, Bruce Springsteen," 157). A Sappho line that perfectly complements "I'm on Fire" is a nice illustration of her alternate reading of the lyrics (158). Gina Barreca ("Springsteen's Women: Tougher Than the Rest") brings together the women in Springsteen's songs and the women in his life to explore his impact on women who are fans. Part V then turns to race with "Shackled and Drawn" and "American Skin: Springsteen and Blackness." These pieces explore Springsteen's relationship to soul music, girl groups, and rhythm and blues and the intersection of these genres with Springsteen's bands, many of which cross the line between "white bands" and "black bands" (181), both in membership and musical style.

Two final, short sections (Part VI: "Springsteen and Aging" and Part VII "Springsteen Beyond Borders") examine Springsteen over time and space, allowing readers a bird's eye view of his career as the book concludes. Jim Cullen offers a retrospective look at the evolution of the rocker persona from one inextricably tied to the literal rebellions of youth to one more concerned with generational differences linked to social reform (rebels without/with a cause) and Springsteen's eventual transcendence of the dichotomy to embrace a world-view more tinged with faith. Daniel Wolff, on the other hand, gives us a snapshot, focusing on just two albums in "Work and Play: Midlife Music." He juxtaposes Patti Scialfa's *Play It as It Lays* with Springsteen's *Working on a Dream* to illustrate the two artists' approaches to a long relationship. With "Springsteen Beyond Borders," we return one last time to personal reflections, specifically those that convey

the expansiveness of Springsteen's worldwide impact on his fans. From a river in Dublin that evokes "The River" to "Land of Hope and Dreams" in Bulgaria, to the Springsteen-inspired political career of an Australian Member of Parliament, this final section brings the collection full circle and reminds readers that Springsteen's art has far-reaching effects and has changed the world in countless ways.

As the editors observe, Springsteen's "music, career, and personal life" have been the subject of extensive coverage and analysis, especially in recent years (6). *Long Walk Home* endeavors to examine the impact the art and the artist have had on individual people around the world. The book fulfills this mission admirably. Individual contributions are of uniformly high quality. The collection as a whole is an engaging read that will interest scholars and fans alike.

Prudence Jones  
Montclair State University

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