
BOSS

The Biannual
Online-Journal of
Springsteen Studies

Volume 6 • 2024



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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.

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

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

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Introduction

Welcome to the sixth issue of BOSS: The Biannual Online Journal of Springsteen Studies, an open-access journal devoted to the study of the music, writing, and performance of Bruce Springsteen. Since our last issue in 2022, Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band made their triumphant return to the stage with a blistering world tour in 2023. This tour was defined not only by the euphoria of experiencing rock and roll in the flesh again but also by the thematic concerns that have preoccupied Springsteen in recent years: mortality and reflecting on the past.

These themes were perfectly articulated in the one-two punch of "Last Man Standing" and "Backstreets." In these performances, the invigorating image of teenage punks "running on the backstreets" turns into bittersweet reveries and faded pictures in an old scrapbook. Springsteen brought this wistfulness to his September 15, 2024, performance at the Sea.Hear.Now Festival in Asbury Park, New Jersey, where his life and career seemed to come full circle, performing on the very shores of where he first plied his trade. Reflecting on his journey, Springsteen remarked, "I never thought I'd live to see this sight in my lifetime. The band, we were here on that little street corner when nobody was here, and I didn't know when I would see folks in this good town again."

Aside from all this looking in the rear-view mirror, there's so much on the horizon. One of the most exciting developments is the opening of the Bruce Springsteen Archives and Center for American Music in 2026. Our latest issue features curator Melissa Ziobro, who takes BOSS readers exclusively inside the treasures housed in the archives—soon to make their public debut in the building. This 30,000-square-foot museum space promises to connect students, scholars, and fans from around the world not only to Springsteen's legacy but also to American music as a whole. It will

act as a living, interactive testament to the far-reaching historical and interdisciplinary impact of Springsteen's incredible work.

This commitment to education that the BSACAM will endeavor relates to the topic of our first article by Daniel Loughran, which examines the intersection of Paulo Freire's theory of "radical pedagogy" and Springsteen's approach to engaging his audience. As the chasm between political parties continues to widen in contemporary America, Loughran's scholarship feels more important than ever. He argues that both Freire and Springsteen use models of dialogic praxis—learning through open, two-way conversations that lead to reflection and action—to create positive change and help American citizens reclaim a shared sense of values, enabling them to see each other not as enemies but as neighbors.

The relationship between Bruce Springsteen and literature is rich and continues to be a point of focus for scholars, including Timothy Penner, whose piece provides a new way of examining Ernest Hemingway as an influence on Bruce Springsteen's songwriting. He explores how the economical, raw musical poetics of *Nebraska* align with Hemingway's Iceberg Principle, a singular method of storytelling where details and characters' interiority are kept under the surface.

Considering the recently released Warren Zanes' *Deliver Me from Nowhere* and its upcoming film adaptation, *Nebraska* seems to be generating significant discourse amongst Springsteen scholars, a conversation that will likely continue. Therefore, it feels fitting that Nick Sansone offers a compelling analysis of the sparsely studied film *The Indian Runner*, directed by Sean Penn. Through a detailed examination of the film's stylistic, narrative, and thematic elements, the article examines how *The Indian Runner* both honors and transcends its source material. This piece highlights how the hybridity between music and cinema in Springsteen Studies offers a wealth of scholarly insights.

Continuing in this vein, Marian Jago discusses how Springsteen uses other forms of media, particularly cinema, to carefully sculpt his legacy. She argues that through his various “memoir projects”—such as his autobiography, *Springsteen on Broadway*, *Western Stars*, and more—he is crafting a mythology that extends beyond his identity as a rock and roller.

We also offer several reviews, including *Mary Climbs In: The Journeys of Bruce Springsteen's Women Fans*, an important work that highlights the female reception of Springsteen's music; *Renegades: Born in the USA*, Bruce Springsteen and Barack Obama's podcast, which explores race relations, family life, and coming-of-age in the United States through their distinct yet surprisingly similar personal lenses; and the new podcast *Because the Boss Belongs to Us*, which debates the validity of Springsteen as a queer icon, bringing fresh perspectives from younger generations and the LGBTQ+ community to the Springsteen conversation.

We hope these peer-reviewed articles from multiple academic disciplines, along with our reviews and inside look at the Springsteen archives, will appeal to both scholars and fans. Just as Bruce Springsteen continues to interrogate his own legacy, so too do we, the scholars and readers of BOSS. We appreciate the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of his work and are thrilled to see Springsteen Studies continue to thrive.

Caroline Madden

Contributors

Daniel Loughran earned his doctorate from Rutgers University, with a concentration in Education, Culture, and Society. His thesis, *Equity Work Takes Courage: A Case Study of an Elementary Principal's Praxis*, was grounded in textual concepts and political themes he had explored for nearly two decades in American high school English classrooms as well as in several presentations made at Bruce Springsteen and Syracuse University academic conferences. A lifelong educator, Dan has served as the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction in the Franklin Township Public Schools in Somerset, New Jersey, since 2016.

Timothy Penner is an adjunct professor in the department of English, Theatre, Film & Media at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada where teaches courses on English literature, as well as film history and theory. His research focusses on celebrity persona construction and he has published articles on figures like Ernest Hemingway, Alfred Hitchcock, and Robert Redford

Marian Jago holds a BA from Dalhousie University and both an MA in Musicology and a PhD in Ethnomusicology from York University, where she studied under Prof. Rob Bowman. Her research focuses on Lee Konitz's pedagogical practices, Canadian jazz co-operatives, and the development of the Canadian jazz scene. She has published on these topics in journals like *The Journal of Jazz Studies* and *Jazz Research Journal*, and her book, *Live at the Cellar* (2018), was published by UBC Press. Marian also lectures on Popular Music, with an emphasis on race, gender, and music performance,

and has a special interest in American Blues, Soul, and hip-hop as a form of resistance. As an editor of *Jazz Perspectives*, a board member of the Scottish Jazz Archive, and a member of the steering committee for Documenting Jazz, she actively contributes to the jazz and popular music communities.

Nick Sansone is a Ph.D. student in Film Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He previously received his M.A. in Humanities from the University of Chicago and his B.A. in Film & Television from DePaul University. His main research interests include Bruce Springsteen and film, autism in film and television, cognitive film theory, adolescence in film and television, and the ways in which violence intersects with both adolescence and gender in American film and television. He is also a co-editor for the *Velvet Light Trap* academic journal and has taught courses on Media Production, Screenwriting, and the study of Film Comedy.

Melissa Ziobro began her career as a historian, archivist, and curator for the US Army in 2004 prior to returning to her alma mater, Monmouth University, to teach full time. She teaches over a dozen different courses, including Intro to Public History; Museums and Archives Management Basics; and Historic Site Preservation, Interpretation, and Management. In August of 2023, she became curator of the University's Bruce Springsteen Archives & Center for American Music, after having worked with the Center for many years in her faculty role.

Carrie Pitzulo is a historian of American women, gender, and sexuality. She's the author of *Bachelors and Bunnies: The Sexual Politics of Playboy* (Univ Chicago Press, 2011), and a forthcoming book on grief, spirituality, and women's work in death care. She lives in northern Colorado, but wishes she lived closer to Asbury Park.

James Tackach is a Professor Emeritus of English Literary Studies at Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI. Like Bruce Springsteen, he is a New Jersey boy.

Lucas Crawford is Canada Research Chair in Transgender Creativity and Mental Health at the University of Alberta's Augustana Faculty, where he also runs "Rewriting Ourselves," a collaborative pilot project of poetry workshops offered in psychiatric wards. Lucas is the author of the monograph *Transgender Architectonics* (Routledge 2016), as well as four poetry books, the latest of which, *Muster Points* (U of Calgary Press 2023) was honored by the Alberta Book Publishers Association with the Robert Kroetsch Award for Poetry. Music has been a through-line of Lucas's writing, and, in early 2025, he will be a musician-in-residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts. Lucas is from rural Nova Scotia.

Dialogic Praxis: Radical Pedagogy for a Runaway American Dream

Daniel Loughran
Rutgers University

Abstract

In his 1968 classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazil's heroic social reformer and educational theorist Paulo Freire argues that man's ontological vocation is to create a world that is just for all. Such transformation begins with the individual, who must first create an awakening within himself—*conscientização*—and then, upon careful reflection, take action. This thinking and action, which Freire calls *praxis*, can only occur through *dialogics*, an authentic dialogue between teacher and learners. Bruce Springsteen has conceptualized his career as an ongoing conversation with his audience (*Rolling Stone*, November 1, 2007), and I argue that Springsteen's dialogue with his fans fosters a pedagogy similar to Freire's. Both thinkers provide unique models of dialogic praxis designed for different purposes. Freire offers a direct, boots-on-the-ground, mission-oriented approach he established via "cultural circles" to help Brazilians self-actualize and become *empowered citizens*. Springsteen offers an indirect, visionary approach mediated through songwriting, concert performances, and public statements to help Americans transform themselves into *empathetic citizens*. I argue here that both models of dialogic praxis, visionary and missionary, are necessary to help citizens in the American democratic republic reclaim a shared sense of values that enable them to see each other not as enemies but as neighbors. Freire called dialogic praxis a "radical pedagogy" that I contend is needed to address the root causes of American political violence.

Introduction

Fifty years ago, when Bruce Springsteen famously wrote about a "runaway American dream," he spoke not only to the obvious economic

inequality he observed in American society, but also to the helpless feeling Americans experienced after a decade and a half of government actions that invited mass protest and disillusionment. America was still relatively “young” – merely on the cusp of its Bicentennial in 1975 when Springsteen’s *Born to Run* album garnered national attention – and it had yet to live up to its promise, with full enfranchisement of its citizens seen only since the 1965 Voting Rights Act and extreme economic disparities worsening.¹ Political assassinations, racial unrest and rioting, protests against the Vietnam War, Watergate, the fall of Saigon, and the specter of nuclear annihilation threatened the very fabric of a nation formerly recognized as a stable steward of democracy. To a young Springsteen the American Dream was off the rails like a runaway train.

That the American “experiment” could come unraveled has occupied the consciousness of Americans since the nation’s founding.² In 1787, upon the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention, socialite Elizabeth Willing Powel asked Benjamin Franklin, “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” Franklin said, “A republic, if you can keep it.”³ Powel’s question is keenly relevant in the wake of the political vitriol and violence Americans have been witnessing in recent months and

¹ Joshua Zeitz, J. “How Bruce Springsteen’s ‘Born to Run’ Captured the Decline of the American Dream.” *The Atlantic*, August 26, 2015.

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

² Nelson, J. *Will the Great American Experiment succeed?* National Center for Constitutional Studies, September 17, 1987. <https://nccs.net/blogs/our-ageless-constitution/will-the-great-american-experiment-succeed>

³ Julie Miller. “‘A Republic if You Can Keep It’: Elizabeth Willing Powel, Benjamin Franklin, and the James McHenry Journal | Unfolding History.” *The Library of Congress*. January 6, 2022. <https://blogs.loc.gov/manuscripts/2022/01/a-republic-if-you-can-keep-it-elizabeth-willing-powel-benjamin-franklin-and-the-james-mchenry-journal/>.

years, and the 2024 election of Donald Trump has additionally invited widespread fear among half of the electorate that sees Trump as an authoritarian threat to the constitutional order.⁴ A few months earlier, Americans were horrified when a young man shot and attempted to kill Trump, prompting some in the Republican party to point to extreme political rhetoric characterizing modern American politics as evidence of how irresponsible the other side was, that Democrats' words *caused the shooting*.⁵ Thankfully this reaction was less common than pronouncements made by leaders on both sides of the political spectrum to "turn down the temperature" of the heated rhetoric.⁶

Although these latter gestures towards calm were welcome and the nation avoided devolving into all-out violence or civil war, experts do not see the attempt on Trump's life or even the sickening examples of recent political violence – such as the January 6th insurrection, the attack on Speaker Pelosi's husband, or the shootings of Representatives Steven Scalise or Gabby Giffords – as the culmination of such violence. To the contrary, "It is reasonable to worry that the attempt on Trump's life represents not an ending to this cycle of violence, but an escalation," said Adrienne LaFrance, Executive Editor of *The Atlantic*.⁷

⁴ Lerer, L. "Trump asked for power. Voters said yes." *The New York Times*, November 6, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/06/us/politics/trump-election-analysis.html>

⁵ Beauchamp, Zack. "This Is How You Get Escalation." *Vox*, July 15, 2024.

<https://www.vox.com/politics/360557/trump-assassination-attempt-republican-response-political-violence-irresponsible>.

⁶ "After the Assassination Attempt Against Trump, Anger and Anxiety Loom Over the Republican Convention." PBS News. July 15, 2024.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/after-the-assassination-attempt-against-trump-anger-and-anxiety-loom-over-the-republican-convention>.

⁷ LaFrance, Adrienne. "How Cycles of Political Violence End." *The Atlantic*, July 24, 2024.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/09/trump-butler-assassination-attempt-pa-rally/679153/>.

Historians have noted that the sort of endemic political violence akin to the kind seen today in America typically has only ended when a significantly horrifying act, such as the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, repulses further politically-motivated violence by providing a strange form of “catharsis.”⁸ LaFrance points out it is possible to avoid such a cataclysm only if Americans commit to choosing leaders at every level of society who reject violence, and if these leaders come to recognize that authentic civic engagement is urgently needed – not the pseudo-engagement familiar to so many Americans who believe that merely sounding off in various online forums represents political action. LaFrance further contends that avoiding violent cataclysm “require(s) articulating American values worth preserving and building consensus toward reaching them.”⁹ Contemplating such an undertaking – articulation of a nation’s values and building consensus towards reaching them – invites reflection on reformers who have achieved such transformation, those who have inspired citizens in democratic nations to learn more about their personal agency and political values that sustain their power.

Brazilian social justice reformer and education theorist Paulo Freire is such a person. Freire’s pedagogy educated his nation and, in doing so, helped sustain its democratic reforms. Freire published his foundational text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in 1968 after a brutal dictatorial regime exiled him from his home country.¹⁰ Initially banned in Brazil, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* became popular when the government revitalized democracy efforts in Brazil during the 1980s and has since become a classic text not

⁸ LaFrance, “Political Violence.”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Paulo Freire | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.” n.d.
<https://iep.utm.edu/freire/#H6>.

only in the field of American education, but also for scholars in the fields of political science, psychology, sociology, and art.¹¹ The text has become essential reading to those who seek to understand the essence of personal and societal change and how the personal interacts with the societal. Donaldo Macedo, a contemporary scholar and close colleague of Freire's, warns that the "dire consequences (i.e., denial of climate change, obscene economic inequality, potential nuclear catastrophe) of the far-right power hegemony...may potentially result in the end of humanity as we know it."¹² What is needed, Macedo argues, is "the development of people's critical awareness of how they are in the world and with the world – a posture that Freire insisted upon."¹³ I contend that the sort of awareness and civic engagement that Freire developed and Macedo emphasizes is sorely missing in American culture, and Americans will regard their political opponents as, perhaps, wrongheaded neighbors rather than as bitter enemies only after American leaders create shared and intentional opportunities to develop such awareness and engagement within the nation's citizenry.

If LaFrance is correct, and the only way the U.S. can stave off cataclysmic political violence is through deeper civic engagement, it will require an all-hands-on-deck approach. An impactful level of civic discourse around topics related to American values – such as the proper role of government and a well-understood notion of "protection for the people from the excesses of government"¹⁴ – will require participation at all levels of society, including from public intellectuals and academics who have attempted to bring about the sort of political consciousness-raising

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Donaldo Macedo, Introduction in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 1.

¹³ Macedo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1.

¹⁴ Nelson, J. *Will the Great American Experiment succeed?*

Freire espoused. It will also need to come from less conventional sources, as some of the most compelling and authentic attempts to achieve democratic consciousness-raising have taken place in popular music, concert halls, arenas, and even amid an artist's spoken interactions with his audience.

Such is the case with Bruce Springsteen, who has engaged his audience in a compelling moral, if not political, dialogue for more than 40 years.¹⁵ In *Long Walk Home*, a book that explores the ways in which writers have been "moved, shaped, and challenged" by Springsteen's music,¹⁶ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein assert that "A Springsteen concert is a forum for epiphanies: his objective is to have each person walk out of the show asking, wanting, and expecting more of him or herself—as well as society. He wants you to leave with a self-in-transition."¹⁷ To prove their point, they quote Springsteen, who argues there are "powers that your [must] find within yourself to keep going and change things. To try to make some place for yourself in the world."¹⁸ Springsteen's emphasis that change can only truly happen when it comes from within is analogous to Freire's *conscientização*, and I contend that helping Americans find such power within themselves, to channel it towards a shared sense of American values, is the nation's best hope of avoiding cataclysmic political violence.

In this study, I explore the role of the artist in the life of a society and specifically the ways in which Springsteen has engaged with his fans via a

¹⁵ Roxanne Harde. "'Living in Your American Skin': Bruce Springsteen and the Possibility of Politics." *ResearchGate*, January 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1353/crv>.

¹⁶ Jonathan Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers, *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen* (Rutgers University Press, 2019).

¹⁷ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, "The Role of the Popular Artist in a Democratic Society," in *Long Walk Home*, 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

form of visionary dialogic praxis on a political level unique from that of other popular artists. In Springsteen's dialogic model, he challenges his audience to be reflective to the point of self-transformation, so that they can be their best versions of themselves and become motivated into action. Just as Freire challenged his students with *conscientização*—consciousness-raising to stimulate positive action—Springsteen challenges his fans to take steps in their lives and in their communities to bring about a measure of liberty and equality for all. Whereas Freire engaged his students directly, in a mission-focused, or “missionary” model of *dialogics*, Springsteen has famously and repeatedly asserted that his career has been an ongoing conversation with his audience,¹⁹ often challenging fans with ideas they did not necessarily agree with,²⁰ a practice like that of Freire's praxis. I contend Springsteen's ongoing conversation with his audience is just as vital a practice in promoting democratic citizenship as was Freire's radical pedagogy in changing the aspirations and outcomes of the people of Brazil—actions free societies embrace to guarantee their own liberty.

Context and Composition of Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Freire's family experienced hunger and extreme poverty so painfully amid Brazil's economic crisis in the 1930s he called it a violence of hunger.²¹ In this context Freire “angrily and compassionately wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,”²² while exiled from the country he loved. The dictatorial regime that seized power in Brazil in 1964 demanded learning structures in which students were asked to accept, comply with, and memorize “facts” without

¹⁹ Joe Levy. “Bruce Springsteen: The Rolling Stone Interview.” *Rolling Stone*, November 1, 2007. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bruce-springsteen-the-rolling-stone-interview-238478/>.

²⁰ Gary Susman, “Bruce Springsteen Defends the Dixie Chicks.” *EW.Com*, April 23, 2003. <https://ew.com/article/2003/04/23/bruce-springsteen-defends-dixie-chicks/>.

²¹ Macedo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 13.

²² *Ibid.*

questioning authors. Literacy was required for Brazilians to vote, so Freire's education efforts were a means to democratic participation and liberation from oppressive poverty. Grounded in authentic learning contexts, Freire's work was alternately condemned as subversive by the military dictatorship that ruled from 1964-1985 and hailed as an important pro-democracy tool in the late 1980s when Freire returned to the country as Brazil reformed its democracy. Freire's approach posits that learning and social change cannot occur when students and citizens receive information passively, via what Freire called the *banking concept* of teaching and learning in which students receive teachers' *deposits* of knowledge.

In contrast, Freire's *problem-posing education*, a *dialogic pedagogy*, helps students become critically aware of oppressive social conditions that work upon them via *conscientização*, a process in which a student's conscience is awakened via open dialogue. To Freire, a teacher's dialogue with students must be action-oriented – a *praxis* – that insists that students and teachers *act upon their environments* to produce new understandings of their personal and social reality. In this way, reality itself can be transformed by pursuing personal and collective action and *reflection* upon one's thinking and action.²³

Drawing on central features of Freire's *problem-posing education* – including *radicalism* in contrast to *sectarianism*; *praxis*; *dialogics*; *conscientização*; and authentic curricula (which Freire calls *concrete curricula*) – I show below how these features have analogs in Springsteen's "pedagogy." In contrast to Freire's pedagogy, however, which relied on the clear "mission" of a highly organized effort via *cultural circles*²⁴ designed to

²³ "Paulo Freire | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy."

²⁴ Ibid.

attack illiteracy and then empower oppressed Brazilians, I contend that Springsteen achieves dialogic praxis with his audience in a less direct, “visionary” pedagogy he brings to life via songwriting, performance, and speaking. I show how these sites invite fans to be reflective and subsequently empathetic, spurring them to take civically engaged actions, such as voting or contributing to social causes. The overarching claim I make is that dialogic praxis is the radical pedagogy Americans need now, including the sort of civic engagement that materializes in both missionary and visionary formats. I argue here that dialogic praxis is radical pedagogy that can establish shared American values currently eluding partisans on both ends of the nation’s political spectrum.

Radical vs. Sectarian Transformation

The centrality of the notion of “radical” in opposition to “sectarian” is perhaps the most important feature of Freire’s pedagogical philosophy for social change. “Radicalism” has been associated in modern American parlance with that of extremism, but in Freire’s work, it is the “sectarian” who sees his point of view as the sole arbiter of reality, a fixed understanding of the world that cannot be altered by counterfactual information, consensus, or compromise. Freire says that a sectarian on the left or on the right “feels threatened if (his) truth is questioned,” and, citing a contemporary journalist of his, “suffer(s) from an absence of doubt.”²⁵ Given such absolute beliefs, regardless of one’s position on the political right or left, a sectarian, not a radical, is one who would work potentially violently to uphold his worldview.²⁶ Conversely, Freire maintains that a “radical...commit(s) himself or herself, within history, to fight” at the side

²⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 39.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 38.

of the oppressed, nonviolently.²⁷ The radical is *not* the extremist, but one who confronts, listens to, and tries to truly understand the world. Freire's insistence in the moral value of a radical's peaceful commitment to confrontation, consciousness-raising, and subsequent transformation is at the core of his work, and it undergirded his massive literacy effort in Brazil.

In similar ways, it is Springsteen's commitment to speaking authentically that has enabled him to connect deeply with his audience, which views his songwriting, performances, and other exhortations as compelling, moral, and real—in doing so, his “pedagogy” invites transformation. Springsteen's life has been an example of the ways in which art makes it possible for personal transformation. In one of his earliest interviews after achieving national attention following his release of *Born to Run*, Springsteen admitted, “Rock and roll has been everything to me. The first day I can remember looking in a mirror and being able to stand what I was seeing was the day I had a guitar in my hand.”²⁸

About ten years later, Springsteen had ascended to popular music's highest echelons, when he famously sang “We learned more from a three-minute record, baby, than we ever learned in school.”²⁹ He would go on, although perhaps not realizing it, to educate countless fans with his own three-minute records, by posing problems—i.e., giving his fans much to think about – via his own form of visionary dialogic praxis. Springsteen has often contemplated how art can powerfully impact society, including once discussing the impact John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* had on him or the ways in which his own mother's spirit was uplifted each morning while listening to a small, portable AM radio in the kitchen. In many interviews

²⁷ Ibid, 39.

²⁸ Dave Marsh. *Born to Run: The Bruce Springsteen Story* (Dell, 1981), 16.

²⁹ Bruce Springsteen, “No Surrender,” *Born in the USA*, Columbia, 1984, Track 7.

and perhaps most famously at the 2012 South-by-Southwest conference in Austin, Springsteen has extolled the power of music to move people:

In the beginning, every musician has their genesis moment...It's whatever initially inspires you to action. Mine was 1956, Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show. It was the evening I realized a white man could make magic, that you did not have to be constrained by your upbringing, by the way you looked, or by the social context that oppressed you. You could call upon your own powers of imagination, and you could create a transformative self. A certain type of transformative self, that perhaps at any other moment in American History, might have seemed difficult, if not impossible.³⁰

There is perhaps no clearer thread between Springsteen and Freire than what is illustrated in the recollection above. As a boy transfixed watching Elvis perform on the Ed Sullivan Show, Springsteen experienced his own sort of *conscientização*, followed, essentially, by his own praxis. Springsteen emphasizes the urgency of identifying what inspires us into action and that we can transform ourselves if we choose to do so.

Praxis, Dialogue, and Problem-Posing Education

How do radicals—teachers who ally themselves with students in service of *conscientização*—transform their world so that oppression can be overcome? Freire writes that only when they stop “regarding the oppressed as an abstract category” and regard them as “persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor.”³¹ Only then can a person begin to transform social reality. A newly awakened oppressor's awareness must be paired with radical reflection

³⁰ Rolling Stone. Exclusive: The Complete Text of Bruce Springsteen's SXSW Keynote Address." *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/exclusive-the-complete-text-of-bruce-springsteens-sxsw-keynote-address-86379/>.

³¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50

and action—praxis—the means by which oppressors can join in solidarity with the oppressed to help transform reality. Freire lays out a dialectic strategy that helps oppressed people push back against oppressors and oppression, in the form of praxis, which is deep reflexive thinking about forces of subjectivity and objectivity that must be paired with action to effectuate change in these conditions. Freire conceptualizes radical pedagogy as being necessarily grounded in the back and forth of respectful and open-minded dialogue. He writes, “...dialogue cannot occur...between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them.”³² Freire leans on the writing of Che Guevara when he asserts that, perhaps even more than respect, authentic dialogue “cannot exist...in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people...Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself.”³³ Without dialogue, students, and all citizens by extension, are merely controlled as passive objects of the oppressors’ intentions.

Springsteen’s pedagogy is also a back-and-forth dialogue based on love, and it is through this dialogue that he achieves a response that could be understood as dialogic praxis. Springsteen’s depictions of authentic people who voice authentic concerns in authentic situations is how he enacts an indirect, but visionary dialogue with his audience. His connection to and understanding of people has been so authentic and compelling that some have described it as being not so much that of a songwriter or rock star, but that of a “cultural worker” or “social artist.”³⁴ As a social artist, Springsteen upholds a set of moral values – respect for all people, taking care of the less fortunate, showing empathy for those who are dealing with

³² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88.

³³ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁴ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, in *Long Walk Home*, 55.

adversity – that serve as a unifying force for collective good. Examples of this include Springsteen’s portrayal of migrants and their communities struggling for survival at America’s southern border; or of an unemployed, under-skilled worker who tries to convince himself and his family that “we’ll be alright,” presumably in the midst of the Prime Mortgage Crisis of 2008;³⁵ and, famously, his rendering of nonfictional or historical characters, including an internal monologue that America’s first television-famous killing-spree murderer, Charles Starkweather, might have experienced in the late 1950s.³⁶ All of these lovingly, visionary creations provoke a response, a kind of dialogue, that forces listeners to be reflective about social issues.

While some of Freire’s text is dedicated to specific curricular considerations and teaching methodology, the overarching foundational strategy for education for social change is his idea of “problem-posing education,” which stands in opposition to the “banking concept” of education, in which students receive teachers’ “deposits” of disconnected, uninspiring recitation of facts that have little relevance to their lived experiences. To achieve critical consciousness, oppressed students must be given the opportunity to address authentic problems in their lives and then use a dialogic process to collaborate in solving these problems. Freire asserts, “The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation.”³⁷ Concrete problems in daily life were thus posed to the peasants in Brazil at the time, as they learned literacy via cultural circles.

Springsteen too lays authentic problems at the feet of his listeners, grappling with the same confounding issues they experience on a daily

³⁵ Bruce Springsteen, “Jack of All Trades,” *Wrecking Ball*, Columbia, 2012, Track 4.

³⁶ Bruce Springsteen, “Nebraska,” *Nebraska*, Columbia, 1982, Track 1.

³⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 95-96

basis, including the very real outcomes of socially constructed and embedded racism. Film and culture critic A.O. Scott documented a compelling example of Springsteen's problem-posing pedagogy, in which audience members protested Springsteen's performance of "American Skin," Springsteen's protest song against the tragic killing of Amadou Diallo.³⁸ Here, Scott describes an unusual phenomenon he observed as a "symbol of civic promise."³⁹ Scott depicts in vivid detail the way in which some audience members had booed the song in previous concerts, but here, in front of Scott, were two men, "closer to forty than thirty"⁴⁰ years old, enjoying the concert like everyone else in the packed arena. As soon as the song began, the two men "turned their backs to the stage, clasped their hands in front of them and bowed their heads"; they did not cause a ruckus, but "stood silently, registering their protest at the Boss's protest."⁴¹

As soon as the song concluded, the two men turned around again and, without missing a beat, joined in with the rest of the crowd singing along with their hero. Scott goes on to write that "Of course (Springsteen) didn't have the power to fix racism, to resolve the contradictions of class and ideology, to move the world toward justice,"⁴² and although he would disagree with their reasons for protesting the song, "(Springsteen) understood them. And their understanding of *him* was what authorized their protest."⁴³ Springsteen's ability to use problem-posing pedagogy with his audience, to engage with them around a difficult topic (racism), and to

³⁸ Bruce Springsteen, "American Skin (41 Shots)," Live in New York City, Columbia, 2001, Disc 2, Track 4.

³⁹ A.O. Scott, "The Ties That Bind," in *Long Walk Home*, 76.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

use dialogic praxis while also creating a “civic space in which two antithetical sentiments could coexist and communicate with each other”⁴⁴ underscores the uniqueness of his political and pedagogical gifts. Scott, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, was describing dialogic praxis, in which a level of understanding could be achieved through dialogue, even if a problem could not be solved at that particular moment. It will require more artists, teachers, and political leaders to engage American audiences thusly, via problem-posing education, if we are to restore a sense of shared American values separate and apart from the vitriolic partisanship we see today.

The Role of the Artist in Society

In his own book about radical pedagogy, civil rights activist Myles Horton engages in a Socratic discussion with Freire on a range of topics, including the ways in which art itself is a sort of liberating pedagogy: “The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can...shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves”⁴⁵ In his most specific pronouncement about an artist’s role in society, Springsteen penned an op-ed for the New York Times in August 2004, during the summer political season that would eventually see disinformation cripple John Kerry’s presidential candidacy.

In *Chords of Change*, Springsteen chose for the first time to overtly leverage his credibility as an artist to attempt to make a difference in electoral politics. In the piece he writes, “A nation's artists and musicians have a particular place in its social and political life.... Through my work,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Myles Horton, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Temple University Press, 1990), 181.

I've always tried to ask hard questions. Why is it that the wealthiest nation in the world finds it so hard to keep its promise and faith with its weakest citizens?"⁴⁶ Rooted in love and grounded by questions that stir discussion and engagement, Springsteen's op-ed was a serious piece that prompted a serious response from its readers – a sort of Freirean problem-posing lesson activity for his readers. The piece's very essence relies upon questions posed that do not have singular answers, but require awareness, reflection, and subsequent actions (voting, civic engagement, etc.) that can lead to collective transformation.

Dialogic Praxis in Springsteen's Songwriting

When asked why, as a very wealthy artist, he feels the need to keep writing songs, Springsteen says, "It's how I find out who you are, and who I am, and then who we are. I'm interested in that. I'm interested in what it means to be an American."⁴⁷ Such sentiment virtually depicts a dialogic praxis defining the term "American" and Springsteen's need to define himself within the larger context of American-ness. Springsteen achieves dialogic praxis in his songwriting by providing specific information and dramatic narratives that provoke emotional responses, invite discussion, and offer a site for contemplation and subsequent action. While Springsteen's dialogue with his audience may not be the direct back-and-forth, Socratic style discussion Freire used with adult participants in cultural circles in his dialogics, it is informed by similar human-to-human interactions that find their way into Springsteen's meticulously detailed,

⁴⁶ Bruce Springsteen, "Opinion | Chords for Change." *The New York Times*, August 5, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/05/opinion/chords-for-change.html>.

⁴⁷ "Springsteen: Silence Is Unpatriotic." *CBS News*, July 28, 2008. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/springsteen-silence-is-unpatriotic/>.

authentic rendering of characters, oftentimes based in imagined scenarios depicting ongoing or recent social/historical events.

Although many examples could be provided here, one especially abundant site for Springsteen's provocative conversation with his audience via songwriting takes place on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* album, a work that raises consciousness about the plight of migrants and itinerant workers struggling to survive, in which a speaker sings that only "the highway is alive."⁴⁸ One song on the album that invites dialogic praxis and which could easily have fit into an updated soundtrack of Ford's filmic version of *The Grapes of Wrath* is "Across the Border." In it the narrator sings to his companion about a future in which they will leave behind the "pain and sadness we found here," a place in which "pain and misery have been stilled" and where they will "drink from God's blessed waters," across the (heavenly) border. It is a wistful song made to feel optimistic compared to the darker, preceding track, "The New Timer," on the same disc. Inspired by Michael Williams and Dale Maharidge's collaboration *Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass*, the speaker in "The New Timer" is an itinerant worker who will pick peaches in Marysville but at night is bunked in a barn: "just like animals—me and a hundred others just like me."

Both songs bring the listener up close to the pain and degradation of dehumanizing, exploitative work that forces listeners to ask this problem-posing question, as the song's speaker plaintively does in "Across the Border": "For what are we, without hope in our hearts?"⁴⁹ At the end of "The New Timer" the narrator has lost all hope and does not look for God's grace, only a rifle and the name of someone to kill in revenge for the death

⁴⁸ Bruce Springsteen, "The Ghost of Tom Joad," *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Columbia, 1995, Track 1.

⁴⁹ Bruce Springsteen, "Across the Border," *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Columbia, 1995, Track 10.

of his former travelling companion. *Who are we to treat people inhumanely? What are we if we have no hope?* – these are the kinds of problem-posing questions Springsteen’s lyrics ask of his audience, and they demand a response, even in the form of the listener’s non-verbalized thoughts.

Dialogic Praxis in Springsteen’s Performances.

Comparing Springsteen’s concert performances to other artists who might want to provide a “simplistic political consciousness,” Cowie and Dinerstein point out that Springsteen has never called for “punk resistance or gratuitous rebellion.”⁵⁰ Instead, they write, he is “working for *your* personal independence of mind and soul...he presents an audience with political possibilities but is not an overt dissident.”⁵¹ In contrast to punk performers who invite participatory engagement around rejection of culturally established systems of belief, Springsteen’s art affirms mainstream American values, such as patriotism, freedom, rule of law, compassionate citizenship, community – but it also, in contrast to country music, resists “uncritical patriotism.”⁵² In holding up American values while resisting the extremes of nihilism or jingoism, Springsteen’s concert performances are a unique brand of political performance.

The radical pedagogy found in Springsteen’s performances is a visionary one, in which he does not wish merely to entertain; instead, he “demands things of his audience.”⁵³ That is, he lays out themes, asks questions, confronts his listeners in ways that invite imagination of other worlds. While this can manifest itself in different ways – including fans’

⁵⁰ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, in *Long Walk Home*, 54.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵³ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, “The Role of the Popular Artist,” 51.

participation in call-and-response rituals, choral singing in complete unity, laughter, booing, protest, and crying – his work “lasts in the soul, as (Springsteen’s) fans will tell you.”⁵⁴ None of this is accidental, as Springsteen’s problem-posing pedagogy provides dialogue that, even after the show, invites praxis. While preparing for his world tour celebrating the release of his 2012 *Wrecking Ball* album, *The New Yorker*’s David Remnick observed that “Springsteen rehearses deliberately, working out all the spontaneous-seeming moves and postures: the solemn lowered head and raised fist, the hoisted talismanic Fender.”⁵⁵ He then quotes Springsteen: “It’s theatre, you know...I’m a theatrical performer. I’m whispering in your ear, and you’re dreaming my dreams, and then I’m getting a feeling for you. I’ve been doing that for forty years.”⁵⁶ In this we see the visionary, two-way dialogue between artist and audience.

Springsteen has built his career on similar dialogue in his concerts, whether he provokes discussion from hard truths he feels compelled to share, such as the “public service announcement” he shared with audiences during the aftermath of the Iraq War, regarding civil liberties being rolled back⁵⁷; or the protestations and lamentations following the 2008 Prime Mortgage Crisis; and especially when he feels like sharing his own emotional response to current events that bother him, such as his sorrowful statement to open his show after John Lennon’s murder, or in his angry response to Ronald Reagan’s re-election campaign in 1984, when the President had talked about Springsteen only a few days prior to serve his own interests: “There’s something really dangerous happening to us out

⁵⁴ Ibid., 52

⁵⁵ Remnick, David. 2012. “We Are Alive.” *The New Yorker*, July 23, 2012.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/30/bruce-springsteen-profile-we-are-alive>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Cherry, Kevin. “Taking Springsteen Seriously.” *National Review*, June 16, 2010.

<https://www.nationalreview.com/2003/07/taking-springsteen-seriously-kevin-cherry/>.

there now. We're slowly getting split up into two different Americas. Things are being taken away from the people that need them and given to the people that don't. There's a promise getting broken."⁵⁸ Similarly, he has shared his vulnerability, anger and sadness in response to the 1992 LA Riots⁵⁹ and the September 11th terror attacks, and especially to the disinformation surrounding weapons of mass destruction that were never found, and which was offered as justification for a military invasion of Iraq.

In concert, Springsteen has also spoken angrily to his fans, such as demanding their quiet, as he notably did during his Ghost of Tom Joad tour, aka the "Shut the Fuck Up Tour."⁶⁰ He has cursed out fans for setting off firecrackers during his shows and corrected the audience as needed when their response to his performances manifested itself in unexpected ways. For example, he once gently admonished the audience that applauded him when he spoke about avoiding the draft and, almost twenty years later, when fans were responding overexuberantly to the sentiment he expressed in the lyric "I want an eye for an eye," from "Empty Sky,"⁶¹ Springsteen told them these lyrics were "never written to be a....call for blind revenge or bloodlust...I realize that it could've been a well-meaning few or perhaps some borderline psychotics out there who may have misunderstood."⁶²

⁵⁸ Geoffrey Himes. "The Bruce Springsteen Concert That Sparked a Political Firestorm in Reagan's America," *Salon*. July 22, 2017. <https://www.salon.com/2017/07/22/the-bruce-springsteen-concert-that-sparked-a-political-firestorm-in-reagans-america/>.

⁵⁹ "Story 1992-06-05 Hollywood Center Studios, Los Angeles, CA - Brucebase Wiki." June 5, 1992. <http://brucebase.wikidot.com/rehearsal:1992-06-05-hollywood-center-studios-los-angeles-ca>

⁶⁰ Quietus. 2021. "Reveling in Failure: Bruce Springsteen's Shut the Fuck up Tour." *The Quietus*. March 29, 2021. <https://thequietus.com/opinion-and-essays/anniversary/bruce-springsteen-shut-the-fuck-up-brixton/>.

⁶¹ Bruce Springsteen, "Empty Sky," *The Rising*, Columbia, 2002, Track 6.

⁶² "Story 2003-03-07 Boardwalk Hall, Atlantic City, NJ - Brucebase Wiki." 2003. March 7,

Even as Springsteen told his audience these words, a fan can be heard calling out in the midst of it, "Shut up and play."⁶³ These examples reinforce the way Springsteen poses problems via dialogic praxis. He is not merely entertaining. He is also open to different reactions. Springsteen's dialogue with his audience is sometimes seen in their responses to his words during concerts, such as those noted above, but also in the way some fans register their reactions to Springsteen's words or messaging is by leaving their seats to buy concessions during certain songs.⁶⁴

One of the strongest examples of Springsteen's dialogic praxis seen during concert performances occurred in front of East Germans in 1988, when he pulled the rug out from under the propagandists trying desperately to hold onto power in the former Soviet Bloc country, saying, "I'm not here for any government. I've come to play rock'n'roll for you in the hope that one day all the barriers will be torn down."⁶⁵ Books have been written that studied the impact of this concert, some arguing that it accelerated the destruction of the Iron Curtain and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union. While this is debatable, it has been documented that Springsteen's words and performance were a "...topic of discussion for quite some time afterwards" and "It made people ... more eager for more and more change ... Springsteen aroused a greater interest in the west. It

2003. <http://brucebase.wikidot.com/story:story-2003-03-07-boardwalk-hall-atlantic-city-nj>.

⁶³ Ken Rosen. "Roll of the Dice: Empty Sky | E Street Shuffle." E Street Shuffle. January 4, 2024. <https://estreetshuffle.com/index.php/2022/09/12/roll-of-the-dice-empty-sky/>.

⁶⁴ David Masciotra. "Bruce Springsteen's 'The Ghost of Tom Joad' Then and Now," *Salon*. September 16, 2017. <https://www.salon.com/2017/09/16/bruce-springsteens-the-ghost-of-tom-joad-then-and-now/>.

⁶⁵ Connolly, Kate. "The Night Bruce Springsteen Played East Berlin – and the Wall Cracked." *The Guardian*, December 1, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/jul/05/bruce-springsteen-east-germany-berlin-wall>.

showed people how locked up they really were."⁶⁶ Here, again, Springsteen identifies a problem to solve (freedom) and initiates a dialogic praxis with his audience.

Dialogic Praxis in Springsteen's Public Statements.

While his songwriting and concert performances enable Springsteen to communicate messages that invite visionary dialogic praxis, it is when he makes public statements, including speeches, interviews, or in his (non-song) writing that Springsteen is able to achieve dialogic praxis somewhat more directly. One such example occurred in the late 1990s, when Springsteen participated in African American Read-Ins at the Count Basie Learning Center in Red Bank, New Jersey, during Black History Month. Here, reading from Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, Springsteen told school-aged children that the book talks about how people are ignored. He told the students, in typical problem-posing fashion, "I struggled with the pain of being unrecognized when I was young...I was looking for a place to voice my anger, my joy, and happiness. I didn't get into music to be famous or make money. I did it to find a purpose and meaning in life."⁶⁷ He went on to add, "...the work (you students) do (at the Count Basie Learning Center) ...provides you with the tools you need to...develop your own voice to make yourself visible."⁶⁸ Here, Springsteen makes public remarks in a manner similar to what he does in his songwriting and in his performances; namely, he holds up a candle to those who came before him as a way of reinforcing American cultural values. Like Ellison, Springsteen

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Beard, Sonya. "Read-in Celebrates the Power, Rewards of Literacy." *Asbury Park Press*, February 7, 1999, AA2

⁶⁸ Ibid.

can be considered an “innovating traditionalist” who “learn(s) the best of the past and add(s) to it his personal vision.”⁶⁹ As an innovating traditionalist, Springsteen employs dialogic praxis to reinforce American cultural values by honoring the tradition of protest he learned from those who came before him.

Speaking out about politics was not something Springsteen did naturally in his early career, and he only really began to do so when he achieved a mass audience.⁷⁰ Still, as a fan of Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger, Springsteen understood the value of a popular artist’s words. During the early 1980s, while giving interviews about his *Born in the USA* tour, Springsteen would frequently invoke concerns about how political leaders preyed upon citizens’ need to have pride in their country, but that the policies proposed, and the rhetoric used were created to serve only some at the expense of others. Regarding Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iran Hostage Crisis, Springsteen said, “We were beaten, we were hustled, and then we were humiliated.”⁷¹ In his 1988 press announcement at the Amnesty International Human Rights Now! tour, Springsteen spoke about being in Africa for the first time, acknowledging the “systematic apartheid of South Africa and the economic apartheid of (his) own country.”⁷² Such discourse echoes Freire’s insistence that radicals must be “in it” with the oppressed, and Springsteen did not hold back when being either critical or supportive of government interventions that felt necessary, including the

⁶⁹ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, “The Role of the Popular Artist in a Democratic Society,” in *Long Walk Home*, 54.

⁷⁰ Roxanne Harde. “‘Living in Your American Skin’: Bruce Springsteen and the Possibility of Politics.”

⁷¹ Kurt Loder, “The Rolling Stone Interview: Bruce Springsteen,” *Rolling Stone*, December 6, 1984, 21.

⁷² John J. O’Connor, “TV WEEKEND; ‘HUMAN RIGHTS NOW TOUR,’ ON HBO.” *The New York Times*, December 23, 1988. <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/23/movies/tv-weekend-human-rights-now-tour-on-hbo.html>.

bombardment of caves that sheltered enemies of the U.S. in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks.⁷³

Like Freire, Springsteen is also a radical educator in that he “commit(s) himself...within history, to fight” at the side of the oppressed.⁷⁴ Springsteen is not an extremist, but one who confronts, listens to, and tries to truly understand the world. For example, although he was incorrect when speaking about Trump’s prospects in September of 2016, Springsteen was correct in identifying the danger in Trump’s calling elections “rigged” and the violence that could follow an election he loses.⁷⁵ When Trump won in 2016, Springsteen proclaimed membership in the “new American resistance,”⁷⁶ and then not only allowed his music to be used in the subsequent Democratic National Convention in 2020, but also felt compelled to speak out when the Trump administration separated children from migrant families upon arrival to the U.S. border. Fittingly, only two weeks after the violent insurrection at the US Capitol that saw 140 police officers assaulted⁷⁷ and several others dead in its aftermath, on the evening of the Biden/Harris inauguration, Springsteen offered a “little prayer for our country,” singing a mournful and plaintive “Land of Hope in Dreams” in the darkness outside the Lincoln Memorial.

⁷³ IrishExaminer.com. 2020. “Springsteen Praises Bush Over War on Terror.” *Irish Examiner*, May 22, 2020. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-30061762.html>.

⁷⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 39.

⁷⁵ Channel 4 News. 2016. “Bruce Springsteen on Donald Trump, and His Own Depression.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_UoZ8wP6zg.

⁷⁶ Lustig, Jay, 2017. “Springsteen Says He’s Part of ‘the New American Resistance.’” *NJArts.Net* (blog). January 22, 2017. <https://www.njarts.net/springsteen-says-hes-part-new-resistance/>.

⁷⁷ “Three Years Since the Jan. 6 Attack on the Capitol.” January 5, 2024. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/36-months-jan-6-attack-capitol-0>.

Springsteen is also “not afraid to meet the people or enter into dialogue with them.”⁷⁸ When he speaks out Springsteen risks audience backlash, loss of sales, potential boycotts of his art, etc. In essence, he enters into dialogue even with those with whom he disagrees. For example, he has financially supported striking workers and canceled a performance in North Carolina to protest its state law that prohibited trans persons from using the restroom that correlated with their gender.⁷⁹ Recently, he acknowledged how the political left has not done enough to speak to the concerns of working people who have been sold a cynical message. Yet, he shows empathy and understanding towards these working-class citizens and disdain for politicians who create divisiveness and invite hatred against vulnerable citizens to convince enough voters that they have their interests in mind.

When Springsteen commented publicly on the 2008 mortgage crisis, that he personally knew people who lost their homes and their retirement savings, and that he was angry about the lawlessness and manipulation of vulnerable citizens that led to the situation, he perfectly fit Freire’s definition of the radical who does not regard “the oppressed as an abstract category” but as “persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor.”⁸⁰ Yet, Springsteen’s dialogic praxis is not the same as Freire’s. Although Springsteen can be seen as a Freirean radical who uses problem-posing education in dialogue to bring about conscientization and praxis, the notion of “oppressed” is worth parsing here. Freire’s goal is to help his citizens self-actualize, to change their beliefs in themselves so that they can participate in their own

⁷⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 39.

⁷⁹ McCormick, J. P., “Bruce Springsteen dumps North Carolina over bigoted anti-LGBT law.” Pink News, April 8, 2016. <https://www.thepinknews.com/2016/04/08/bruce-springsteen-dumps-north-carolina-over-bigoted-anti-lgbt-law/>.

⁸⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50

economic survival. Springsteen's fans, at least those who have leisure time and money to attend his concerts, are not learning how to transform themselves *for economic viability*. They are there to enjoy music and *to be inspired to be their best versions of themselves*, perhaps even to help those who are less fortunate than they are.

A Runaway American Dream?

Freire's missionary model of dialogic praxis reminds us that the radical educator is the person who truly listens to her students (although Freire would call teachers "coordinators" of "cultural circles" and students "participants," as the idea that an adult would need to go to school to learn to read was a major stigma in Freire's time⁸¹) and then, in a loving manner, works with them to reflect upon problem-posing questions before proposing positive actions to take in response to those problems. Springsteen offers a visionary dialogic model to educators, including those who wish to participate in re-igniting civic engagement for American values, by posing problematic questions throughout his catalog, and perhaps most obviously in *Nebraska*, *Devils & Dust*, and *Wrecking Ball*. Respectively, these albums ask listeners to contemplate the fate of those who become disconnected from society; the loss that occurs when we "kill the things (we) love"⁸²; and the fear, restlessness, and anxiety that grows out of the frayed social relations stemming from economic injustice. In contrast to Freire's direct problem-posing education, Springsteen's indirect, visionary form of dialogic praxis offers songs that urge his listeners to empathize, to see humanity in others who may have lived quite different

⁸¹ "Paulo Freire | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy."

⁸² Bruce Springsteen, "Devils & Dust," *Devils & Dust*, Columbia, 2005, Track 1.

lives from their own. In this way they achieve *conscientização* which then allows them to be reflexive and take further action, *praxis*. In other words, Springsteen's dialogic praxis, like Freire's, offers a radical pedagogy that can civically-engage and strengthen society.

Although the goals and means to attain them are different for Freire, who died in 1997,⁸³ and Springsteen, both men exhort their followers' personal transformation to bring about positive cultural and political change via civic engagement in their respective contexts. Both efforts begin with individuals involved in dialogue with other individuals, and in doing so personal and social consciousness are altered for awareness and well-being. Both pedagogues, in this way, are not "sectarians" who believe in their own absolute truths about history and human relations. And while Freire's students were economically oppressed, some in Springsteen's audience may inadvertently contribute to oppression; raising his audience's awareness about social and economic justice enables Springsteen to invite self-reflection about choices his fans can make to support those who are more profoundly oppressed.

Despite his intense engagement with his audience, it is fair to question whether Springsteen truly achieves praxis within a critical mass that has made a historical difference. While he may or may not have caused the cultural tipping point that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall,⁸⁴ Springsteen's involvement in projects such as Artists Against Apartheid, USA for Africa, and the Amnesty International's Human Rights Now tour raised consciousness and encouraged engagement with the world to make it a better place; his work for Vietnam Veterans in the early 1980s likely

⁸³ Donaldo Macedo, Introduction in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

⁸⁴ Erik Kirschbaum. *Rocking the Wall: The Berlin Concert That Changed the World*. (Berlinica Publishing LLC, 2013).

saved the Vietnam Veterans' movement;⁸⁵ and Springsteen's was an important voice raised against the invasion of Iraq as well as to so many other challenging American moments since then. Whether Springsteen—or anybody—can truly achieve praxis for a democratic nation today is debatable, given that the country may not necessarily have a shared moral conscience. It may be that the best Springsteen and other “cultural workers” can do is to “keep the congregation together.”⁸⁶

Relatedly, some have argued that it is not healthy for democracy to rely on popular artists like Springsteen to influence the political life of a nation. Music writer Jack Hamilton cautions against the possibility of “nefarious uses” of mass culture “in the political realm,”⁸⁷ and he makes a good point, especially considering President Trump's ascendancy as a byproduct of celebrity. However, Hamilton's core argument in telling the Democratic party to “break up with Bruce Springsteen” is that, instead of relying on people like Springsteen to promote political ideas, we ought to “have a clearer sense of our politicians' persons and policies.”⁸⁸ Springsteen himself does not necessarily agree that his vast body of work is necessarily political or contains necessarily political outcomes:

When I started, I self-consciously saw myself as an American artist and as an average American. I figured I had a talent that allowed me to create a language in which I could speak about the things that

⁸⁵ Marc Leepson, “How Bruce Springsteen Rescued Vietnam Veterans of America—and the Vietnam Veterans Movement,” *The VVA Veteran*, a Publication of Vietnam Veterans of America. March/April 2016: https://vvaveteran.org/36-2/36-2_springsteen.html.

⁸⁶ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, “The Role of the Popular Artist in a Democratic Society,” in *Long Walk Home*, 57.

⁸⁷ Jack Hamilton. “Democrats, Break up With Bruce Springsteen.” 2021. POLITICO. March 7, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/03/07/barack-obama-bruce-springsteen-podcast-democrats-pop-culture-473383>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

concern me and that I felt were of concern to the place that I lived — to my neighbors and the people that I'd grown up with. I don't know if I would call it a political point of view, but I had a point of view when I was very young, and I always viewed popular music as a movement towards greater freedom. Great music brings greater freedom ...⁸⁹

Yes, it would absolutely be far better for the nation if its elected officials successfully engaged in discourse and policymaking in ways that spur active, moral citizenship. However, many of the nation's elected officials are the ones currently fanning the flames of hatred and political violence. As LaFrance points out, we need to articulate "American values worth preserving and building consensus toward reaching them."⁹⁰ Limiting this work solely to politicians might not be enough.

Economic catastrophe and weak political leadership brought about the military coup d'état in 1960s and 1970s Brazil, before democratic efforts took hold, bolstered by the foundation of Freire's radical pedagogy that was reintegrated into his home country. Cultural workers in Freire's day needed to participate in democracy revitalization efforts to bring about a freer Brazilian society. Although these efforts helped citizens develop their own agency, and Brazil's rates of literacy have also vastly improved, Brazil has its own issues to contend with regarding the health of its democracy.⁹¹ In 2024, "to keep the republic," Springsteen and other contemporary American artists, filmmakers, writers, teachers, and local and national

⁸⁹ Brooks, D. "Bruce Springsteen's Playlist for the Trump Era," 2020, June 23, 2020. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/bruce-springsteens-playlist/613378/>

⁹⁰ LaFrance, "Political Violence."

⁹¹ Nicas, Jack. 2024. "Two Capitol Riots. Two Very Different Results." *The New York Times*, January 8, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/08/world/americas/brazil-us-capitol-riots.html>.

public figures must use their voice and their influence to condemn violence and re-teach and reinforce American values regarding personal freedom, economic equality, and environmental sustainability. The potential for violence and further erosion of democratic values beyond the 2024 election is not only possible, but sadly likely if a re-invigorated movement for national civic engagement does not come to pass.

Radical Pedagogies for “American Values”

Adrienne LaFrance and the historians she interviewed have made the clarion call for political leaders to reject violence and model moderation in their words and actions. A robust American civic engagement effort is sorely needed. Fortunately, there are highly effective radical pedagogies practiced in schools across America that can complement such an effort, thanks to leaders in the field of education who have embraced constructivism, upon which Freire’s dialogic praxis relies. An increasing number of schools are embracing pedagogies that rely on assets students with different languages, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds bring to the classroom. Approaches such as Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) pedagogy and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) are designed to help teachers learn how to recognize and respond to students and their own cultural backgrounds so that they can foster a strong ethic of care in a space with students whose backgrounds may be different from their own. Such asset-based approaches are only just now coming into the mainstream.

Unfortunately, many of today’s school leaders are not yet prepared to promote asset-based pedagogies, and some do not have the support of

district leadership or boards of education to promote equity in schools.⁹² Support for equity initiatives in schools can be changed if a national dialogue around citizenship is created and sustained around the missionary and visionary models offered by Freire and Springsteen. There are also encouraging trends for K-12 civics education, including recent legislation⁹³ in states like New Jersey that require civics instruction at the middle school level in addition to existing civics education requirements in grades 9-12. Adult Learning Theory also foregrounds a student-centered approach, while Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)⁹⁴ literally uses problem-posing principles and data gathering to help students develop their own agency, very similar to the work Freire's cultural circle coordinators used for literacy education in Brazil.

⁹² Daniel C. Loughran, "Equity Work Takes Courage: A Case Study of an Elementary Principal's Praxis," Ed.D. diss., (Rutgers University, 2021).

⁹³ "New law requires middle school students to take civics course." | *New Jersey School Boards Association*. (n.d.). <https://www.njsba.org/school-board-notes/new-law-requires-middle-school-students-to-take-civics-course/>

⁹⁴ KnowledgeWorks. *Youth Participatory Action Research: A Guidebook and curriculum* – KnowledgeWorks, April 17, 2024. <https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/ypar-youth-participatory-action-research-guidebook-curriculum/>

“They wanted to know why I did what I did:” Reading Bruce Springsteen’s “Nebraska” through Ernest Hemingway’s Iceberg Principle

By Timothy Penner

Abstract

Bruce Springsteen and Ernest Hemingway, two masters of their respective forms, are rarely spoken of in conversation with each other. One rose to fame as a serious-minded author before parlaying that recognition into a macho persona that became a cultural icon of the early twentieth century; the other, gained notoriety as an electrifying performer known for his lyrical verbosity and blue-collar work ethic who has sustained a successful musical career for over 50 years. Yet, on the level of artistry and technique, we can see that as Springsteen moved into his second decade in the early-1980s, his lyrical style, especially on 1982’s *Nebraska*, shifted into a mode that could be considered Hemingwayesque. This essay examines the song “Nebraska” through the tenets of Hemingway’s theory of writing, the Iceberg Principle, which denotes the idea that if writers are “writing truly enough” they can show only the tip of their metaphorical icebergs, and the reader will intuit the rest. Reading “Nebraska” through this principle exposes the dense layers of narrative execution, character development, and complex thematic resonances that reverberate underneath the mere 167 words Springsteen uses to tell the story of serial killer Charles Starkweather. In doing so, this study reveals the audacity, and considerable skill, of Springsteen’s poetics.

In his review of *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, legendary rock critic Lester Bangs (1973) calls the record “cosmically surfeiting” before describing Bruce Springsteen’s lyrical content and delivery as

"breathtakingly complicated."¹ While *Greetings*' linguistic gymnastics retains its ability to impress, it was not ultimately the artistic direction Springsteen would follow. Despite a steady paring down of lyrical output in his records of the late 1970s, even as they remained musically boisterous, the 1982 release of *Nebraska* was as striking in its paucity of words as *Greetings* had been in its surfeit. With its grainy, monochromatic cover image of an empty highway, surrounded by sharp red lettering, to its barebones instrumentation, to its lack of any promotional concert appearances, everything about *Nebraska* is sparse.

Springsteen's movement toward lyrical minimalism and narrative economy, particularly on the title track, recalls the experimental expressionism practiced by early twentieth-century Modernists like Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway more so than it does the work of his contemporaries. Hemingway is of particular interest to this study not only because he managed to bring the Modernists' experimental approach to the mainstream, but because his articulation of his method of writing as metaphorically like an iceberg provides a useful way to read Springsteen's "Nebraska"--a dramatic monologue about Charles Starkweather, who, along with his fourteen-year-old girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate, killed eleven people across Nebraska and Wyoming between November 1957 and January 1958. While Springsteen has never discussed Hemingway as an influence, reading "Nebraska" through Hemingway's

¹ Lester Bangs. "Review: *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*," *Rolling Stone*, 5 July 1973, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/greetings-from-asbury-park-nj-249992>.

Iceberg Principle provides a useful framework for understanding the complexity submerged beneath the song's enigmatically simple lyrics.

The burgeoning field of Springsteen Studies is refreshingly multidisciplinary: beyond expected disciplines like musicology and literary studies, it includes critical approaches to Springsteen's works and life by scholars from psychology, sociology, linguistics, history, political science, gender studies, and even theology. There are several collections of scholarly articles dedicated to Springsteen, including *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen* (2010, Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight, eds.), *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream* (2012, Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zolten, and Mark Bernhard, eds.); *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music* (2018, William L. Wolf, ed.); and the hybrid academic/popular collection *Long Walk Home* (2019, Jonathan D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers, eds.).

In addition to articles published in a variety of academic journals, a concentration of work in the field can be found in the *Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies* (BOSS, for short). Of particular interest to this study are articles by Irwin H. Streight, Seth C. Kalichman and Joshua M. Smyth, Ryan Sheeler, Alan Rauch, and Char Roone Miller, all of which perform analyses of the *Nebraska* record from various academic disciplines. Also of note is Warren Zane's book *Deliver Me from Nowhere* (2023) on the making of *Nebraska*, which includes both a thorough historical narrative of the album's genesis and strong considerations of its key songs. This scholarship provides a solid base on which to build a close reading of the historical, cultural, and biographical details that inform the "Nebraska" lyrics and production.

In the intellectual salons of Paris in the 1920s, under the mentorship of influential Modernists Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, Hemingway

developed the direct, minimalistic writing that he would become known for. Hemingway scholar Verna Kale writes that it was through Stein's mentorship that Hemingway developed his 'craft of omission' wherein he "put crucial elements of plot beneath the surface of a story," as he learned to "pare down dialogue, to drop similes in favor of concrete images, to abandon adverbs almost entirely and, when adjectives were necessary, to place them in the predicate."² But Stein and Pound were not only artistically important to Hemingway; as Kale writes, "Where Stein would influence Hemingway's nascent stylistic experiments, Pound would serve as an advocate and agent, helping Hemingway to place some of his earliest works in the little magazines and introducing him to other literary personalities around the Latin Quarter."³

Ultimately, Hemingway would break off his relationships with both Stein and Pound after his fame had significantly eclipsed theirs⁴, and yet their influence can be felt in every aspect of his work, especially the theory of writing he presented in his 1932 book *Death in the Afternoon*. Ostensibly a guide to the world and history of bullfighting, Hemingway's first work of non-fiction regularly digresses into discussions of politics, personal history, and advice on writing including Hemingway's description of his literary style in terms of iceberg imagery:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as

² Verna Kale, *Critical Lives: Ernest Hemingway* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴ This is a common theme for Hemingway; the list of his former friends that were once his champions is long and includes people like Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Harold Loeb, and his three ex-wives: Hadley Richardson, Pauline Pfeiffer, and Martha Gellhorn.

though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.⁵

Over the years, the Iceberg Principle has become synonymous with Hemingway's literary persona as macho pursuits like hunting, fishing, and bullfighting are with his popular one. In his exhaustive study of *The Sun Also Rises*, H.R. Stoneback writes that this minimalist style is intended to make "the reader feel more than is understood and to urge the reader to participate actively in decoding the action,"⁶ because there is just enough detail to give the reader an impression from the exposed "one-eighth" of the textual iceberg to allow readers to fill in the rest.

Hemingway's style appears straightforward, and even simple; however, as Philip Young writes, "it is a style which normally keeps out of sight the intelligence behind it."⁷ (Young 1966, 204). Young goes on to describe the way Hemingway's work appears to offer absolute objectivity of what he is describing by presenting "perceptions [that] come direct to the reader, unmixed with comment," which creates "the impression ... of an intense and disciplined objectivity, a matter-of-fact offering of whatever details are chosen to build in the reader the response for which the author has provided only the stimulus."⁸ Yet the simplicity in Hemingway is deceptive, owing to the calculated and deliberate way he wrote. The affective qualities of his writing are the direct result of his narrative construction, which provides only the illusion of objectivity, an illusion that encourages the reader's participation. It is not that Hemingway had no

⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribners, 1960), 192.

⁶ H.R. Stoneback, *Reading Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises: Glossary and Commentary* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2007), 211.

⁷ Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), 204.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

more to say about a tree, a wound, a feeling of love, or a mass evacuation he was describing, but that he left the spaces blank so that his reader can participate in the construction and perhaps even come to understand just how often Hemingway is subverting the whole notion of objectivity⁹. As we will see, this illusion of objectivity is vital to understanding Springsteen's presentation Starkweather's story in "Nebraska."

Released just shy of a decade after his debut album¹⁰, *Nebraska* shares little in common with that first record, lyrically or sonically, even as it remains recognizably Springsteen's work. Bangs' aforementioned *Rolling Stone* review of *Greetings* claims that Springsteen has "got more [words] crammed into this album than any other record released this year."¹¹ Bangs' estimation was not only likely correct for that year, but it is nearly the case for Springsteen's entire oeuvre. According to a study performed by Seth C. Kalichman and Joshua M. Smyth which looked at, amongst other things, average words per song (AWPS) on each Springsteen record, there is a clear drop in AWPS from his first two albums¹² until Springsteen arrived at the lyrical sweet spot (289.2 AWPS¹³) in the late 1970s that has remained his preferred style of writing. This study also reveals just how atypical "Nebraska" is as a song in his oeuvre, from the view of AWPS, as it has only 167 words, significantly lower than his overall average.

⁹ The best of many examples of this is Jake Barnes' first-person narration in *The Sun also Rises* where the astute reader can see how Jake's seemingly reportorial portrayals of his friends are usually suspect, if not wholly unreliable.

¹⁰ *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* was released on 5 January 1973 and *Nebraska* was released nine years and nine months later, on 30 September 1982.

¹¹ Bangs, "Greetings," 1973.

¹² *Greetings from Asbury Park* (369.1 AWPS) and *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* (463.5 AWPS).

¹³ Kalichman and Smyth's methodology for arriving at their numbers is described in detail in their article. It should be noted that their study (first published online in 2021) does not include Springsteen's latest album of original material, *Letter to You* (2020).

To illuminate this trend beyond the quantitative changes, we can consider the significantly different descriptive approaches found in “Rosalita” (1973 [word count: 528]), “Thunder Road” (1975 [word count: 417]) and “Nebraska” (1982 [word count: 167])¹⁴, three songs that present similar narratives about young lovers on the run in very different ways. Springsteen describes “Rosalita” as his “musical autobiography,” and “a kiss-off to everybody who counted you out, put you down or decided you weren’t good enough.”¹⁵ (193). While more of an emotional¹⁶ autobiography than factual, the song provides a profusion of detail to create a place wherein the desires, perceived injustices, and small-scale acts of rebellion play out. The cast of characters is large, even for an eight-minute song, and includes characters with outlandish names like Little Dynamite, Little Gun, Jack the Rabbit, Weak Knees Willie, Sloppy Sue, and Big Bones Billy¹⁷. Few of these characters do all that much in the narrative of the song, yet Springsteen’s inclusion of their mostly purposeless posturing creates a milieu of urban aimlessness that the speaker can push back against. The argument the speaker presents is couched in a rescue mission, wherein he must save Rosalita and whisk her away to California, the land of sunshine, promise and opportunity, far from the suffocating “swamps of Jersey.” The couple will go to a “little café where they play guitars all night and all day,”

¹⁴ “Rosalita,” unlike the other two, has a repeated chorus, but even if we only count the chorus once it still has 467 words, fifty-nine more than “Thunder Road,” and 309 more than “Nebraska.”

¹⁵ Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 193.

¹⁶ In his book *Songs*, Springsteen writes, “Most of my writing is emotionally autobiographical. You’ve got to pull up the things that mean something to you in order for them to mean anything to your audience. That’s how they know you’re not kidding” (2003, 69).

¹⁷ In addition to Rosalita, her parents, and the speaker.

the exact opposite of the downtown streets, pool halls, department stores, and the small houses that his cast of characters occupy.

The notion of escaping to some promised land is a major theme of *Born to Run*¹⁸ and "Thunder Road" (the first track) sets the tone for the whole record. "Thunder Road" and "Rosalita" share a great deal of lyrical DNA; however, Springsteen's narrative technique has shifted. Gone are the wildly named characters, the hyperbolic activities of parents, and the idealistic pronouncements of youth. Unlike the speaker in "Rosalita" who heroically fights through the wilderness in the final stanza, the speaker of "Thunder Road" announces, resolutely, that "I'm no hero, that's understood." Unlike the elaborate internal rhyming schemes Springsteen uses to describe a broken-down car, we get "the skeleton frames of burned-out Chevrolets," an image so stark it delivers a level of evocative power unseen amid the torrential downpour of lyrics in his first two records. The significance of cars as symbols of freedom for these characters, and so many of Springsteen's characters¹⁹ cannot be overstated. In the worlds Springsteen creates, a car is never just a means of conveyance but is a nearly mythical object²⁰ that has the power to move one away from hopelessness.

¹⁸ For instance, the title track ends with a promise of reaching a place where "we'll walk in the sun;" "Night" contains the hopeful promise to the auditor that they will "break on through to the inside," a space apart from the working-class life described in the rest of the lyrics; and the desperate speaker of "Meeting Across the River" feels it will just take one simple criminal act to alleviate his poverty.

¹⁹ In addition to the already mentioned songs, consider the role cars (or other motorized vehicles, like motorcycles) play in "Spirit in the Night," "Backstreets," "Meeting Across the River," "Racing in the Streets," "The Promised Land," "Darkness on the Edge of Town," "The River," "Cadillac Ranch," "Stolen Car," "Drive all Night," "Wreck on the Highway," "Used Cars," "Gypsy Biker," "Hitch Hikin'," "The Wayfarer," and "Drive Fast (The Stuntman)."

²⁰ See Miller (2019) for an examination of the car as metonymic device across *Nebraska*.

"Thunder Road" presents an unbroken dramatic monologue (aside from the first four lines, in which the speaker establishes setting) wherein the first-person narrator offers up his rationale for why Mary should run off with him. While not as pessimistic as the songs that would populate Springsteen's next three records, "Thunder Road" is certainly less celebratory than is "Rosalita." Redemption comes from beneath a "dirty hood;" the characters recognize themselves as being less than ideal: "I'm no hero" and "You ain't a beauty;" the speaker sees himself as a "killer in the sun," while Mary, despite seeming quite young, has left a trail of boys who now stand with her "graduation gown [lying] in rags at their feet." These images, along with the "burned out Chevrolets" are entirely devoid of "Rosalita's" whimsy, connoting a place of desperation, pain, and even trauma (the gown in rags implies molestation) that must be escaped if the two characters hope to survive. Both stories are about lovers surrounded by characters looking to keep them apart and ultimately to destroy them.

"Nebraska" traffics in these same archetypal elements, but the danger that had been lurking in the dark corners of these mythologies comes to the forefront in a narrative drained of any optimism. The clearest sign of this is the lyrical absence of the car itself, the symbol of freedom in the other two songs is merely implied in "Nebraska." It has slipped below the surface of Springsteen's iceberg, meaning that we only intuit its existence through lines about going "for a ride," and travelling through the "badlands of Wyoming." It is not a focal point of the story and so contributes nothing to the construction of the speakers' heroic image, nor does it connote boundless freedom.

Consider the coda of "Thunder Road" as an example of the confluence of form and content as it pertains to Springsteen's car symbolism. When Clarence Clemens' soaring saxophone solo explodes at

the end of the song like a revving engine and spinning wheels, it takes over for the words that the speaker “ain’t spoken.” The musical line, with its melodic rise and fall, and looping pattern, expresses the hope, fear, and even repetitious nature that the young lovers will encounter somewhere down that road. It’s a thrilling moment of optimistic ecstasy that is not diminished even after many repetitions. “Rosalita” has a similarly ecstatic Clemens coda, but “Nebraska” has none of this triumphalism, neither lyrically nor musically. Although all the songs end with instrumental codas, the willowing harmonica line is so unfocused that it creates a stark contrast to the deliberateness of Clemens’ saxophone lines. Rather than a liability, however, the sparseness of Springsteen’s form elevates the song’s themes in ways that can be illuminated through Hemingway’s theory of writing.

The key intertext behind the creation of “Nebraska” is Terrence Malick’s 1973 film, *Badlands*, which Lloyd Michaels calls a “subjective adaptation of the Starkweather Case.”²¹ Malick, with his post-narrative, impressionistic style has gained as many fans as detractors, leaving audiences both baffled and elated by his work, often simultaneously. Springsteen’s introduction to Malick came through a late-night television broadcast of *Badlands* in the fall of 1981.²² The influence of the film was not restricted to content, as the final product evinces Springsteen’s incorporation of formal qualities from Malick’s work, as well as that of two other texts, particularly in terms of narrative perspective. As critics like

²¹ Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Champagne, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 21.

²² Warren Zanes. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen’s Nebraska* (New York: Crown, 2023), 111.

Michaels,²³ Robert Sinnerbrink,²⁴ and Malick himself have pointed out, *Badlands* presents the adult world through the eyes of a child. In an interview with *Sight and Sound*, Malick mentioned the influence of “books like *The Hardy Boys*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huck Finn* – all involving an innocent in a drama over his or her head,” as well as “Nancy Drew, the children’s story child detective.”²⁵ Although seemingly incongruous, the childlike perspective on horrific events is reminiscent of another film about a serial killer, Charles Loughton’s *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). Springsteen confirmed the influence of Loughton’s film in VH1’s *Storytellers*, saying that he was interested in creating an “aural projection of ... *Night of the Hunter*.”²⁶

A third intertext for “Nebraska” is the work of the Southern Gothic author Flannery O’Connor, whose influence on Springsteen is explored by Streight in his essay “Born to Write: Bruce Springsteen, Flannery O’Connor, and the Songstory.” As Streight points out, by referencing a footnote in a Norton Anthology, O’Connor’s influence on “Nebraska” is clearest in the use of the word “meanness” in the song’s final line.²⁷ This is a direct allusion to O’Connor’s character The Misfit in her celebrated story “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” Like both Malick and Springsteen’s presentations of Starkweather, The Misfit is a character who blends ruthlessness and sensitivity. When “Nebraska’s” speaker’s only explanation for his actions

²³ Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, 24.

²⁴ Robert Sinnerbrink. *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 26-27.

²⁵ Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, 103.

²⁶ VH1 *Storytellers: Bruce Springsteen*, directed by Dave Diomed (2005; New York: Columbia Music Video, 2005), DVD.

²⁷ Irwin H Streight, “Born to Write: Bruce Springsteen, Flannery O’Connor, and the Songstory” in *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*, ed. Jonathan D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 136.

is that there is a “meanness in this world,” the line echoes the nihilistic worldview The Misfit expresses when he says, after discounting the reality of Christ, “there’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.”²⁸ (O’Connor 1971, 132). The single word connection is subtle, but it manages to open the intertextual conversation between the two works by emphasizing the banality and quotidian reality of evil that O’Connor explores so devastatingly in her stories. In a 1998 interview with Will Percy, Springsteen acknowledged O’Connor’s influence:

There was something in those stories of hers that I felt captured a certain part of the American character that I was interested in writing about ... It was always at the core of every one of her stories-the way that she’d left that hole there, that hole that’s inside of everybody. There was some dark thing – a component of spirituality – that I sensed in her stories, and that set me off exploring characters of my own.²⁹

This sort of subtle incorporation means that the Malick, Loughton, and O’Connor connections remain mostly submerged within the actual song. As does the considerable time Springsteen spent researching his subject, which went beyond familiarizing himself with the story that inspired Malick’s film by reading *Caril*, the biography of Starkweather’s 15-year-old accomplice Caril Ann Fugate written by Ninette Beaver, B.K.

²⁸ Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1953) in *The Complete Short Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 132.

²⁹ Will Percy. “Rock and Read: Will Percy Interviews Bruce Springsteen” (1998) in *Racing in the Street: The Bruce Springsteen Reader*, ed. June Skinner Sawyers (Penguin Books, 2004), 307.

Ribley, and Partick Terse. Wanting to know more, Springsteen called KMTV in Omaha, the station where Beaver, the first person to interview Fugate after her arrest, had worked. Surprisingly, given the time gap, Beaver still worked there and was in the office when Springsteen called.³⁰ In explaining his motivation for such intense research, Springsteen told Zanes that “I was up to something besides song writing ... I’m not sure what I was doing. The book was pretty obvious. That was just...you could call it research. But the phone call was an unexpected thing for me to make. I’m not sure what led me to do that. But I was getting deeply into it”³¹ It is difficult to define just what that “something” is, and Springsteen has never fully articulated it, but it clearly goes well beyond just getting the details right. Rather, his phone call appears to be an attempt at getting closer to his subject, as a way to embody the character(s) he is attempting to describe. “When I made that phone call,” Springsteen told Zanes, “It was all just information, as far as I can understand. I’ve written plenty of music over the years that I’ve just flat out researched, to get the details right. That’s a part of the kind of writing that I do. It sort of began with that in some ways, but I think there was more going on.”³²

In his *Storytellers* appearance Springsteen offers another clue, saying “You can put together a lot of detail, but unless you pull something up out of yourself, it’s just going to lay flat on the page.” Springsteen continues, “You’ve got to find out what you have in common with that character, no matter who they are and what they did.”³³ He had to learn about Fugate

³⁰ Zanes, *Deliver me from Nowhere*, 127.

³¹ Ibid., 126-127.

³² Ibid., 128.

³³ *VH1 Storytellers: Bruce Springsteen*, directed by Dave Diomedes (2005; New York: Columbia Music Video, 2005), DVD.

and Starkweather to find the commonalities necessary to build the character, even if those commonalities are never outwardly expressed in the song because that research, like his use of allusion, form an invisible foundation that is vital to achieving the emotional connections at the heart of the work. As Sheeler writes, "By putting himself into these scenarios, Springsteen is able to drive home the stories in a real and sometimes frightening way. He does not seek to justify their deeds; instead, the listener gets an opportunity to see the thoughts behind the actions."³⁴ In describing Hemingway's approach to research and specificity that went into his work, John W. Aldridge writes that

In order to live an authentic life and produce an authentic fiction, one has to proceed with the greatest caution and select only those experiences, express only those emotions, that have proved their validity because they have been measured against the realities of honest feeling and what one senses in one's deepest instincts to be true. The result in Hemingway's fiction is not a realistic reflection of a world but the literal manufacture of a world, piece by piece, out of the most meticulously chosen and crafted materials.³⁵ (Aldridge 1987, 123)

The same can be said of the world Springsteen manufactures in "Nebraska," built out of meticulously chosen elements, not only words, but the whole of the production technique, and the way both draw from the connections to the subject that come from extensive, and even obsessive,

³⁴ Ryan Sheeler, "A Meanness in this World: The American Outlaw as Storyteller in Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska*," *American Studies Journal* 50, no. 08 (2007): 14.

³⁵ John W. Aldridge, "Afterthoughts on the Twenties and *The Sun Also Rises*," in *New Essays on The Sun Also Rises*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 123.

research. Yet, the results of Springsteen's efforts go beyond technique, as they led to a deeper level of philosophical engagement with the darker parts of human nature. He had been exploring these topics already on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and parts of *The River*, but songs like "State Trooper," "Atlantic City" and "Reason to Believe" on *Nebraska* reveal a deeper engagement with the depths of human depravity and desperation. In the same way that Hemingway's war experience on the sidelines of World War I and the Spanish Civil War informed the existential ideology of his novels, Springsteen's investigative drive shaped his shifting worldview in his late-1970s/early-1980s records.

The production history of *Nebraska* has been thoroughly documented by Zanes and others, but it is important to this study to consider the use of the TEAC 144 Portastudio 4-track tape recorder because it is an integral aspect of the song's formal qualities. This consumer-level multitrack recording device, which utilized commercially available cassette tapes rather than higher quality two-inch magnet tape, the industry standard at the time,³⁶ allowed Springsteen to work out song ideas and arrangements more efficiently and economically than working in a studio or with other musicians. After completing an LP's worth of demos, Springsteen went to work with the E Street Band, trying to re-record the songs in a studio. The process did not go well, as Springsteen wrote:

On listening, I realized I'd succeeded in doing nothing but damaging what I'd created. We got it to sound cleaner, more hi-fi, but not nearly as atmospheric, as authentic ... At the end of the day, satisfied I'd explored the music's possibilities and every blind alley, I pulled

³⁶ Zanes, *Deliver me From Nowhere*, 146.

out the original cassette I'd been carrying around in my jeans pocket and said, "This is it."³⁷

It is key to recognize is that Springsteen's choice was, first and foremost, artistic. This lo-fi recording was not done for commercial reasons; in fact, some on his team saw it as extremely unwise to release it.³⁸ And transferring the material to a professional medium proved to be an arduous task³⁹. The more commercial route would have been to press on in the studio, drop the songs that were not working, release the polished versions on an album with the songs that would eventually end up on *Born in the USA*, and keep to himself the fact that he thought the demos were better. None of that happened, and so we can take everything about the recording (the sparseness of the instrumentation, the uneven mix, the tape hiss throughout, the distorting buzz on certain lines, and the uneven harmonica melody) into account in reading *Nebraska* as a unified, if not premeditated, artistic statement.

Before getting into the words, it is useful to consider the music and production a bit more, since music, as Springsteen has stated, "informs the lyric with so much extra information."⁴⁰ First off, the lo-fi aesthetic of the production reflects something of the improvisational nature of Starkweather and Fugate's spree. Theirs was not a plotted journey, rather, one horrific choice required another, until they felt they had to kill everyone

³⁷ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 300.

³⁸ Especially since he had several the songs that would become major hits when released on 1984's *Born in the USA*, already in the can (Zanes 2023, 176).

³⁹ See Zanes (2023) 191-199 for an admirably thorough and technical (while still accessible) history of the challenging process of bringing what was on the cassette to the masses.

⁴⁰ *VH1 Storytellers: Bruce Springsteen*, directed by Dave Diomedes (Columbia Music Video, 2005), DVD.

who crossed their paths. Springsteen, in 1982, was a far cry from an amateur musician, but the use of the TEAC 144 along with the rushed and unrehearsed nature of his performance, gives the record the feel of an amateurish production. This is not a negative, as the ongoing success and discourse around the whole record can attest to, but it changes the way we understand the finished product.

Nebraska, as a whole, with its lack of rigid professionalism, represents a form of child's play, something that seems out of step with a lot of the very dark material on the album, especially the title track, and yet adds important thematic layers to the whole project. Thus, Springsteen is breaking the rules of the professional musician, just as Malick broke the rules of the established Hollywood narrative form, and Starkweather inflicted unintended terror on a series of communities in a way that could be read as amateurish. The form here contributes to Springsteen's personification of Starkweather as an enthusiastic amateur who does not fully considering the ramification and consequences of his actions as a professional killer might.

Performing those actions with any foresight, however, would have significantly changed the nature of the acts by removing the amateurish aspect manifest in the general sloppiness of each product. In the same way that Springsteen's performances on the recording would have likely changed had he thought what he was recording would have been heard by the world, Starkweather might have acted differently had he realized where each violent act would have led. If nothing else, both men might have tried to clean things up a little more, in each of their respective situations, instead of leaving messy trails behind. Hence, the entirety of the song's unpolished form reflects the nature of Starkweather's amateurish killing spree without ever drawing explicit attention to what it is doing.

Another important aural attribute of "Nebraska" is the faint, but nevertheless present glockenspiel. This song is not the first time Springsteen has incorporated the small metallophone into his arrangements⁴¹, yet its inclusion here is another direct allusion to Malick's film. The musical score of *Badlands* makes frequent use of compositions from *Musik für Kinder* by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman, which are a part of Orff's *Schulwerk*, a music education program for children. Percussive instruments, like the xylophone, are a key part of Orff's method and are particularly prominent in pieces like *Gassenhauer*, which are used throughout *Badlands*. This association between Orff, these instruments, and childhood is key in considering the way the film is constructed as a child's view of the adult world. Springsteen, in his nod to Malick's film score, employs the glockenspiel because, as he told Zanes, "it harkened back to childhood, [and] gave a sense of coming from that childlike space." Springsteen continued, "there's something in the instrument that reminds me of what's used on [*Badlands*'] soundtrack."⁴²

Yet, despite its significance to Springsteen's conception and memory of the song⁴³, the glockenspiel is almost inaudible for most of the released version; however, the formal importance of the glockenspiel's faint presence is illuminated through Hemingway's Iceberg Principle. There is no blatant moment where the instrument announces its presence, nor does Springsteen take a heavy-handed approach to pushing what it might be doing thematically. Rather, the sounds drift under the surface of the

⁴¹ The high-pitched tinkling tones of the glockenspiel can be heard, with varying prominence, on the studio recordings of "Thunder Road," "Born to Run," "Candy's Room," "Prove it all Night," and "Hungry Heart."

⁴² Zanes, *Deliver me from Nowhere*, 152.

⁴³ It also comes up in his *Storytellers* episode when he talks about creating a child's version of the adult world like Loughton does in *The Night of the Hunter*.

arrangement, bobbing up occasionally enough to be noticed and subtly evoke the connection to childhood, thus accomplishing the goal of creating an “aural version” of Loughton’s (and Malick’s) films in a way that is never explicitly stated, but is perhaps felt and vaguely heard.

As much as the music and form subtly reveal underlying meaning, it is the lyrics in “Nebraska” that best exemplify Hemingway’s principle. Consider the opening memory: “I saw her standing on her front lawn / Just twirling her baton.” The line is simple, but the image conveys a great deal of information. As Springsteen points out in *Born to Run*, in the *Nebraska* songs, “The writing was in the details; the twisting of a ring, the twirling of a baton, was where these songs found their character.”⁴⁴ The ‘front lawn’ evokes a suburban setting, and the baton (another reference to Malick’s film) tells us something about the age of the woman the speaker is describing. Baton twirling requires enough physical strength and coordination, as well as considerable time and effort to master, signifying the ambition and drive of the character, suggesting that the speaker is not watching a young child; however, baton twirling is also an activity that is usually outgrown, indicating that this is likely not an adult woman either. Hence, the listener can quickly intuit that the speaker is describing a girl in her adolescence, an important liminal space in human development where the pressures and attractions of both childhood and adulthood pull at a person. Without overt description, Springsteen has established a rough age, a demographical location, aspects of a character’s personality, and the theme of liminality in a single, somewhat ambiguous line.

These kinds of subtle gestures are as important to shaping the speaker as they are in shaping Fugate’s character, and the world they both

⁴⁴ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 299.

inhabit. One of the most effective techniques Springsteen employs to this end is direct address. The honorific "sir" is used by the speaker four times throughout the song, and although it could be read as similar to the sort of ambiguous second person address, he often employs⁴⁵, the fifth verse identifies the auditor: a "Sheriff." This allows us to identify the song as a dramatic monologue, which Alan Rauch states "is present in most of Springsteen's work," but "is most striking in the album *Nebraska*."⁴⁶ In describing the form, Rauch writes that "as readers of the monologue we encounter that character – who is in the process of speaking to an identifiable but silent listener – in a dramatic moment in his or her life. During the course of the monologue the speaker reveals, often unwittingly, deep personal traits."⁴⁷ As is the case with Robert Browning's famous dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess," we are listening in to a one-sided conversation which reveals more about the speaker (whether Browning's Duke or Springsteen's Starkweather) than he seems intent on sharing.

The direct address in "Nebraska" manages to capture, in the most efficient way possible, the unnerving charm of the central murderer. Malick's cinematic version of Starkweather (named Kip and played by Martin Sheen) has an unsettling ability to turn on the charm, even as he is about to do horrific things. Kip uses 'sir' to address the father of Holly (Malick's version of Fugate, played by Sissy Spacek), even as he threatens him with a gun; he shows genuine interest in Cato (Kip's friend, played by

⁴⁵ Springsteen's oeuvre is filled with second person addressees like 'son,' 'sonny,' 'baby,' and many uses of the indefinite 'you.'

⁴⁶ Alan Rauch, "Bruce Springsteen and the Dramatic Monologue," *American Studies* 29, no. 1, (1988): 33.

⁴⁷ Rauch, "Dramatic Monologue," 30.

Ramon Bieri, that they hope will give them shelter), even though he will not think twice about shooting him a few scenes later after he attempts to flee.

After being arrested, Kip is full of compliments for the officers, saying they “performed like a couple of heroes,” until the sheriff feels so conflicted about his being charmed that he throws Kip’s hat out of the car to reassert his authority. Kip indulges in his celebrity when speaking to reporters in the hanger, throwing out personal items like saintly relics; and when he is taken away by helicopter, Kip again fixates on complimenting an officer on his hat. It does not seem like he thinks he will gain anything through his politeness, other than to be liked for that moment. Of course, Kip is not Starkweather, but his character is inspired by him, and Springsteen’s personification of Starkweather owes as much to Kip as it does to the historical figure. This connection allows Springsteen to emphasize one of Malick’s major themes: the way outer facades can cover over the sometimes-dark realities hiding beneath, and the way a culture’s obsession with the trappings of celebrity—whether artistic, athletic, or political—helps to facilitate that phenomenon⁴⁸.

Furthermore, using direct address frees Springsteen from having to describe the way his version of Starkweather uses a seemingly genuine obsequiousness to disarm, and even gain trust from his interlocutors. Rather, we experience that obsequiousness in two ways: the introduction of the sheriff so late into the song means that for the first half of the song listeners may assume themselves to be the addressee. Listener and sheriff are both experiencing the speaker work his charm. Just like the characters in the film that laugh at Kip’s jokes and are lulled into siding with him,

⁴⁸ Sissy Spacek articulates this reading particularly well in an interview included in the Criterion Collection edition of *Badlands*.

including Holly, we can begin to ignore the horrific things he has done as we empathize with his plight. This is all part of the way Springsteen finds his own way into the character--by placing himself in the role of someone that knows he has done something terribly wrong but still wants to see himself as a good person. The speaker refers to "innocent people" that have died, so he is not framing himself as some sort of bringer of justice, but quite the opposite. Yet that does not mean that he does not want to be liked or, more importantly, remembered. According to Jeff McArthur, the grandson of Fugate's lawyer John McArthur, Starkweather refused to plead insanity because "nobody remembers a crazy man."⁴⁹ Instead, Starkweather (at least in the constructed form Springsteen is working with) seemed to intuitively know that he was constructing a public persona based on the James Dean archetype, despite, according to Zanes, being the polar opposite of Dean in terms of charisma and looks.⁵⁰ (Zanes 2023, 123).

Whether it was the media's construction, Sheen's performance in Malick's movie, or the general public's morbid fascination with serial killers, Starkweather's public persona has become a mythologized version of a person that, by most accounts, was below average in terms of stereotypical ideas of beauty, intelligence, and personality.⁵¹ "Nebraska," however, is written from Starkweather's point of view; therefore, Springsteen's research into his personality had to include both the real and the fantasy versions of Starkweather, so that both could inform his characterization. This is the preparatory work that Hemingway sees as so necessary for someone to write well.

⁴⁹ Zanes, *Deliver me from Nowhere*, 122.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 123.

⁵¹ Ibid., 123.

Springsteen's research meant he came to understand something of Starkweather (or at least his constructed persona), his situation, and his time. He does not spell out that information, but channels it into the way the character addresses his listener. Springsteen is able to show rather than tell, which allows the listener to feel emotionally rather than grasp intellectually who the speaker is, and how he sees himself, which in turn forces listeners/readers to consider their own personal responses to the character. As Rauch points out, Springsteen's technique "allows our sympathy to be conscripted initially (often, as in "Nebraska," at the expense of judgement); but finally, when we have heard the entire song and can no longer empathize, judgement remains available to us in order to distance ourselves from the speaker."⁵²

Springsteen's use of narrative gaps and non-sequiturs also contributes to the construction of his speaker's psyche. There is a major gap, for instance, in the first stanza between going for a ride and the death of ten people, a gap that is partially filled in as the song continues. In the second verse he describes some of his route (from Lincoln, Nebraska to the badlands of Wyoming), the type of gun he is carrying (sawed-off .410), and what he did ("killed everything in my path"). The specificity here is as important to crafting the character as is the vagueness of the previous verse. His movement through the so-called "heartland" of America connotes the corruption of an area thought to be safe and wholesome.

The speaker here is a snake in the garden, bringing violence and destruction. The last line of the verse is delivered with the same matter-of-factness as the rest, even though the speaker is confessing to a heinous crime. There is no attempt to soften the reality of what he is saying, and

⁵² Rauch, "Dramatic Monologue," 37-38.

there is no sign of remorse. The speaker is simply relaying the reality of his actions in the same way he relayed the reality of his movements and the reality of his weapon, thus employing that same illusion of objectivity that is also vital to Hemingway's style. Vital because it replaces the significant explanation of why with the less significant details of how and thus seems to provide answers while actually obfuscating them.

The speaker's statement that he does not feel sorry for what he has done, and in fact, sees the whole endeavor as "fun," alongside his recognition of the "innocence" of his victims in the first verse, and the flippant way he talks about being executed, emphasize that Springsteen has shaped the character not as a sociopathic killer without knowledge of right or wrong. Rather, the Starkweather Springsteen has crafted is well aware of what he has done and is more than a little arrogant about his deeds. We can consider Springsteen's choice to include Starkweather's request to have Caril Ann, his "pretty baby," sitting on his lap when he is electrocuted, as a part of this arrogance, especially as it speaks to the way Starkweather changed his story regarding Fugate's innocence during the trial. These moments also speak to Starkweather's actual personality and behavior at the time of his arrest, as the suggestion that Fugate be executed while sitting on his lap is also taken from his own words.⁵³ In each of these cases, Springsteen is providing just the tip of the iceberg with his short glimpses at historical details and letting the rest of the story drift below the surface. The stripped-down nature of the song compels listeners toward a deeper consideration and encourages us to make our own judgements about the macho posturing of the speaker.

⁵³ Zanes, *Deliver me from Nowhere*, 126.

The structure of the song further reflects Springsteen's attempts to capture the wandering and narcissistic nature of Starkweather's mind through its loops and narrative jumps. Consider the shifting approach to each verse: while the first and second verses are purely reportorial, verse three injects some personal reflection into the middle of the narrative, as if the weight of the speaker's confession has just hit him, and he feels it necessary to justify it somehow, though he cannot. In verse four, the speaker returns to his narrative to describe the jury finding him guilty and the judge sentencing him to death. In the second half of the verse, the speaker seems to begin to imagine that death as he describes how it may occur in a "prison storeroom/with leather straps across my chest." Unlike the first two verses, the reportorial tone here is overtaken by the speaker's speculation. This imagined scenario continues into the fifth verse, where the speaker again pictures the moment of his execution. The obsessive looping of the speaker's mind is clear when the sixth verse restates the information from the fourth verse in a slightly more poetic manner. The second line takes on almost Shakespearian syntax in the way its clauses are arranged. Rather than his soul being hurled into a great void, its "into that great void my soul'd be hurled." Of course, this helps to make the rhyme with world work better, but the archaic construction of the line is an attempt at formality that reveals the high-minded aspirations of Springsteen's Starkweather character. In this way, the lines capture his fixation on posterity as he restates the same information with a classical flair, either to make himself, or the event, more important, by elevating it through a formalized poetic phrase.

In terms of the narrative space given to killing and death in the song, the speaker spends far more time considering and describing his own impending death than he does on the deaths of all his victims. This is, of

course, a natural inclination; however, it becomes more revealing if we consider the purpose of this dramatic monologue. Ostensibly, it seems that the speaker is attempting both to describe and explain his actions. Hence, he begins with simple description, statements of facts, locations, weapons, etc., but quickly moves into an emotional response. It is as if the gravity of his crimes hits him mid-discourse, and so he must re-assert the tough-guy persona he has been crafting, the sort of persona that could call a killing-spree "fun." Here form takes over from content in representing the speaker's psyche. We are glimpsing his thought patterns, and we can see that they have been fully overtaken by his complete self-interest. Hemingway does something similar in *The Sun Also Rises* when Jake regards himself, and his wounded genitals, in the mirror of his bedroom. His thoughts dart about, from comments on his furniture, to the quality of bullfighting papers, to the architecture in Italy, to the odd behavior of an Italian general, to his unrequited love for Brett, until every thought becomes about the injustice of his injury, and he is overcome with tears.⁵⁴ Hemingway does not have to tell us that Jake's trauma sends him into depressive spirals because we are experiencing it. The same is true of Starkweather here. Springsteen's narrator does not have to tell us that he is fixating on his own death; it is impressed upon us, even as what is being expressed says the opposite.

After the fifth verse, the form of the song changes ever so slightly with the injection of a short harmonica interlude. It comes directly after the speaker's dark joke about having his "pretty baby" sit on his lap while he is executed. This longer than typical instrumental interlude, accompanied by the wail-like sound of the harmonica, as Char Roone Miller points out,

⁵⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun also Rises* (1926) (Scribners, 2006), 38-39.

“evokes a foreign yet bodily sound – one that ... does not directly respond to the authoritative demand to explain its agency but does operate in parallel with the human voice.”⁵⁵ The harmonica represents a pause, a moment for the speaker to reflect on the cruelty of his statements, with possible regret. The rawness of the instrumentation evokes a connection to the speaker’s inner struggle that the attempts at macho posturing found in his words cannot achieve. Miller calls the words an “alienated human voice” that is offset by “the intimate sound of the harmonica.”⁵⁶ When this wailing ends, however, the weight of the speaker’s actions returns, and he repeats the same information from the fourth verse before recounting a conversation he had with an anonymous “they”: “They wanted to know why I did what I did / Well sir, I guess there’s just a meanness in this world.” The pronoun “they” is key here, as it connotes a group that has asked the speaker a question. These could be reporters or police officers, and so it is instantly reminiscent of the final scenes from *Badlands* in which Kip attempts to charm a group of reporters before being loaded into a police car. The whole of the verse, and especially the last two lines are performative: the speaker is telling us about a time he was asked to tell a group of people the thing that he is now telling us. The group is not identified, yet “they” are there, informing every aspect of what the speaker says, including the last instance of direct address using the honorific “sir.” The speaker is playing the part of a ‘good old boy,’ supplicating to the authority of the law in order to garner favor, despite having no actual respect for the law or the value of any human life, other than his own. In this way, these lines articulate everything that is prominent about the real

⁵⁵ Char Roone Miller, “‘Ghostly Voices Rose from the Fields’: *Nebraska* and Political Hopelessness,” *American Political Thought* 8, no. 1 (2019): 136.

⁵⁶ Miller, “Ghostly Voices,” 137.

Starkweather, Kip from *Badlands*, and even Mitchum's Harry Powell from *The Night of the Hunter* – all evil men with a desire for fame and the remarkable ability to charm even their most fervent detractors. The word “meanness” in the final line that also draws an allusion to The Misfit, another figure that, despite espousing horrific worldviews, manages to garner empathy from his auditor: the grandmother, whose family The Misfit's henchmen have just murdered. Similarly, we as listeners, and Springsteen as the writer, find ourselves empathizing, in the way Rauch describes, with a character who has enacted extreme violence on wholly innocent people.

In his essay on Springsteen's connections to O'Connor, Streight writes that “Springsteen is remarkable as a songwriter in his intention and ability to step inside someone else's skin, to see the world through their eyes, and to step back and allow his own voice, as he says of the *Joad* songs ‘to disappear into the voices of those [I've] chosen to write about.’”⁵⁷ This ability to step inside someone else's skin has everything to do with Springsteen being a writer who, as Hemingway says, “knows enough about what he is writing about.”⁵⁸ “Nebraska” the song, and *Nebraska* the record, represents a culmination of the song writing journey Springsteen was on in the first decade of his career as he moved from the lyrically verbose, and poetically complex songs of his first two albums, through the significantly simplified, yet far more evocative songs of his next three records, to the dark, and often disturbing, worlds he creates through remarkable lyrical economy on *Nebraska*.

⁵⁷ Streight, “Songstory,” 140.

⁵⁸ Hemingway, *Death*, 192.

Yet, despite the lack of lyrical and musical grandiosity he had become known for, Springsteen still manages to pack a considerable amount of narrative and thematic meaning into the mere 167 words of “Nebraska” by submerging so much of what informs the narrative. In letting go of his earlier hyper-specific, overly detailed, and verbose style of writing lyrics, Springsteen allows us to become active interpreters, and even makers of meaning alongside him. Just like when we read a Hemingway text informed by his Iceberg Principle, in “Nebraska” we get to “participate actively in decoding the action.”⁵⁹

For Springsteen’s part, this is a great compliment to his audience, as he gives us space to discover the depths of meaning at play, rather than deliver it in some didactic manner. This approach also reveals the level of confidence he had in his songwriting ability at that time. Springsteen, and others, have described his live performances not as just concerts, but as being “in concert” with the audience. Indeed, his performances are more than just unidirectional experiences that go from the stage outward, but, at their best, become exchanges of emotional energy from performer to spectator and back again until those demarcations lose much of their meaning⁶⁰ As this close reading shows, audience participation is not only part of his live performance but is a fundamental aspect of his songwriting. The subtle lyrical and instrumental details submerged in “Nebraska” create a space for Springsteen to find himself in his characters, and for his listeners to find themselves in his songs.

⁵⁹ Stoneback, *Reading*, 211.

⁶⁰ Linda K. Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall: Community and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (Waveland Press, 2011), 38.

**“Man Turns His Back On His Family”:
Domestic Precarity and Fragile Masculinity in
The Indian Runner and “Highway Patrolman”**

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Abstract

This paper examines Sean Penn's film *The Indian Runner* in relation to the song he adapted it from, Bruce Springsteen's "Highway Patrolman." The film's plot closely follows the narrative of the song while greatly fleshing out the backstories of the central characters, brothers Joe and Frank Roberts, and adding in several other plot elements that help to allow the film to build to the dramatic climax that is lifted from the song's final verse. But what these various elements also do, beyond "flesh[ing] out the narrative spine provided by Springsteen's song," as Jeff Smith puts it in *Film Art*, is shed light on the film's dominant. From the film's first scene, it is evident that the film's environment is one in which masculinity is fragile and is constantly at risk of destroying both itself and the very foundation of domesticity. While "Highway Patrolman" is an effective under-six-minute morality play about family and ethical dilemmas when it comes to loved ones, in this paper I argue that *The Indian Runner*'s dominant is ultimately the deconstruction of the classic morality play via the inclusion of scenes and stylistic elements that consistently show both the detrimental impact of the main characters' damaged masculine identities on themselves and their families. In doing so, I examine the film's three structural levels -- stylistic, narrative, and thematic -- concluding that the film's use of defamiliarization on the first two levels allows the themes to be communicated in ways that both honor and transcend its inspiration.

As the legend goes, on January 3, 1982, Bruce Springsteen situated himself inside a bedroom in a ranch house he was renting in Colts Neck,

New Jersey, with a TEAC 144 four-track recorder, a Gibson J-200 acoustic guitar, and a handful of other instruments, and recorded the series of songs that would end up comprising his sixth studio album and first solo acoustic album, *Nebraska*. In his autobiography *Born to Run*, Springsteen describes the experience of recording these songs as “an unknowing meditation on my childhood and its mysteries...I was after a feeling, a tone that felt like the world I’d known and still carried inside me. The remnants of that world were still only ten minutes and ten miles from where I was living.”¹ Warren Zanes further described these songs in his book *Deliver Me from Nowhere*, saying that they directly mirrored Springsteen’s troubled and depressed mental state in the early 1980s, reflecting his overall “ambivalence about the world he came into and came from.” One notable example of this is “the tension between familial allegiance and the law that underpins ‘Highway Patrolman,’” a song that in many ways forms the centerpiece of the album.²

The song’s lyrics tell the story of a man named Joe Roberts, a “highway patrolman” in a fictional town near the Ohio-Michigan border, who has a criminal brother named Frank. Despite constantly being alerted to his brother’s violent criminal activity, Joe still finds himself bailing Frank out of trouble rather than allowing him to face consequences for his actions out of a “fraternal protectiveness” that culminates in him allowing Frank to escape over the Canadian border rather than arrest him for brutally beating a man in a bar.³ Many of the other lyrics are rich with detail and historical significance, with allusions to Frank’s service in the Army from 1965 to 1968

¹ Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

² Zanes, Warren. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen’s Nebraska*. New York: Crown, 2023.

³ Rauch, Alan. “Bruce Springsteen and the dramatic monologue.” *American Studies* 29, no. 1 (1988): 29-49.

(naturally coinciding with the Vietnam War, not mentioned by name in the song), Joe having gotten a farm deferment before an agricultural recession drove him to become a highway patrolman, and both Joe and Frank being romantically attracted to Joe's wife, Maria. Despite initially describing "Highway Patrolman" as "coming up short" in a note to his manager Jon Landau, Springsteen "would later rank the song and recording as one of his very best, exactly as it was,"⁴ and his biographer Dave Marsh would call it "Nebraska's finest story," with the protagonist Joe Roberts being "Springsteen's most fully and lovingly drawn character and the performance is as beautiful as it is exhausted."⁵ Springsteen himself is careful to note in *Born to Run* that both "Highway Patrolman" and the next track in the album's sequence, "State Trooper," "were recorded only once each," something that ultimately comes across in the raw, cathartic nature of these songs even in the context of the album as a whole.⁶

Among those who also deeply responded to "Highway Patrolman" was actor Sean Penn. Around the same time Springsteen recorded the songs that would make up *Nebraska*, Penn was dating Springsteen's younger sister, Pam. As Penn would later tell his biographer Richard T. Kelly, he heard a demo of *Nebraska* before it came out, and later told Springsteen while drunk that he wanted to make a film out of "Highway Patrolman" someday.⁷ While Springsteen failed to take him seriously at the time, the song's story continued to stick with Penn and, about eight years later, he made his directorial debut with a film called *The Indian Runner*, which

⁴ Zanes, Warren. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska*. New York: Crown, 2023.

⁵ Marsh, Dave. *Bruce Springsteen: Two Hearts, the Story*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2004.

⁶ Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

⁷ Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.

acknowledges the Springsteen song's inspiration in its opening credits. The film's plot closely follows the narrative of the song while greatly fleshing out the backstories of Joe and Frank, showing how the "good brother/bad brother" dichotomy of "Highway Patrolman" ultimately damages both of them, and adding several other plot elements that help the film build to the dramatic climax, lifted almost directly from the song's final verse.

But what these various elements also do, beyond just "flesh[ing] out the narrative spine provided by Springsteen's song,"⁸ as Jeff Smith puts it in *Film Art*, is shed light on the film's "dominant." As defined by Kristin Thompson, "the dominant is a formal principle that controls the work at every level, from the local to the global, foregrounding some devices and subordinating others."⁹ When viewing *The Indian Runner*, it is easy to see certain traits that make it distinctive. Deane Williams, at the beginning of his chapter on *The Indian Runner* in his book *The Cinema of Sean Penn*, quickly identifies several of these, dubbing them "a host of figures—Bruce Springsteen, Harry Crews, the Johnstown Flood, Peter Nabokov's *Indian Running*, Dennis Hopper, Charles Bronson, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, the Method —[assembled] to facilitate a narrative concerned with the ways in which places and times condition individuals."¹⁰ And this connects directly with the list that Springsteen provides in *Born to Run*, where he says that his "family, [Bob] Dylan, Woody [Guthrie], Hank [Williams], the American gothic short stories of Flannery O'Connor, the noir novels of James M. Cain, the quiet violence of the films of Terrence Malick and the decayed fable of

⁸ Bordwell, David., Thompson, Kristin., Smith, Jeff. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill LLC, 2023.

⁹ Thompson, Kristin. "Boredom on the Beach: Triviality and Humor in *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 89-109. Princeton University Press, 1988.

¹⁰ Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

director Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* all guided my imagination" during the writing and recording of the *Nebraska* album.¹¹

However, when focusing on the film's formal aesthetics, the aesthetic elements within the film that make up its form and style, a clearer picture comes into play. From the film's very first scene, in which Joe shoots and kills a young man in self-defense only to feel tremendous guilt that is amplified later when the man's parents take their grief and anger out on him, it is evident that the film's environment is one in which masculinity is fragile and is constantly at risk of destroying both itself and the very foundation of domesticity. Indeed, Springsteen's "Highway Patrolman" is a deeply effective under-six-minute morality play about family and ethical dilemmas when it comes to loved ones, highlighted by the aforementioned "good brother/bad brother" dynamic of Joe and Frank. In contrast, *The Indian Runner*'s dominant is ultimately the deconstruction of the classic morality play (i.e., the breaking down of the sort of story used to teach moral/ethical lessons) via the inclusion of scenes and stylistic elements that consistently show the detrimental impact of Joe and Frank's fraternal dynamic on themselves and their families, and thereby illustrate a deeper connection with the broader life and works of Springsteen regarding both masculinity and domesticity.

Using Kristin Thompson's neoformalist analytical model from the "Boredom on the Beach" chapter of her book *Breaking the Glass Armor* as an outline, one in which she analyzes a film's formal aesthetics on three structural levels, I will likewise examine the three structural levels of *The Indian Runner*—stylistic (the level pertaining to the film's visual and cinematic style), narrative (the level pertaining to the film's plot), and

¹¹ Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

thematic (pertaining to the film's themes). In doing so, I will look primarily at the film's use of defamiliarization (i.e., the process by which a work of art presents a familiar object as strange or unfamiliar), which, as Thompson notes, is crucial for this form of analysis because it focuses on how the film "seeks to prolong and roughen our experience — to induce us to concentrate on the processes of perception and cognition in and of themselves, rather than for some practical end."¹² And particularly in comparison to other competing models of critical film analysis, Thompson's model will help foreground what is central to the film's deconstructive practices, as well as highlight the means by which the film is formally complex in ways that are deeply effective without drawing particular attention to itself

I. The Stylistic Level

From the opening prologue of *The Indian Runner*, a dark, almost sinister stylistic template is set. While Joe provides the opening narration explaining the process by which Native American hunters trap and kill deer, the film shows a series of slow-motion, fuzzy moving images visually illustrating this process one by one, with moments of black in between and heartbeats accentuating the transitions. While this exact sort of editing pattern will not be repeated in the rest of the film, what this prologue does immediately establish is the film's common pattern of defamiliarization. Here, Penn takes a situation commonly portrayed in films set in the American heartland — that of a hunter killing a deer — and breaks it down to present a fragmented depiction of it that fully emphasizes the violence of the practice, whereas most other films are timid when it comes to the kill

¹² Thompson, Kristin. "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 3–46. Princeton University Press, 1988.

shot. This is a perfect example of what Kristin Thompson refers to as a “roughened form,” which “encompasses all types of devices and relations among devices that would tend to make perception and understanding less easy.”¹³ Color is mostly absent from the scene with the exception of the brown skin of the deer and the Native America hunter’s coat and, most importantly, the deer’s blood after it is killed by the hunter. The scene as a whole is lit in such a way that the overall features of the deer and the hunter are obscured in silhouette, with even the face of the hunter never clearly seen. And the fragmented nature of the sequence construction also helps to imply a ritualistic nature to this violence, something that will become much more significant when looking at the thematic structural level later.

Following the prologue and subsequent opening credits, more of the film’s stylistic tendencies start to come into play and, as Deane Williams notes, “the place of *The Indian Runner* is evoked.”¹⁴ But even in the process of evoking the film’s place, Penn still uses defamiliarization tactics that force the audience to see a common location in a way that fits the sinister, unforgiving milieu that will come to define the rest of the film. He does this in this first post-opening credits scene via three establishing shots, the first being a close-up of snow-covered wheat, followed by a shot of a dirt road stretching toward a white light in the distance and another close-up of a barbed-wire fence. By not revealing the precise location at this juncture and instead focusing on the cold, harsh nature of the surrounding environment, Penn is able to establish what Williams refers to as “an unspecified mid-west America...that is prefigured by the titles which tell us that it was

¹³ Thompson, Kristin. “Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods.” In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 3–46. Princeton University Press, 1988.

¹⁴ Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

‘inspired by the song Highway Patrolman by Bruce Springsteen...provid[ing] an immediate intertext with [Springsteen’s] 1982 album *Nebraska*.”¹⁵ And indeed, the cold, bleak nature of Penn’s cinematography in these opening shots is more than a little evocative of the *Nebraska* album itself and even the album’s cover, which is a black-and-white photograph from the front seat of a car driving down a two-lane rural highway. As well, the choice to immediately emphasize elements of this landscape such as snow-covered wheat and a barbed-wire fence, provokes instant feelings of decay and isolation that likewise match the feelings that Springsteen captures on *Nebraska* and “Highway Patrolman,” both in the characters as well as the sparse acoustic arrangements and vocals.

Much more concrete elements of the stylistic level come into play here once the protagonist, Joe, is formally introduced to the audience. The very manner in which he is introduced, via the sudden arrival of his police car chasing a young man down a rural two-lane highway, establishes him as one with the location, as the chase he is engaged in is intercut with other establishing shots, including of a snow-covered farmland complete with a windmill, a church with its steeple stretched high into the sky, and a factory with smoke billowing out of its smokestack. His job, as a police officer in rural Nebraska with the Cass County Sheriff’s Office, is routinely emphasized in a visual way throughout the film, an authority figure as ingrained an institution in this town as its farms, churches, and factories. As well, editing the sequence in this manner serves as another form of defamiliarization, as it places equal emphasis on the surrounding rural environments as it does on the car chase, a method that can be disorienting

¹⁵ Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

to the spectator and in this case conditions them to view the location as equally important to the action happening on screen, especially since this car chase is not really causally significant. While it doesn't necessarily serve as a "delay," a film editing/storytelling technique that can either compress nor expand time, it does, in a certain sense, serve as what Thompson refers to as "impeding material" in how it distracts from the main action, "drawing our attention...and thus complicating our sense of the narrative."¹⁶

However, Penn quickly uses formal stylistic devices to also emphasize the film's deep-rooted focus on violence and fragile masculinity, the classical dimension of Penn's narration, and in this way, he is doing what Thompson describes as making these "stylistic devices...subservient to the narrative line through through-going compositional motivation."¹⁷ As the car Joe is chasing screeches to a halt and Joe subsequently slams on his brakes, the scene goes into slow motion. The slow motion persists as the two men exit their cars, and the young man Joe is chasing draws his gun, repeatedly firing at Joe while running away from him. Eventually, Joe draws a shotgun and shoots the man directly in the chest, blood visibly bursting from him as he falls to the ground dead, the slow motion only stopping as the camera zooms in on a mortified Joe staring at the man. This particular use of slow motion, as well as match-on-action editing (i.e., a film editing technique that cuts from one shot to the next while the subject of said shot is in motion), to accentuate violence will be used again in the film's climactic car chase between Joe and Frank, in a way that provides a strong

¹⁶ Thompson, Kristin. "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 3-46. Princeton University Press, 1988.

¹⁷ Thompson, Kristin. "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 3-46. Princeton University Press, 1988.

parallel with the opening sequence while also subverting the spectator's expectations given Joe's ultimate decision at the end of the film.

But what this shot also establishes that ends up being a key stylistic motif is Joe's isolation. This situates the film in much of the same mindset that Springsteen himself was in when writing "Highway Patrolman" and the rest of the *Nebraska* album. As Warren Zanes writes regarding Springsteen's isolation at that time, "From that point forward Springsteen would never again be in a band the way he'd been in one for *The River*. He was not someone's boyfriend, didn't even belong in his own neighborhood. He was alone and in *Nebraska*."¹⁸ Starting from when the camera zooms in on Joe after he has shot and killed this young man, Penn evokes a similar isolation to the one Springsteen experienced, frequently depicting Joe alone in the camera frame when he is outside of a domestic situation. This is particularly pronounced when he faces the parents of the young man he killed in self-defense, as he is shown sitting alone at his desk while the man's mother tearfully calls him a murderer and his father bursts into an angry rendition of the folk song "John Henry" (a song that, coincidentally, would be covered by Springsteen with his "Seeger Sessions Band" fifteen years after this film's release). As opposed to the imposing, authoritative presence Joe had when shooting the young man in self-defense, here he is framed in a way that effectively strips him of power and authority. Even when he goes back home to his wife, Maria, and discusses what happened with her, Penn still frames him in such a way that communicates this isolation. In fact, it is only after Frank surprises Joe and Maria in their home eight minutes into the film that Penn slowly begins to frame Joe alongside

¹⁸ Zanes, Warren. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska*. New York: Crown, 2023.

others in a communal context. But this stylistic device will continue to come back at various points throughout the narrative to further illustrate Joe's own fragile masculinity.

And especially once Frank firmly enters into the story, Penn begins to develop other defamiliarizing stylistic devices that carry the film through to its end, the most crucial being that of the titular "Indian runner." While the "legend of the Indian runner" is first explained in the aforementioned prologue, it is not until Penn begins showing "the ghost-like American Indian figure...that drifts past [Frank] at several intervals in the film" that it firmly solidifies itself as a stylistic device subservient to both the narrative and thematic lines throughout the film.¹⁹ In each case, Penn uses a combination of eerie sound design evoking different sounds such as howling winds or banging drums, as well as careful editing, to emphasize this figure's haunting nature to Frank, most notably at the film's end when a vision of the man running across the road causes Frank to stop dead in his tracks while being chased by Joe. And, as will be discussed later, the way this specific sequence is edited and filmed is in direct parallel to the film's opening sequence, particularly in terms of the use of match-on-action editing, which is a key way that both sequences are able to engage in defamiliarization.

II. The Narrative Level

As Thompson writes in her "Boredom on the Beach" chapter, in contrast to the film she was writing about (Jacques Tati's *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*), "a typical Hollywood-style film would have a clear-cut

¹⁹ Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

pattern of narrative development; this pattern might involve a changing relationship among characters, as in a love story..."²⁰ And while *The Indian Runner* is not a love story in any classical sense, the central narrative pattern is based on the changing fraternal dynamic between Joe and Frank, and how this damages both of them. This changing dynamic, and the damage it ultimately inflicts, is something that Penn's changes to the story of "Highway Patrolman" come to highlight, and these changes seem to create a tension between Springsteen's original and Penn's adaptation. More specifically, while the narrative of "Highway Patrolman" centers on Joe's dilemma over how to handle his dual roles as law enforcement officer and brother, this narrative of *The Indian Runner* is even more internal, being based on Joe "becom[ing] haunted by the possibility that he and his brother are doomed to be temperamental opposites—that they have nothing in common but blood."²¹

Following the prologue and opening sequence, which mainly seek to establish the film's central thematic elements and certain stylistic devices, *The Indian Runner's* narrative can be roughly divided into six main narrative developments that form the structure of the overall story:

Frank's character is introduced, sneaking into Joe and Maria's house after returning early from his tour in Vietnam.

1. Following Frank's overnight stay with Joe and Maria and his brief car ride with Joe the following morning, Frank hops a freight train out of town, leaving Joe to relay the brief visit to their parents.

²⁰ Thompson, Kristin. "Boredom on the Beach: Triviality and Humor in *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 89-109. Princeton University Press, 1988.

²¹ Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.

2. Joe learns that Frank has been imprisoned in Columbus, Ohio, for assaulting his girlfriend and will be released soon, so he decides to go and formally begin working toward his goal of “try[ing] and get close to him again” despite the obvious reservations of Maria and what he knows deep down will be Frank’s own stubbornness toward anyone trying to help him.
3. Frank comes back to town after the suicide of his and Joe’s father, bringing his girlfriend Dorothy with him, resulting in him and Joe growing closer again.
4. Frank and Dorothy conceive a child and get married while Frank works in construction.
5. While Dorothy is in labor giving birth to their child, Frank gets violently drunk and beats a bartender to death, which results in Joe chasing him down to the state line before allowing him to go.

While Frank’s presence is the initial destabilizing force in this story and the main driver of the film’s structure, it is Joe who still serves as the protagonist and narrator. The main sequence that opens the film after the credits, in which Joe shoots and kills a young man in self-defense while telling the audience via voiceover that he didn’t believe his own justification for doing what he did, is a crucial narrative event even if it exists outside of the central narrative structure due to its severe implications for Joe’s overall well-being by the time Frank arrives. As Richard T. Kelly puts it, this incident leaves Joe “physically and mentally discomfited,” which further helps to make his reunion with Frank “less

than [he] had hoped.”²² This is even noticeable when Frank first sneaks into the house unbeknownst to Joe and Maria. Maria, thinking that someone has broken in, grabs the gun from the nightstand and sneaks downstairs, only to discover Frank. The fact that Maria, and not Joe, is taking charge in this scene as the protector of the house and family is a significant narrative detail in showing the weakened masculine state that Joe has been left in after the earlier tragedy, a state that he will ultimately never fully recover from in this film.

The voiceover narration Joe provides throughout the film also serves as an important narrative anchor for the story. Not only does the voiceover function as “a gesture that provides an equivalent to the song [“Highway Patrolman”]’s first-person perspective,”²³ it also serves as a crucial form of building connection with Joe as a protagonist through his revelation of both backstory and internal commentary throughout the film. In particular, the exact lines of voiceover that are heard after Joe shoots the young man in self-defense at the beginning speak volumes as to the fragile state of Joe’s overall masculinity. His voiceover then tells the spectator shortly afterward that he had not seen Frank since he lost the family farm in 1965, a crucial piece of backstory that speaks to broader unfulfilled masculine desires that linger throughout the rest of the film. This piece becomes even more poignant when Joe’s voiceover tells the spectator later that “I used to know my brother like I used to know I’d always be a farmer, but drifting off on the train that day was a stranger.”

The above line, in conjunction with the scene of Frank abruptly ending his visit home, does two crucial things. First, it deepens Joe’s

²² Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.

²³ Bordwell, David., Thompson, Kristin., Smith, Jeff. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill LLC, 2023.

relationship with Frank by showing a change in his view of him. While in "Highway Patrolman," Springsteen's lyrics indicate that "it's been the same comedown" with Joe and Frank ever since their respective childhoods, this line shows that Joe's brotherly perspective of Frank has changed with this singular visit home. He always knew that Frank was the town hellraiser and troublemaker, but their respective experiences in law enforcement and the military have still changed them. And secondly, this line shows how Joe's familial and masculine dreams and ideals have always been interconnected to his own identity, and with both of these vanishing before his eyes, Joe is experiencing nothing short of an identity crisis, one that defines the narrative as seen through his eyes going forward in this film. And in many ways, this serves as yet another reflection of Springsteen's mindset at the time of writing "Highway Patrolman," when, in his own words, he "was simply a guy who was rarely comfortable in his own skin, whatever skin that might be. The idea of home itself, like much else, filled me with distrust and a bucket load of grief. I'd long convinced myself...almost...that homes were for everybody else."²⁴ As fundamentally different as Joe and Frank are, neither feels comfortable in their own skin or homes, both in *The Indian Runner* and in "Highway Patrolman."

Likewise, the deaths of Joe and Frank's mother and father within the film's first hour are vital in setting the stage for the unraveling of the family structure that will become a centerpiece of the film's final hour. Even when Frank decides to hop a freight train and leave town instead of seeing his parents, an early warning sign of what he will later do during the film's climax, he still ultimately reaches out to his father during his imprisonment in Columbus, an act that both serves as a catalyst for Joe actively pursuing

²⁴ Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

his goal of trying to get close to him and reinforces the overarching importance of the family structure. However, once both parents are dead and Joe and Frank are left to carry on the family name, the very foundation of domesticity is suddenly on incredibly shaky ground, and a relatively brief exercise in Frank becoming a family man prodded by Joe eventually proves not enough to be able to sustain it, even as both Maria and Dorothy continually serve as guiding lights for the hope of its sustainability.

Maria, in particular, is important when looking at the film's narrative in regard to the precarity of the family structure. Other than the aforementioned scene when she takes charge of grabbing the gun to protect her husband and son from a potential home invasion, she is also seen as a matriarchal leader in several other ways. When she is first introduced, she is seen grabbing a bottle of Johnnie Walker along with two glasses and pouring drinks for Joe and herself, taking control of her house while her husband sits in his guilt and shame. The spectator never even sees Maria's face until she is pouring the first glass, with the cinematography and editing, emphasizing the ritual of what she is doing, in yet another form of defamiliarization. Throughout the film, she is seen taking charge in a variety of ways, whether it is bringing in household income by tutoring other Mexican immigrants in English or taking care of Dorothy in addition to her own son after Dorothy and Frank's move into town. But her role in sustaining the family structure reaches its apex in the film's climax, when she is the sole family member present at the birth of Dorothy's son, acting as midwife while Joe and Frank are in the midst of a car chase to the state line. And while Maria does have a significant symbolic presence in "Highway Patrolman," with Heather Stur specifically arguing that she

represents “the importance of women to the Vietnam War narrative,”²⁵ here she takes on an even greater significance as the familial savior in the absence of men to uphold the family structure (and even her name and Latina heritage allow for Springsteen-esque biblical parallels given the name Maria being a variation on Mary, the mother of Jesus and patron saint of Mexico).

And, of course, it is in the film’s aforementioned climax where the true implications of the narrative fully come to light. The editing structure of the opening sequence described earlier is mirrored but also expanded in this final sequence, as Penn intercuts Joe and Frank’s car chase with Dorothy giving birth to her and Frank’s son with support from Maria. Not only does this juxtaposition illustrate the natural endpoint of Frank’s broken masculinity and the collapse of the family structure, but it also, as Jeff Smith puts it, “alter[s] alter the meaning of Springsteen’s original [song]. While the song’s lyric about a man who turns his back on his family seems to affirm Joe’s allegiance to his brother, it implicitly condemns Frank, who at the end...abandons his wife and child.”²⁶ And by this simple alternation in the narrative of the story, Penn is able to take a song that Springsteen himself would introduce in concert as being about “family and duty, and how, sometimes, it’s hard to know what the right thing to do is with the ones that you love,”²⁷ and transform it into an even more complex cinematic narrative.

²⁵ Stur, Heather. “Finding Meaning in Manhood after the War: Gender and the Warrior Myth in Springsteen’s Vietnam War Songs.” In *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream*, 111-122. Routledge, 2016.

²⁶ Bordwell, David., Thompson, Kristin., Smith, Jeff. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill LLC, 2023.

²⁷ Springsteen, Bruce. “Highway Patrolman,” recorded August 20, 1984, track 6 on 08/20/1984, Brendan Byrne Arena, East Rutherford, NJ, live.brucespringsteen.net, mp3.

III. The Thematic Level

Upon *The Indian Runner's* theatrical release, film critic Roger Ebert was quick to note a thematic insight in the film that could also be said about "Highway Patrolman," that being the presence of its creator in both Joe and Frank. While recognizing that the film was inspired by Springsteen's song, Ebert speculates that "maybe it was also inspired, in part, by the two sides of Sean Penn's own character: here, in one person, is not only the media caricature of a hothead who gets in public shoving matches, but also the young man who is one of the three or four best actors of his generation."²⁸ This sort of Jekyll and Hyde personality that Ebert ascribes to Penn's character is one that Springsteen ascribed to himself on his 1987 *Tunnel of Love* album track "Two Faces," a retelling of his first marriage to Julianne Phillips in which he "swore to make her happy every day / And how I made her cry / Two faces have I..."²⁹ Here, Springsteen illustrates one side of him that seeks to serve his wife and make her happy, as well as another side that makes her cry. He expands on this in his autobiography, saying that "Over the years I had come to the realization that there was a part of me, a significant part, that was capable of great carelessness and emotional cruelty, that sought to reap damage and harvest shame," further saying that his "emotionally violent behavior" was "always cowardly and aimed at the women in my life."³⁰

And yet, the other side of Springsteen, the one celebrated by feminist scholars such as Gina Barreca in her essay "Springsteen's Women: Tougher Than the Rest," is one who routinely centers strong women in his music. As

²⁸ Ebert, Roger. "The Indian Runner." *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 4, 1991.

²⁹ Springsteen, Bruce. "Two Faces," recorded 1987, track 8 on *Tunnel of Love*, Columbia, mp3.

³⁰ Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

Barreca notes, “the women in Springsteen’s songs are feminists. Independent, loving, and courageous, she is nobody’s object, property, or plaything.”³¹ Once Springsteen’s public persona as bandleader, political activist and “voice of the people” is factored in, then it is easy to see how, when writing “Highway Patrolman,” Springsteen could equally relate to both Joe and Frank, as, like Penn making *The Indian Runner*, Springsteen could see himself both in the volatile and destructive behavior of Frank as well as the caring dutiful leader of Joe. In the years leading up to recording “Highway Patrolman” in 1982, Springsteen drew attention for various things such as pulling his ex-girlfriend Lynn Goldsmith on stage at Madison Square Garden to humiliate her during a fit of rage, but also for becoming more socially conscious, particularly when turning one of his 1981 concerts at the Los Angeles Sports Arena into a benefit for the Vietnam Veterans of America. These two sides of him, in part stemming from what Warren Zanes describes as his “ambivalence about the world he came into and came from,” therefore ended up manifesting themselves “in the tension between familial allegiance and the law that underpins “Highway Patrolman.”³² And in many ways, Springsteen’s self-consciousness in writing “Highway Patrolman” served as a prelude to both his writing “Two Faces” and the broader *Tunnel of Love* album, as he was putting his inner demons on display for all to see while disguising them in two fictional characters.

And while, as Ebert noted in his review quoted above, Joe and Frank function as stand-ins for Sean Penn as much as they do for Springsteen in

³¹ Barreca, Gina. “Springsteen’s Women: Tougher Than the Rest.” In *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*, 163-169. Rutgers University Press, 2019.

³² Zanes, Warren. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen’s Nebraska*. New York: Crown, 2023.

The Indian Runner, Penn opted for a deeper thematic explanation for his characters' actions in the film. Going back to the film's very beginning with the explanation of "the legend of the Indian Runner" and what the motif symbolizes on a broader scale in the film, particularly since there is nothing in Springsteen's song to motivate this, Penn himself has credited Berkeley anthropology professor Peter Nabokov and his book *Indian Running: Native American History and Tradition* for providing the inspiration for the motif and, ultimately, the title of the film. He specifically explained its thematic significance as representing "our ancestral sins: the criminal past of the settlers in the United States, this hustled land. It inhabits some part of our subconscious, because it got passed on by our fathers, and their fathers, and those before. I viewed that as a sort of shared disease in the culture, and—it's a leap—but I wanted to see if that had anything to do, if not literally then politically, with the damaged spirit of people like Frank."³³ Deane Williams then makes the argument that the film "contains, at its heart, a reflection of the folk traditions of Native American culture only to throw light on the notion of original sin, which functions as the loosest kind of explanation for the actions of Frank."³⁴

Another quote in Penn's interview refers back to Springsteen, specifically his song "Nebraska," the title track from the same album as "Highway Patrolman," which tells the story of Charles Starkweather's spree killings and their aftermath from Starkweather's perspective. When asked why he committed his heinous crimes, the last line of the song simply says, "Sir, I guess there's just a meanness in this world," a statement that ultimately embodies the idea that some people's actions simply do not

³³ Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.

³⁴ Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

make logical or rational sense. When Springsteen asked Penn where Frank's anger in the film came from, Penn referred him to that last line on "Nebraska," saying "that was answer enough for me, because I don't think there's always an explanation for these things."³⁵ All of this being said, there are quite a few thematic threads in the film that further deepen the motif of the "Indian runner" figure beyond Penn's comments and Williams' interpretation.

First, throughout the film, the specter of the Vietnam War lingers in the background, from Joe's voiceover reflecting a letter written by Frank talking about fellow soldiers being disturbed by the bloodshed they had witnessed to Joe and Frank's father's first line about "the boys coming back...coming back real confused." And there is certainly a connection to be made between America's colonizing past on Native land and imperialist present in Vietnam. By the late 1960s, when *The Indian Runner* takes place, the Western film genre was just beginning to make these connections through implicit commentary, most notably in Sam Peckinpah's 1969 film *The Wild Bunch*. This film, a graphically violent revisionist Western depicting a group of aging outlaws fighting against a gang of Mexican revolutionaries, was described by scholar David Cook as being "a mythic allegory of American intervention in Vietnam" where "the victims of this 'heroic' violence are principally civilians caught in the crossfire."³⁶ In doing this, the film highlights how horrific acts of violence such as the My Lai massacre—in which American soldiers mass murdered hundreds of women, children, and senior citizens—are a deeply ingrained part of how

³⁵ Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.

³⁶ Cook, David. *A History of Narrative Film*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.

America as a country has operated since white European colonizers first set foot on the North American continent.

Going back to *The Indian Runner* and Frank's Vietnam experience, it is noteworthy how even for Frank, a violent, unstable man who was known as "the town hellraiser" before going to Vietnam, the sheer horror of the violence he and his fellow soldiers witnessed there was impactful enough that he wrote home about it. And yet, Joe's voiceover is careful enough to emphasize that Frank was complaining that other soldiers were being disturbed by the killing they had seen, not himself. Still, one could certainly interpret those words as Frank talking about himself anyway. And once the motif of the "Indian runner" figure is introduced while Frank is riding in Joe's patrol car, Frank's suppressed guilt and trauma from his Vietnam experience appears to be manifested not in visions of Vietnamese or wounded soldiers, but in something far more symbolic and historical. Much like *The Wild Bunch* used its Western trappings to link America's involvement in the Vietnam War to the genocide that is part of America's policy of Manifest Destiny, *The Indian Runner* uses its titular motif to position Frank's experience in Vietnam within the larger history of American imperialism and destruction across generations.

And while Frank's Vietnam experience is not immediately introduced at the film's opening (it is introduced more than five minutes in via Joe's voiceover), the allusions to it start very early on, particularly when the shooting that begins the film occurs. In this case, the spectator is never offered any background for what the young man Joe is chasing did to warrant being in that position, nor is any explanation offered for why the young man then proceeded to shoot at Joe, which forced Joe to shoot and kill him in self-defense. In some ways, this immediately establishes parallels to the senselessness and meaninglessness of war, specifically

America's involvement in Vietnam. But even more significantly, the frequent comments during the film's first act about the post-traumatic stress of Frank's fellow soldiers in Vietnam seem to be as much about Joe's own guilt and shame from the shooting as they are about the soldiers (perhaps alluding to Springsteen's stated sentiment regarding "the common generational impact of a war that had touched everyone"³⁷).

A particular line that Joe quotes from one of Frank's letters, which states "Guys out here expect their hair to stay dry in the rain" (i.e., they expect to stay strong and heroic in the midst of all of the horrific bloodshed happening around them), rings particularly true to Joe's own feelings. The possibility of killing in self-defense (or the defense of others) is a standard part of being in both law enforcement and the military, and doing so often results in officers and soldiers being celebrated as heroes. But for both Joe and certain soldiers serving in Vietnam, having to take part in institutional violence and murder is something they ultimately find to be shameful and traumatizing. And for Joe and Frank specifically, although they deal with their traumatic experiences in different ways, they seem to share an underlying psychology that shuns any sort of heroic complex in favor of passive acknowledgment of their respective roles in perpetrating the systematic cycle of violence that is rooted in America's foundation.

This damaged masculinity further applies to how Frank deals with the loss of his parents. As mentioned earlier, Frank still relies on the general family structure while imprisoned in Columbus by way of sending a letter to his father even after refusing to visit his parents after returning from Vietnam. And yet, the callous and even abusive way he reacts to news of his parents' death is noteworthy from a thematic standpoint. When Joe

³⁷ Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

visits Frank in the hotel room he inhabits after his release from prison and mentions their mother's death, Frank coldly replies that he was in jail and that was why he could not attend the funeral. But even more heightened in its nihilism is when the hotel manager tells Frank that he has a call about a family emergency (which is that his father has died by suicide), and Frank simply replies by laughing it off and throwing the hotel manager's shirt over her face. When looking at these moments, it can seem as if Frank's very masculine identity has become so irrevocably separated from any sort of familial structure outside of writing the occasional letter that even the deaths of his mother and father cannot provoke any genuine human emotion.

These moments all build up to perhaps the most thematically rich scene in the film, which takes place at a downtown bar shortly before Frank beats the bartender to death and flees with Joe on his tail. Here, Frank gives an unabashedly nihilistic speech in defense of his choice to get drunk at a bar rather than be with Dorothy while she gives birth to their child. It is no coincidence that Penn chose to have the television behind Frank during this scene play footage from the 1968 Democratic National Convention protests, spurred on against the very war that he fought in and witnessed unimaginable bloodshed in. That some veterans returning from war develop nihilistic outlooks on life is nothing new, and Penn certainly heavily implies that Frank's nihilism existed before he went to Vietnam. Yet, in this scene, Frank seems to not only be speaking for himself, but for a generation of veterans whose trauma and wounded masculinity led them to embrace nihilistic outlooks on life that severed them from religion, friendships, broader society, and even their own families, the same veterans who he wrote earlier expected "their hair to stay dry in the rain."

Meanwhile, Joe's response, after trying to verbally share his love of his family in response to Frank's assertion that he's not satisfied with that being all there is, is to break a glass and cut open his palm to let the blood from it drip on the bar in front of Frank, to communicate that blood—the blood of family—is enough to outweigh the hell that exists in bars and elsewhere in society. This one gesture that Joe makes is not only Penn's most blunt statement of the ultimate message of *The Indian Runner*, but it also sums up the film's entire dominant. Joe understands the importance of the family structure and desperately wants to communicate it to his damaged, nihilistic brother, but in doing so he is inadvertently revealing that his own masculine identity has also been damaged by a different form of self-destructive nihilism. Having allowed himself to be isolated and emasculated both in his job and in his own family, Joe can now equate literally cutting himself to demonstrating the importance of the family structure as a damaged man.

Conclusion

This analysis of *The Indian Runner* would not be complete without acknowledging that Penn does end the film on a slight message of hope for Joe's character that points a way forward from self-destruction. The final scene, which crosscuts between the birth of Frank's son, Joe chasing Frank to the state line, and the Indian runner crossing Frank's path right before he pulls over to the side of the highway, serves to tie the themes of kinship loyalties together, with the return of the Indian runner serving as a final reminder of Frank's suppressed trauma that has helped to drive his actions. And although Joe is not able to save Frank, instead pulling over to the side of the highway and watching him escape over the state line (an ending that directly mirrors the ending of Springsteen's "Highway Patrolman," with

the state line replacing the Canadian border), his final voiceover indicates that Joe is able to go back home with a newfound enjoyment and appreciation for his family life. Perhaps it is because he felt his act of mercy with Frank after their car chase was redemption for his earlier self-defense killing (the parallel editing would certainly point to that), or because his own foreknowledge that Frank was gone for good finally released him of any moral or legal responsibility for Frank. In the latter case especially, the ending of *The Indian Runner* is certainly aligned with the ending of "Highway Patrolman," as the song concludes Joe's arc with him being definitively free of his brother and any moral/ethical dilemma therein.

But what the ending of *The Indian Runner* also provides is a path forward for Joe in a way that likewise frees him from his own form of self-destructive nihilistic masculinity, one that fully provides a counterpoint to Frank's irreparably destructive nature. And this is perhaps most apparent in one of the film's most impactful defamiliarizing events, where Joe hallucinates seeing Frank as a child step out of the car at the end of their car chase moments before he lets him drive across the state line. Although Frank could not be saved from developing a self-destructive nihilistic masculinity and turning his back on his family, Joe can still save himself, and perhaps Frank's son and Joe's son can both try to break that cycle. Penn even makes this idea explicit in the film's final quote from Tagore, which states "Every new child born brings the message that God is not yet discouraged of man." And if that quote does not provide some semblance of hope for both the future of masculinity and the family structure, then nothing does.

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

² Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. Simon & Schuster, 2016.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

suggests an interest in claiming some association with a broader musical identity.

By taking a critical look at Springsteen's filmed output – *On Broadway* (2018), *Western Stars* (2019), and *Letter to You* (2020), but also *Blood Brothers* (1996), *Wings for Wheels* (2005), and *The Promise* (2010) – we can clearly see Springsteen that is invested not in denying his prior rock-based legacy but rather in adding to it, and, importantly, in authenticating⁷ these new facets of identity via fan engagement. My work seeks to follow on from Richard Elliott's consideration of Springsteen's use and development of persona⁸ via the autobiographical *Born to Run*⁹ and *Broadway* and reminds us that "discussions about popular musicians' personas, especially for musicians considered over extended periods, are often guided by two dominant categories: the artist as shape-shifter and/or the artist as consistent, layered self."¹⁰ Both Elliott and I place Springsteen in the latter camp, however where Elliott considers only the autobiography and its stage production, I seek to consider the ways in which Springsteen's subsequent filmed work carries on this project and links through to material released decades earlier. Though these efforts at amendment on Springsteen's part are most evident in his recent work – the films *Western Stars* (2019), *Letter To You* (2020), and the short film *The Middle* (2021) which aired as a Super Bowl advertisement for Jeep – they are contextually wedded to prior material.

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

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

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 20

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

Springsteen's apparent interest in the cultural placement of his legacy can be seen clearly in *Springsteen on Broadway*, via its one-man-band rawness and links to autobiography; in *Western Stars*, via its use of cinematography, narrative framing, and deployment of the cinema-space as fan-space to say some quite new things about Springsteen-as-composer; in *Letter to You* via its reprise and juxtaposition of key E Street Band tropes; and in *The Middle* via its lack of musical performance and startlingly novel political adjacency. The relative success of what I am suggesting is Springsteen's self-conscious use of film to add nuance and new layers to his public persona as artist-rock star relies, of course, in large part upon what Richard Elliott has termed the 'affective pact' he has established with his audience¹¹ — an extraordinarily engaged core fanbase which can be counted upon to notice what he's doing and to aid in the essential processes of

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

authentication required to legitimize and entrench Springsteen's work.¹² Unlike many artists in the twilight of their careers, Springsteen, now nearly 75 and still out on tour with the E Street Band, is not simply reenacting a static, long-established performance identity but is rather actively engaged in a process of nuancing and layering his publicly accepted identity—a process that, given widespread negative commentary among hardcore fans to a change in approach to set list design for the 2023 World Tour and the lukewarm reception to his 2022 album of soul standards *Only the Strong Survive*—is not always guaranteed to go smoothly.¹³

Whether attempts at layering, adding, or altering Springsteen's persona are successful or not relies in large part upon transmedia and convergence culture; related concepts that point to a complex and fluid process of world-building that requires audience(s) to piece together narratives spun across both time and media forms. This process relies heavily upon social interaction between members of an audience(s) or fanbase who collaboratively make sense of additional layers of structure.¹⁴ While media theorist Henry Jenkins used the then-developing DC Comics universe to explain his thinking, the concept can be quite easily stretched to fit the public persona of those artists, like Springsteen, who engage in multiple forms of media expression (live performance, audio recording,

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

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

¹⁴ Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006. Pp. 3–4.

music videos, concert films, live interviews, book authorship, public speaking, theatre, documentary film, radio programming, podcasts, and political activism) and who might seek self-consciously to tweak the way(s) in which they are perceived.¹⁵ The importance of fan engagement in the success of these strategies also sits comfortably alongside popular music's reliance upon audiences and scenes to function as processes of authentication for an artist's career development alongside the opinion of professional critics.¹⁶ Since the decline of traditional music criticism toward what Nancy Hanrahan has termed 'a culture of consensus'¹⁷ and within fanbases as long-running and famously engaged as Springsteen's, fan reaction is perhaps paramount to critical reception for new projects or developments in legacy building. Convergence, Jenkins tells us, occurs as "each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed

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

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

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

into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives.”¹⁸ As Springsteen releases work with new or alternate points of performative focus which seek to layer on to his established persona, these aspects enter into the arena of fan discourse and are accepted/legitimized to a greater or lesser degree. This approach leads to a kind of Springsteen orthodoxy in which a ‘core’ of works exists around which other works, deemed less essential, orbit.¹⁹ This approach enables Springsteen’s varying performance identities to exist alongside a multiplicity of stable fan-constructed identities via a process of picking and choosing. By thus far keeping his overt engagement with composition and notational practice separate from his identity as linked to the E Street Band, Springsteen allows himself to be both all things for all listeners and to have a widening sense of artistic output inscribed on and as biographical record.

Springsteen is no stranger to rockumentaries and there are no fewer than 11 projects which directly concern his career and over which he claims some level of curatorial control (director, producer, etc).²⁰ These various film projects all take a slightly different approach to fusing Springsteen’s music and symbolic capital with film footage: some are more or less orthodox attempts at documentary (*Blood Brothers*, *Wings for Wheels*, *The*

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

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

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

Promise, Letter to You, etc.) while some are rather Terrance Malik-inspired short films serving various aesthetic purposes (*Hunter of Invisible Game, The Middle*)²¹. Springsteen's most recent feature-length projects – *On Broadway, Western Stars*, and *Letter to You* – are of particular interest here as they are strikingly different, or at least more urgent, in their use of cinematic processes to establish and secure particular narratives around aspects of Springsteen's legacy. In conjunction with Thom Zimny, his collaborator for nearly all of these filmed outputs, Springsteen uses the intimacy of cinematic space – both on-screen via camera placement and editorial shot selection and in the theatre auditorium itself via fan engagement – to engage in curating and fixing particular narratives around the self, artistic practice, and cultural value. Springsteen is open about the fact that these latest projects are in some ways consciously interrelated²², but what is notable is that much of the material used in these three films is actually recycled or repeated from prior work and therefore clearly the product of decades of consideration and honing.²³

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

²² "...[I'm] getting to that age where you sort of, you're summing up a lot of what you've learned and what your life has been and ... writing a book really was the first chapter [of] me doing that I suppose, and then the play came out of the book, and in a funny way you know the film [*Western Stars*] sort of came out of the play." (Springsteen 2019, Loudersound.com)

²³ Springsteen, Bruce. *Songs*. Virgin Publishing, 1998.

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

One of Springsteen's primary concerns, particularly when paired with the E Street Band, is in claiming and positioning himself at the heart of American rock and rock'n'roll authenticity. Springsteen's frequent alignment with rock'n'roll (or rock'n'soul) is important here, with rock'n'roll sitting closer to the improvisatory Black traditions of the music and 'rock' with the more studio-mediated, compositional, and frequently white expressions that dominated from the mid-late 1960s.²⁴ Springsteen's recordings certainly *are* studio mediated, but pains have been regularly taken to ensure that the E Street Band and Springsteen as its leader are linked through to the live-off-the-floor, improvisational roots of the genre.²⁵ Springsteen is a legendary control freak²⁶ yet this knowledge lives comfortably alongside celebrations of the seemingly off-the-cuff: "In striving for spontaneity, [Springsteen] often won't tell you what key you're in, [or] what song you're going to do ... just follow me, boys!" says Garry Tallent in *Blood Brothers*, released in 1996 and filmed during the recording

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

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

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

of additional material for Springsteen's *Greatest Hits* (1995) album. *Blood Brothers* centers itself on the E Street Band, congregating together for the first time since Springsteen famously disbanded the group in 1989, and sets out key themes and set pieces to which Springsteen will return across subsequent E Street-oriented documentaries and depart from significantly in *Western Stars* (2019). The theme of the film is very much that of the band; the 'blood brothers' at the heart of E Street and of Springsteen's place as leader of the ensemble. The film's narrative highlights Springsteen as songwriter and the camera follows him at work, offering numerous shots that are framed to include his notebook(s) – a theme that recurs later across *Wings for Wheels* (2005), *The Promise* (2010), and to a lesser extent *Letter to You* (2020). The emphasis here is on the importance of Springsteen as lyricist, and upon his lyrics as central to the music-making process. It's important to note that the notebooks we are shown glimpses of seem to contain little other than lyrics; there are very few chord symbols present and no notated pitches whatsoever. Indeed, almost no focus in *Blood Brothers* is placed upon musical (rather than lyrical) materials or charts, and certainly no material of this sort is linked to Springsteen himself.²⁷ This will stand in marked contrast to *Western Stars* (2019) where we shall see a radically different approach to shot choice and emphasis.

In *Blood Brothers* Springsteen is also seen several times seen playing a song through on acoustic guitar (and once on piano) while the band transcribes around him, the suggestion being that these are the first moments of musical arrangement or chart making, and there's something of a freewheeling, though not improvisational, nature to the development

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

of the new material that E Street is working up throughout the film.²⁸ While Springsteen is shown several times playing from a legal pad containing nothing but lyrics, these sequences result in the creation of lead sheets or chord charts as seen in camera shots that capture the transcriptive work of Garry Tallent in particular during a run-down of "Blood Brothers."²⁹ Whether this resulting material is meant as personal arrangements for each individual player within E Street (as all but Clarence Clemons are seen engaged in this process) or as a process of communal chart capturing/making remains unclear.³⁰

These sequences are important however as they recur in 2020's *Letter to You*, a film that once again places the E Street Band at the heart of the narrative, and as they provide an important counterbalance to *Western Stars* in terms of Springsteen's relationship to charts/scores. In *Blood Brothers* and *Letter To You* these sequences pointedly distance Springsteen from the charts and the process of chart making (though he is also clearly framed as the musical source), while in *Western Stars* Springsteen claims credit as composer and arranger on a film which highlights the use of orchestral scores. Importantly therefore, *Blood Brothers* is also the first film in which we see Springsteen's developing interest in strings and string arrangements: work on an ultimately unused "Secret Garden" orchestral arrangement by David Kahn and Springsteen's enthusiastic response to it is something of a minor plot point.

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

²⁹ This is the opening sequence in the DVD chapter 'Take Two'

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

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

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

Springsteen on Film

Released in 2010 *The Promise: The Making of Darkness on the Edge of Town* is the third of Springsteen’s full-length rockumentaries³¹ and is again

³¹ Following *Blood Brother* 1996, *Wings for Wheels* 2005

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

With *The Promise* three key things also become clear: 1) the careful and painstaking process of self-curation with which Springsteen has been engaged across a period of years and multiple formats; 2) the extent to which Springsteen understands and relies upon the filmed image to create and transmit musical meaning; and 3) that critical acclaim and a modicum of commercial success for Springsteen's work on film had become a point of focus. Whereas *Blood Brothers* premiered on the Disney channel before being released on VHS (and later DVD)³³ and *Wings for Wheels* was included

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

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

with a 2005 CD reissue of *Born to Run*, *The Promise* was offered to a wider and more discerning cinematic audience. Elevated from the realm of music video to 'proper' documentary film of the sort ones goes out to the cinema to see, *The Promise* appeared on the 2010 global film festival circuit where it premiered as an official selection at the Toronto International Film Festival and garnered warm reviews at both the BFI and Rome Film Festivals as well as in the mainstream press.³⁴ The film was then broadcast via HBO in October 2010 before its eventual release on DVD (2011). In 2019 with *Western Stars*, Springsteen would go one step further with cinematic release in commercial theatres, turning cinematic space into participatory fan space akin in many ways to the concert experience and marketed as such to the Springsteen fanbase.

Springsteen clearly understands the affective power of cinema and has always been clear that some of the key influences on his landmark albums were cinematic, not musical or literary. In *VH1 Storytellers* (2005), itself important for its relationship to the development of *Springsteen on Broadway*, Springsteen speaks of the creation and adoption of characters to sing through – to enable the telling of wider and different stories than those bounded by personal experience – and speaks of the role of film in prompting this technique. *Nebraska*, he tells us, was meant to be an 'oral projection' of Robert Mitchum in Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* (1955), and of Terrence Mallick's *Badlands* (1973). This influence of film, character, and visual aesthetics appears first in *Bruce Springsteen: Songs* (1998) where he writes of the 'cinematic drama' of *Born to Run* and of the

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

broader geographical and ideological space afforded by character-driven, rather than biographically oriented writing.

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

Between *The Promise* (2010) and the Netflix premier of *Springsteen on Broadway* (2018) Springsteen is seen in numerous music videos, live concert films, three short documentaries (*Houston ’78 Bootleg: House Cut* (2010), *High Hopes* (2014), *Ties That Bind* (2015)) as well as a short film released via his website which did double duty as a music video of sorts for “Hunter of Invisible Game” (2015) from his album *High Hopes* released a year earlier. *Hunter of Invisible Game* is far more than a music video however, and indeed

anyone seeking that aspect of the work is required to sit through nearly six-minutes of wordless cinema before the song begins—dreamy shots invoking Terrance Malick and the 2009 cinematic adaptation of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* in nearly equal measure, underscored by similarly atmospheric music featuring airy synths and steel guitar before the coherent rhythm of a string section segues into the song proper.³⁵ Clocking in at just over ten minutes, the film marked Springsteen’s directorial debut³⁶ (a credit shared with Thom Zimny) and follows The Protector, a character played by Springsteen who wanders a post-apocalyptic landscape, reunites a lost child with his family, and is simultaneously soothed and tormented by what seem to be memories of both a family and way of life irrevocably lost due to an unexplained societal cataclysm.

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

Springsteen on Broadway: The Memoir Project as Moving Pictures

In 2018, Springsteen teamed with Netflix to present a filmed version of his acclaimed Broadway show, which premiered in New York in October

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

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

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

Unlike *Western Stars*, which would follow in 2019, *Springsteen on Broadway* is also not offering any aspects that might be considered new or additional to what the audience already understands of Springsteen the singer-songwriter. Taken together—ticket price, distance from concert performance, and relatedness to the *Born to Run* biography—the Broadway production was unlikely in any event to have appealed to anyone not already familiar with and fond of Springsteen. Rather, the production seems geared toward 'fixing the record' in the way that a book alone might not, enshrining Springsteen's particular self-narrative onto and *as* the record, straight from the horse's mouth. Following on from success as a songwriter, performer, producer, filmmaker, and author, it's worth noting that the production also served to legitimize Springsteen in yet another of

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

the venerable arts—theatre—and even earned him a special Tony award along the way.³⁸

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

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

keyboard competency – not just a guitar player, this guy; Springsteen can play “real” instruments too.

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

The treatment of “Born in the USA” across *VH1 Storytellers* and *On Broadway* is telling in this respect.⁴⁰ While Springsteen has of course worked

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

⁴⁰ Springsteen made this point before during his *Ghost of Tom Joad* tour⁴⁰ which featured small halls and out of the way towns for 146 performances on an intermittent schedule between 1995-1997 and has been fondly referred to as the ‘shut the fuck up’ tour by fans. Given the size of the halls chosen for the *Joad* tour far fewer even committed fans were able to catch it than saw the original New York run of *On Broadway* let alone the Netflix

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

Western Stars: Composition and Cultural Value

audience. So low-profile (for Springsteen) was the *Joad* tour that biographer Dave Marsh has described it as having likely had no impact on widening Springsteen’s audience and there is relatively little documentation of it.

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

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

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

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

For its primary audience – those not in the barn with Springsteen for the concert elements but those watching the final filmed product on-screen – *Western Stars* provides better seats than most are ever likely to obtain for a Springsteen concert and offers a level of intimacy that a concert does not. Springsteen speaks to us, explains his process to us, looks us in

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

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

Western Stars features Springsteen not alone and not with the E Street Band, but rather joined by a rhythm section, horns, and backup singers who are a mix of new and familiar faces, plus a thirty-piece 'orchestra.' Though the accompanying press materials frequently referred to the ensemble as a 'full' orchestra, the *Western Stars* stage is in fact filled by an 8-piece band (incl. Springsteen), a musical director/keyboardist, 2 French horns, 2 trumpets, 5 background singers, and a 15-piece string section for thirty-two musicians in total. Springsteen had made use of strings before—he included them in the mix on *Born to Run* (1975), experimented with them on the unused "Secret Garden" arrangement we were introduced to in *Blood Brothers* (1996), augmented segments of *Devils & Dust* (2005), *Magic* (2007),

Working on a Dream (2009), and *High Hopes* (2014) with arrangements by Eddie Horst, included a live 8-piece string section in Brisbane, Australia (2014),⁴³ featured strings in a key section of the *Hunter of Invisible Game* film, and of course has had violinist Soozie Tyrell in the augmented touring version of the E Street Band since 1994. In a very different way however, the string section in *Western Stars* is foregrounded and given an increased sense of importance via its relationship to camera direction through the first two thirds of the film's concert sequences. An editorial point is clearly being made via the framing of the string section, a point which is underscored by the more varied and dynamic approach to shot tracking adopted later in the film.

Western Stars begins with a series of disconnected shots (horses running, the open desert, Springsteen's hand on a steering wheel, ancient barns listing in the sunset) over an atmospheric synth score leading into voice-over narration from Springsteen as he introduces the album ("a meditation on individual freedom and communal life") which ultimately leads the audience to the performance venue—Springsteen's barn. Some three and a half minutes into *Western Stars* the film's first song—"Hitch Hikin'" —opens with the camera focused on Springsteen at center stage, spot lit. Thirty-five or forty seconds in, for the first entry of the 'orchestra' both sonically and cinematically, the chosen shot is slightly overhead and into the string section; a lighted music stand and its sheet music forming the center of the shot. It's an odd choice: static, and with the written music fixed and dead center of the screen, at odds with the lyrics of a wanderer not keen on the rigidity of maps. The camera then tours the stage, checking

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

in briefly with most members of Springsteen's band, all of whom, it should be added, are playing without the aid of music stands or visible charts. The camera's next glance into the string section, however, again makes a lit music stand its point of focus.

Throughout the performance of "Hitch Hikin'" the shots chosen are overwhelmingly of the string section players rather than the rest of the orchestra or band. Indeed, they nearly share screen time with Springsteen, and the presence of written charts, along with the concerted attention paid to the art of reading them, is clearly emphasized. The genre of filmed classical concerts (including the yearly TV offering of the BBC Proms) has provided a whole repertoire of camera shots from which to draw when working with orchestral subject matter, the vast majority of which serve to pull focus *away* from the static page and toward the dynamic action of the players and conductor.⁴⁴ Even here, as *Western Stars* develops, we observe a gradual shift toward more dynamic tracking shots into and through the orchestra: close ups of instruments, of bow arms, of the section entraining. The presence of musical materials eventually becomes incidental, rather than fundamental, a move which underscores that this early and pointed foregrounding of the written charts was not accidental, but editorial. The film's focus on highlighting the charts being used by the orchestra and the musical director conducting from the side stage is pronounced during the first three songs performed, and the foregrounding of charts is often quite blunt throughout. During "Tucson Train," for example, where the camera lingers sufficiently long on the musical director's chart to enable the audience to read both the song's title and several bars of music; nearer the

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

end of the film during “There Goes My Miracle” which actually concludes with an image of the song’s chart; and during “Hello Sunshine,” which includes a brief appearance of the musical director conducting the strings to a close. These moments all feature a focus upon sheet music which clearly and rather pointedly contains notated pitches, and which also stand in marked contrast to the merely accidental capturing of musical material of this sort across all of Springsteen’s previous documentaries.

It is well worth noting as well that the invited audience for the *Western Stars* concert sequences isn’t standing, as is common with rock events including Springsteen’s, but is rather seated at small round tables lit with the soft glow of lamp light, cocktails to hand. The crowd is also silent and mostly still; the atmosphere that of a jazz club or chamber concert more than the pit at a ‘normal’ Springsteen show. Here there is no communal dancing or singing, indeed there is little sound at all from the audience beyond polite applause—a marked difference from other Springsteen and Springsteen-oriented shows, even black-tie events such as the Kennedy Centre Honors.⁴⁵ Taken together—the strings, the focus on written music, the hushed attention of the audience—*Western Stars* signals a different behavioral expectation from us when listening to Springsteen. This is music of value, *Western Stars* tells us, and demands our attention. It is a marked shift away from Springsteen’s legendary focus on the ecstatic needs of a rock audience at full roar and toward the wishes of the artist—to be taken seriously, and to be able to act that way.

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

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

Importantly for a film shown in theatres, *Western Stars* concludes by encouraging the audience to sit through the credits—the action of Springsteen and Scalfia lingering at the bar on-screen aids in this, and in keeping audience attention focused on the screen. At the screening I attended in New York, it was also advertised that bonus footage was to

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

follow the film, thereby ensuring that very few left the auditorium until after the credits had fully rolled. It's during these credits that we learn that Springsteen, in addition to being the executive producer, writer, and co-director of the film, is credited with having composed the original score and having orchestrated the film with Ron Aniello. These last two are relatively new job descriptions for Springsteen,⁴⁷ and ones which traditionally link very closely to the reading and writing of precisely the sort of notation that Springsteen described himself as being unable to do (2016) and which *Western Stars* has taken pains to foreground.

Though released in 2018, Springsteen began initial work on what would become the studio album *Western Stars* as early as 2014, circling back to it with Aniello in both 2014 and 2018 before its release. Following these experiences on the studio album, Springsteen says they began to 'score the voiceover' sections of the film, which prompted those elements to expand and ultimately determine the shape of the finished product: "that's what turned it into a movie you know, rather than just a concert film."⁴⁸ The decision to turn *Western Stars* into 'a movie' as something distinct from a rockumentary or concert film led to one of the most interesting aspects of the *Western Stars* experience – Springsteen's use of the cinema space as fan space.

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

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

Letter to You (2020)

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

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

Unlike *Western Stars* and *Broadway* which draw heavily from Springsteen's autobiography and are exclusively scripted monologues, the dialogue we hear in *Letter To You* is, one presumes, improvised, albeit

⁴⁹ Springsteen in *Letter to You*, 2020.

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

The Middle: Rock Musician as Statesman

Springsteen capped things off in 2021 with his first foray into television commercials, releasing a two-minute 'film' for Jeep which premiered during half-time of the 2021 Super Bowl. Entitled *The Middle* and co-directed by Thom Zimny and Springsteen (who also starred, contributed to the scripted narration,⁵⁰ and composed the score in conjunction with Ron Aniello) the spot contained no Springsteen songs or lyrics (to date no Springsteen song has yet been licensed for use in a commercial). Indeed, Springsteen plays no music on-screen, carries no instrument, speaks no dialogue, and no connection is explicitly made to who he is. We are meant

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

to know already, and, more than that, it's clear that he is supposed to *mean*, or at least represent, something to us.

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

Who or what is Springsteen meant to be here, and for what audience? In *Hunter of Invisible Game* his character is meant to be 'the protector' on 'a quest for humanity' seeking 'the spirit' in a post-apocalyptic landscape.⁵¹ Is Springsteen offering himself in a similar capacity in the Jeep commercial, acting as a guide and hero seeking to lead a deeply divided America in the waning days of the Trump presidency toward a political and cultural middle ground? Certainly, many on both sides of the political divide thought so, and the response was both swift and polarized. Various corners of the internet lit up with spirited arguments for and against both Springsteen's perceived selling out and the ad's political messaging (too liberal/not liberal enough), and the controversy took a tangible real-world toll when less than a week after the ad's initial airing reports were made that Springsteen had been cited for driving while intoxicated in November 2020, having had a shot of tequila with fans met whilst riding his motorcycle in a New Jersey state park. Jeep swiftly pulled the ad. Ultimately

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

the intoxication charge was dismissed by the court and Springsteen paid a small fine for having broken park rules.⁵²

However, both the commercial itself and the various controversies it engendered do suggest an interesting, perhaps unique degree of political and moral signposting around a rock'n'roll musician. That Springsteen now occupies a somewhat unique political place within American culture is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that he was the only musician to perform at the 20th Anniversary Memorial held to the 9/11 attacks, where he sang a solo acoustic rendition of "I'll See You In My Dreams" from 2020's *Letter To You*. This was a somewhat surprising choice perhaps given the long association between Springsteen's *The Rising* and the 9/11 attacks, and the solo, acoustic arrangement of the song was maintained throughout the 2023-2024 World Tour where on all but a rare handful of occasions it was used as a concert closer.⁵³

Conclusion

It is neither surprising nor news that Bruce Springsteen has carefully managed and presented his personal persona throughout his career and has frequently augmented and reinforced particular aspects using transmedia

⁵² While the court could not "sustain its burden of proof" regarding the charges of DWI and reckless driving, Springsteen did plead guilty to having consumed tequila while in the Gateway National Recreation Area in Sandy Hook, New Jersey. The judge noted that the law prohibiting this had been implemented just three years prior.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bruce-springsteen-hearing-dwi-charges-dismissed-1132609/>. Nevertheless, the incident has been lodged in public record as *The United States vs. Bruce Springsteen*, a fact now memorialized on innumerable items of fan-produced merchandise.

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

approaches—recordings, performance, books, interviews, podcasts, photographs and films. That said, it's clear that there has been a particular urgency to this project over the last several years. While some of this can be attributed to the multi-platform 'memoir project' of 2016-2018,⁵⁴ other aspects seem designed to enlarge Springsteen's perceived and value and scope as an artist within the popular imagination. In particular the film projects *Broadway*, *Western Stars*, *Letter to You*, and *The Middle* provide evidence that Springsteen has been at work "fixing" three connected yet disparate narratives in the minds of both committed fans and more casual viewers: that of personal biography—let's set the record straight in so far as I would like it; that of the artist—there's more to me than three chords and the truth; and that of authentic, vintage-caliber rock 'n' roller—that there is a direct line from Springsteen to the well-spring of American rock sensibility. The most remarkable aspect of this project is the new focus upon notation, composition, and arrangement as evidenced first in *Western Stars*, and then with *The Middle*.

At the same time, Springsteen seems to be moving to embrace more explicitly a public, politically aligned role which is rooted in his musical output though simultaneously adjacent to it. While Springsteen has never been shy of exposing his left-leaning politics having taken action against the use of his music by various Republican politicians,⁵⁵ spoken out in support of gay marriage as early as 1996,⁵⁶ cancelled a 2016 concert in North

⁵⁴ Watson, 2021

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

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

Carolina in support of trans rights,⁵⁷ and campaigned for Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012, for Hillary Clinton in 2016, and for Joe Biden in 2020. Nonetheless, politics has lately been foregrounded in ways which are perhaps unique in American popular music. While other stars from Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan to Kendrick Lamar have engaged themselves with politics, often of a high-profile nature, Springsteen's presence at multiple inaugurations, his association with 9/11, his association with ex-President Barack Obama (podcast, book), and his role as political voice-of-reason in Jeep's *The Middle* advertisement during one of the most divisive presidencies in American history is singular.

On October 4, 2024, Springsteen further added to unequivocal voicing of political leanings still considered something of a surprise by elements of his fanbase⁵⁸ by releasing a video endorsing Harris/Waltz 2024. While Taylor Swift's earlier endorsement on the night of the Democratic National Convention garnered far more mainstream press coverage, Springsteen's went much further – not just an endorsement of Harris, the spot is an explicit takedown of Trump. Trump is, Springsteen tell us, “the most dangerous candidate for president in my lifetime” and links back to *The Middle* in its simultaneous call for “a vision of this country that respects and includes everyone, regardless of class, religion, race, your political

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

⁵⁸ Anyone interested is directed to the comments on the video at Springsteen's official Facebook page <https://fb.watch/v3rBds501L/> and to the online spat which developed surrounding major Springsteen fan group the Spring-Nuts' decision to remove, and then repost the video with the comments section redacted. This online spat went so far as to involve activity on Twitter (X) with Amy Aiello Lofgren, wife of E Street Band guitarist Nils Lofgren.

point of view or sexual identity ... That's the vision of America I've been consistently writing about for 55 years."

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

Springsteen is now 75, and as Richard Elliot reminds us, "the retrospection allowed by [career] lateness and successful ageing is key here. Popular musicians with long careers provide rich source material for the study of persona, authenticity, endurance and the maintenance (and reinvention) of significant bodies of work."⁶⁰ As Springsteen continues to work through the latter stages of his career, it should perhaps come as no surprise to find him attempting to both make aspects of his legacy

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

⁶⁰ Elliot, 19

unequivocal and add to collective perceptions of himself as an artist. Convergence, Jenkins tells us, occurs as “each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives”⁶¹ and, I’ll add, those things which we imbue with meaning. Even rock stars. Springsteen, via an extended period of careful career positioning, slight shifts in presentation of persona, and the engagement of his fan base in an authenticating process that facilitates the layering of identity, both creates the media flow out of which individual fans may construct a personal connection to his artistic output and ensures coherence with an evolving and highly curated mythology.

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

A Glimpse Inside the Collection of the Bruce Springsteen Archives & Center for American Music at Monmouth University

by Melissa Ziobro, Curator
Monmouth University

The Bruce Springsteen Archives at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey serves as the official repository for Springsteen's songs and other written works, plus photographs, periodicals, oral histories, recordings, films, and artifacts related to Bruce and the E Street Band. The Center for American Music produces museum exhibitions, seminars and educational workshops, concerts, and various other public programs to explore the many forms of American music and their impact on our culture and national identity.

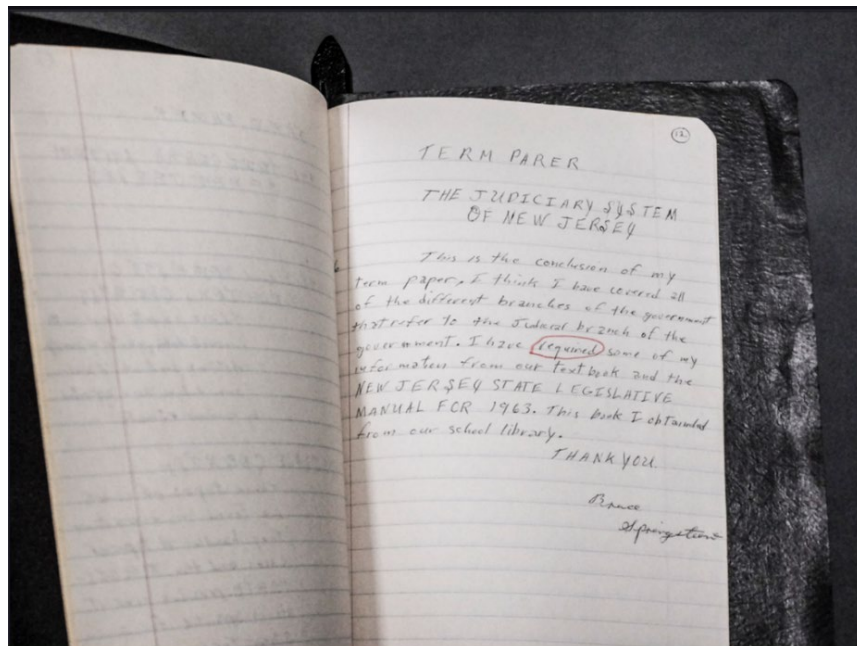
The current Archive traces its roots to a fan-based collection formalized in 2001 as "The Bruce Springsteen Special Collection." After originally living at the Asbury Park Public Library, that collection arrived at Monmouth University in 2011 thanks largely to the efforts of current Executive Director Bob Santelli and Director Eileen Chapman. In 2017, the University entered a partnership with Bruce himself, and The Bruce Springsteen Archives & Center for American Music was born. Springsteen, Monmouth County born and raised, lives in the County to this day. He played on the Monmouth campus multiple times over the years, noting in his autobiography that as his career grew, "First hundreds, then thousands came to impromptu appearances in parks, at the local armory, at the Monmouth College great lawn or college gymnasium and any other location that would hold our growing tribe."

The 2017 partnership with Bruce necessitated a new home for the collection, which was being housed in a small, formerly residential house on campus. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed those plans a bit, but in October 2023, the BSACAM announced a new 30,000 square foot building would be constructed to house the Archives, the Center for American Music, related exhibition galleries, and a 250-seat, state-of-the-art theater. Designed by the acclaimed New York-based architectural firm, COOKFOX, the building will be located on the University campus and is expected to open in the Spring of 2026. As Bruce noted at the formal building announcement:

I want to say how happy I am that my archives are going to have a home here in New Jersey, that means a lot to me. Believe it or not there are people who come from around the world for their vacations or pilgrimages to spend their hard-earned dollars in Asbury Park, or Freehold in search of from whence I hailed, and now they will have someplace to go other than my house. At 19, I played on these very steps out here and to stand here today is quite humbling knowing I'm going to be a presence here on this campus, which I really look forward to being ... It's deeply satisfying. I look forward to working with everyone to make this building and this endeavor a great success.

The collecting mission of the BSACAM is limited to Bruce and the E Street Band, though other items may occasionally be accepted based on specific needs and in careful consideration of space constraints. Access to the current facility is by appointment only. [Contact Director Eileen Chapman](#) to schedule an appointment. Here, in advance of our building opening, readers are treated to a glimpse behind the scenes at the types of items the collection holds, and the stories they tell.

Bruce Springsteen's Term Paper



Photographed by Mark Krajnak

BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies 6 (2024)

Bruce Springsteen famously sings in 1986's "No Surrender":

*Well, we busted out of class
Had to get away from those fools
We learned more from a three-minute record
Baby, than we ever learned in school*

And he's been as open about his struggles with formal education in his prose as he has been in his music. In his 2016 autobiography, *Born to Run*, he writes that the nuns at his Freehold elementary school, Saint Rose, were a source of mystery and terror. He didn't feel he fit in at Freehold High School and skipped his graduation ceremony (much to his parents' chagrin). His stay at Ocean County College was brief (though he did publish some poems in the school's literary magazine). This is not to say that Bruce didn't have an intense desire for knowledge. He just chafed at the rules of the classroom. After he escaped the confines of prescribed curriculums, he embarked on his own self-study regimen, voraciously reading history in particular. As he writes, "History was a subject that had bored me in middle school and high school, but I devoured it now. It seemed to hold some of the essential pieces to the identity questions I was asking."

So, to those students who are still struggling to find their place – take heart. And to the educators, as Bruce wrote upon his induction to his high school's Hall of Fame in 2006:

... It's kind of funny, really. I spent my years at Freehold Regional pretty much as an outcast and at best a very mediocre student. I would probably have been voted 'Least Likely to Succeed.' My only

advice to teachers and the administrators would be to keep your eyes on the ones that don't fit in. They're the ones thinking out of the box and reimagining this place we live in... You never know where they're going.

In case you were wondering, Bruce earned a B on this particular paper on "The Judiciary System of New Jersey." His teacher wrote, "Your writing not legible enough. Somewhat brief."

Castiles Poster



Photographed by Mark Krajnak

The lineup for Bruce's first real band, the Castiles, was somewhat fluid, but key musicians included guitarist and lead singer George Theiss, bass player Frank Marziotti, drummer Bart Haynes, and, of course, guitarist

and singer Bruce Springsteen. The band often practiced at Tex and Marion Vinyard's home in Bruce's hometown of Freehold. As Bruce wrote in his memoir, "Tex and Marion seemed stranded between the teen world and adulthood, so they made a home for themselves and a surrogate parental life somewhere in the middle. They weren't your parents, but they weren't your peers either...Tex became our manager and Marion the house mother and seamstress to a team of misfit townie rock-n-rollers."

From 1965 - 1968 the Castiles played in school gyms, roller rinks, swim clubs, Elks lodges, trailer parks—most anywhere they could. Towards the end of their time together, they made their way into New York, playing at places like Café Wha. They performed a lot of covers, with a set list that was a mixture of pop hits, R&B, guitar instrumentals, and even some big band music. Original music was on occasion sprinkled in. Readers can find some of their recordings on YouTube.

Believe it or not, this incredibly vibrant, hand-drawn Castiles poster is an original and close to 60 years old. Keyboardist Bob Alfano, who joined the band in 1966, created it for a Castiles gig at the Left Foot coffee house in Freehold. It is the only known poster for this show in existence and was donated to the BSACAM by George and Diana Theiss in 2018, just months before George lost his battle with lung cancer. Bruce clearly remembers the Castiles fondly to this day. The band features prominently in the video for his 2020 song "Ghosts," in which he sings:

*It's just your ghost
Moving through the night
Your spirit filled with light
I need, need you by my side
Your love and I'm alive*

Bart Haynes' Purple Heart



Photographed by Mark Krajnak

In a 1996 interview in *Newsweek*, Bruce Springsteen shared, “The drummer I had ... Bart Haynes, and this fellow Walter Cichon, they both died in Vietnam when we were in our teens. I can still see them in their [Marine and Army] uniforms. Those are very powerful images. It still finds its way into my work.” It wasn’t the first time Bruce had discussed Bart, and it wouldn’t be the last. Much has been written, in both the scholarly and popular realms, about the Vietnam War’s influence on Springsteen’s

work and his support of veterans' issues, but far less ink has been spilled on the specifics of Bart Haynes' short life and tragic death.

While he is best known as the drummer in early Bruce band, The Castiles, Bart was also a caring young man who helped raise his younger sister as his parents struggled with alcoholism. He was a resilient young man, who threw himself a 16th birthday party because he knew his parents wouldn't. He soon after volunteered for the military, like so many others with limited choices, seeking some control over their own destinies.

Springsteen wrote about the last time he saw Bart in his memoir, remembering, "Rushing in one last afternoon, a goofy grin on his face, he told us he was going to Vietnam. He laughed and said he didn't even know where it was. In the days before his ship-out, he'd sit one last time at the drums, in his full dress blues ... taking one final swing at "Wipe Out," the drum piece of which he'd never quite mastered. And he never would. Bart was killed in action in Vietnam on October 22, 1967. One has to imagine he was on Springsteen's mind when he later wrote the lyrics to 2014's "The Wall," which includes the lines:

*I remember you in your Marine uniform laughin', laughin' at your ship out party
I read Robert McNamara says he's sorry*

Artifacts like this Purple Heart, on permanent loan from the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation in Holmdel, New Jersey, help us to understand both Bruce's work and the impacts of broader societal conflicts like the Vietnam War. May Bart, and all the 58,220 US military men and women killed in the Vietnam War, rest in peace.

Castiles Mention in *The Monmouth Message*

give in advertising public relations.

TEEN CLUB

By PAT VAN DE WALKER



Hi gang,

Well our Grand Opening of the new wing was terrific. Everybody had a ball including General and Mrs. W. B. Latta who showed us up with their dancing. Colonel and Mrs. George Kurkjian were also on hand to help us with our festivities.

Ribbon cutting, cake cutting and door prizes and also the great music of the Castiles kept the evening really bouncing along. Coil Ferguson deserves a lot of the credit for a great night for the way he organized and coordinated the festivities with General and Mrs. Latta.

— Last Friday, the Shadows were on hand and this week's winner of the Friday night door prize was: Jimmy Smith (lucky you). Our chaperones for the night were MSgt and Mrs. Consillio (Danny's parents)

and they were simply terrific. Sgt. Consillio deserves a medal for bravery and diplomacy for the way he drank Shari Saylor's coffee.

We've had a change of officers, unfortunately. Our club manager, Chris King, has resigned for personal reasons. Shari Saylor has been appointed as temporary club manager. We are all behind you, Shari, and lots of luck.

Guys and dolls, a reminder that we are not to use the old section of the club on Saturdays and Sundays except for movies and auditions.

Band of the Week: The Purple Dynasty (They are in great form I hear).

SWIMMING TEAM: The initial meeting for the Fort Monmouth Swim Club will be on Monday night, 5:15 p.m. at the Post Field House in the pool area.

CHOW!

PAT

WATERVLIET ARSENAL.

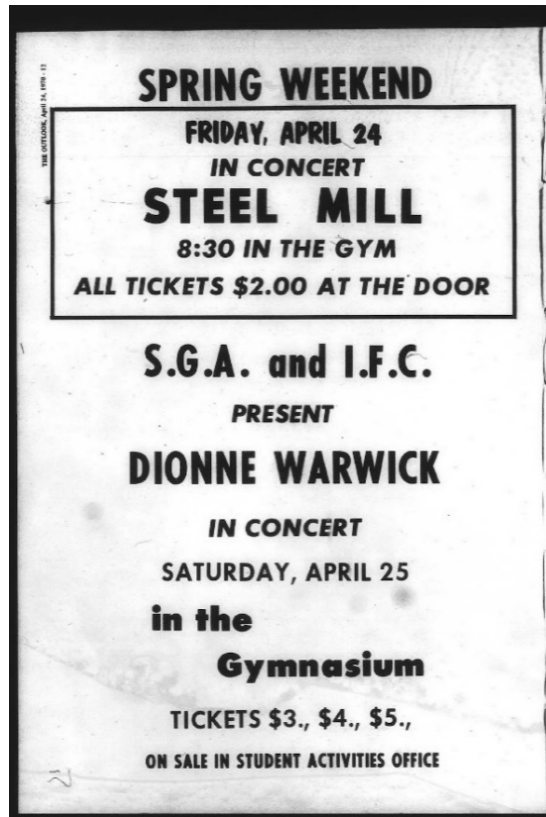
For over 90 years, the Fort Monmouth military base was a fixture in Monmouth County, where Bruce Springsteen was born, raised, and currently lives. The Fort's history began in May 1917 when, as part of its World War I mobilization, the Army authorized four training camps for signal troops. One camp would be located in central New Jersey—that which would eventually be known as "Fort Monmouth," in honor of the soldiers of the American Revolution who fought and died at the nearby Battle of Monmouth. The Army Signal Corps trained thousands of men for

war there and built laboratories that worked on pioneering technologies like air to ground radio. Though the base was supposed to be temporary, it wound up outliving the war. It was for decades known as the “Home of the Signal Corps,” and, until its closure in 2011, the base was still innovating some of the most significant communications and electronics advances in military history – many of which would save lives on the battlefield and also be adapted for civilian use.

Bruce would play at Fort Monmouth multiple times over the decades, first as a teenager and later as a global superstar who appreciated the privacy a secure military facility could offer when one wanted to rehearse undisturbed by the general public. This November 16, 1967 article from the Fort’s newspaper casually mentions that Bruce’s first real band, the Castiles, played “great music” that “really kept the evening bouncing along” at the grand opening of the teen club’s new wing. Bruce was only a few years removed from playing in the teen club when in 1973’s “Lost in the Flood” he first sang:

*The ragamuffin gunner is returnin’ home like a hungry runaway
He walks through town all alone
“He must be from the fort,” he hears the high school girls say*

Steel Mill Advertisement in *The Outlook*



It's a common misconception that the BSACAM lives at Monmouth University because Bruce is a Monmouth alum. He's not, but his relationship with Monmouth's beautiful campus stretches back decades—as illustrated by this 1970 advertisement for early Bruce band, Steel Mill, in the Monmouth campus newspaper, the *Outlook*. The website *Brucebase* gives the setlist for this show as follows:

1. "Funky Broadway"

2. "He's Guilty (The Judge Song)"
3. "Goin' Back to Georgia"
4. "The Wind and the Rain"
5. "Resurrection"
6. "Garden State Parkway Blues"

Bruce actually played at Monmouth multiple times from 1969 – 1974, with Child, Steel Mill, and the E Street Band. He was often performing on campus for events organized to protest the Vietnam War (in which he had recently had close, personal friends killed). Whichever band Springsteen was at Monmouth with—they were popular. As a 1969 review in the *Outlook* noted:

Child, the most popular group of the afternoon, produced a wild, mind-bending show, which combined the antics and musical talents of the Stones and Iron Butterfly. They literally rocked and blasted out the entire area with their dynamic sound. There was even a complaint from a Norwood Ave. resident that there were too many decibels being emitted and [it] was disturbing.

As the BSACAM prepares to open its new building in 2026, the staff will endeavor to ensure that, although there will certainly be plenty of music in both the 250-seat indoor theater and the outdoor amphitheater, noise is kept to a reasonable level for the neighbors!

Early Concert Photographs



Photographed by Jack Schwartz

Readers of a certain age will remember the days before cell phones when informal, amateur concert photographs and footage were relatively rare. Fortunately, more and more such intimate photos of Springsteen shows are being donated to the BSACAM regularly. This photo is part of a series captured by fan Jack Schwartz during Bruce's October 4, 1974 show at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, New York. As Jack recalls, "I took my little range-finder camera. The show was moving and magical with some interesting elements....Bruce had a female violinist, Suki Lahav, who

played a lilting transcendent opening to the intro of 'Jungleland' as Bruce spoke the lyrics..."

*The Rangers had a homecoming
In Harlem late last night
And the Magic Rat drove his sleek machine
Over the Jersey state line*

Jack continued, "At the end of the show the crowd was so intense they rushed toward the stage, like a wave, collapsing the orchestra pit cover. Bruce literally brought the house down...With my little camera which I snuck in, I was able to get close to the stage a few times and snap a couple of moments from this show. I was using 35 mm Ektachrome 160 lowlight color slide film with no flash..."

Reflecting on the experience some 50 years later, Jack shared, "Without hyperbole when I think about it, the many shows I experienced with Bruce with the E Street Band (and on his own)— they represented some of the best moments in my life. When my world was faced with intense challenges, there was always his music, those shows, his gutsy soul blazing guitar sound, his deep reservoir of hope and longing, that incredible bone crushing E Street band, as well as the sadness and joy which has longed carried me through my many trials and tribulations."

Photos—and testimonials—like Jack's help the BSACAM to document Bruce's career and, importantly, his storied relationships with his legions of devoted fans.

Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.* Outfit

Photographed by Jay Godwin

Springsteen's seventh studio album, *Born in the USA*, remains his best-selling. Released in 1984, it has sold over 30 million copies worldwide. As Bruce tells it in his autobiography, *Born to Run*: "*Born in the USA* went nuclear. I knew I had a real runner in the title cut but I didn't expect the

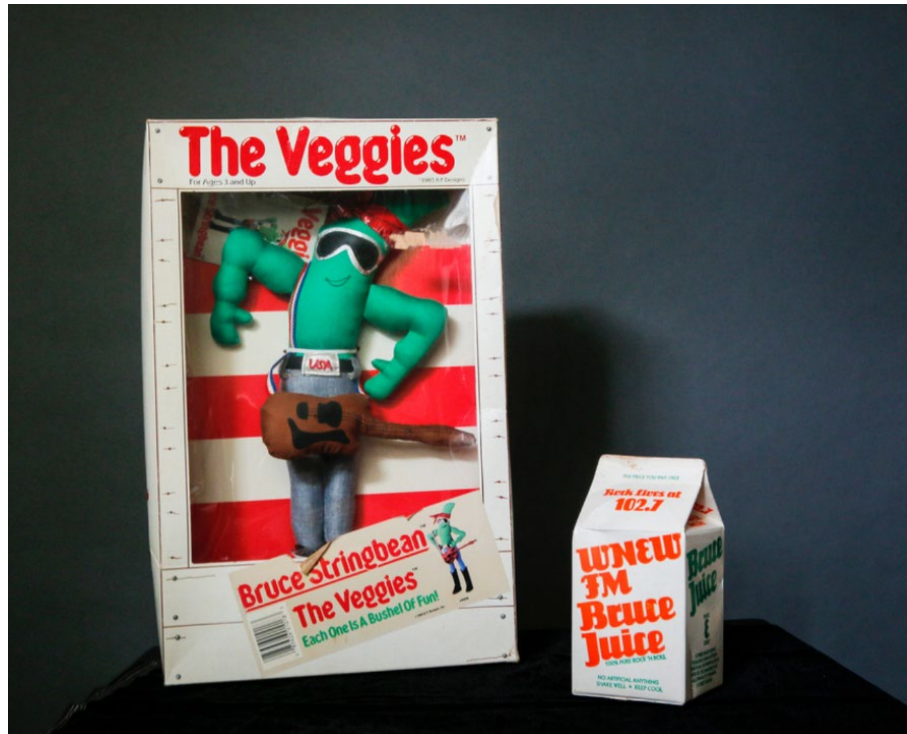
massive wave of response we received. Was it timing? The music? The muscles? I dunno, it's always a bit of a mystery when something breaks that big."

One of the album's tracks, "Dancing in the Dark," is Bruce's best performing single ever, landing at number two on the Billboard charts. Then, there's the anthemic title track, the one Bruce called "a real runner." It has often been misinterpreted as an unabashed celebration of America exceptionalism, when it in fact bemoans the plight of Vietnam veterans and the elusiveness of the American dream. Part of the confusion comes from the song's upbeat synthesizer, pounding drums, and chorus:

Born in the U.S.A.
I was born in the U.S.A.
I was born in the U.S.A.
I was born in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.

Also adding to the confusion is the album's visual imagery. For the cover, photographer Annie Leibowitz captured Bruce in front of a huge American flag. His back is to the camera, he's wearing blue jeans. He has a red ball cap in his back pocket. The image contributed to the belief that the title song was filled with pro-American lyrics, when it really criticized the nation's care of Vietnam veterans. As Bruce observed, "*Born in the USA* changed my life, gave me my largest audience, forced me to think harder about the way I presented my music and set me briefly at the center of the pop world."

Promotional Materials and Whimsical Tributes



Photographed by Mark Krajnak

Fans purchase *stuff*. As Bruce's career went from strength to strength in the 1970s and 1980s, he sold more and more official merchandise to fans at his shows and all manner of other unofficial Bruce-related ephemera emerged on the market. The BSACAM preserves much of it. "Bruce Juice" dates to the late 1970s. WNEW's Dave Herman would play a Springsteen song each morning on his radio show to wake people up and call it "Bruce Juice." Eventually, these faux juice cartons were made to further the gimmick. The carton reads:

BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies 6 (2024)

- A three minute serving from Dave Herman between 7 and 8 am on WNEW-FM equals 100% US recommended daily allowance of vitamins B, E Street, and R&R.
- Grade E Street.
- 100% Pure Rock 'n Roll.
- This Ride is Free, Rosie!
- Rock Lives at 102.7.
- No Artificial Anything. Shake Well. Keep Cool.
- Contents: Roy Bittan, Clarence Clemons, Danny Federici, Bruce Springsteen, Garry Tallent, Steve Van Zandt, Max Weinberg.

"Bruce Stringbean" was distributed by K. F. Designs in 1985. He was a part of a line of stuffed, anthropomorphic vegetables known as "The Veggies." A quaint comic on the back of the box notes, "Veggie Village is as special as the magic it takes to get there. Veggies. Veggies, you can't live without your Veggies.... each one of good for you, plus they have a personality, too!" Coming at the peak of "Born in the USA" mania, it would have been clear to all that Bruce Stringbean was meant as an homage to "The Boss."

Pins



Photographed by Mark Krajnak

Buttons and pins aren't wildly popular today, but as the American Institute of Graphic Arts notes, "from the campaign trail to the rock tour, the pin-back button occupies a fascinating, wide-reaching, and largely undocumented place in American popular history. Social media is today's most popular platform for self-expression, but the button preceded it as a way to tell others what was on your mind or as a tool to help spread an idea." The BSACAM has scores of buttons that would have allowed fans to publicly declare their love for Bruce.

Some of the pins promote a particular album or show. At least one promotes an exhibit: the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark hosted “Teenage New Jersey, 1941 – 1975” in 1997 and 1998. Bruce and fellow New Jerseyan, crooner Frank Sinatra, were highlights. Some of the pins are a little more creative and fanciful: see “Bruce Juice,” “Springsteen for President,” and “It’s Always Time for Bruce.”

A bit of fun pin history fact, while on the topic: Bruce himself has an Elvis fan club pin affixed to his guitar strap on the 1975 *Born To Run* album cover. Even rock stars have their idols!

Adele Springsteen's Scrapbooks



Photographed by Mark Krajnak

Bruce Springsteen enjoyed a very close relationship with his mother, Adele, writing in his memoir, *Born To Run*:

My mother showered me with affection...All I know is she always had my back. When I was hauled into the police station for a variety of minor infractions, she was always there to take me back home. She came to my countless baseball games, both when I stunk up the place

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and the one season lightning struck and I turned into a real fielding, hitting player, with my name in the papers. She got me my first electric guitar, encouraged my music, and fawned over my early creative writing. She was a parent, and that's what I needed as my world was about to explode.

And as Bruce's world exploded, like any doting parent, Adele was there to document it. Her scrapbook collection contains newspaper clippings, photos, correspondence, and more. It's a rare look behind the scenes at the growth of a global superstar, from the moment Bruce releases *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ* and *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* in 1973. Sales might have been slower than the record company would have liked, but Adele is positively giddy that her son actually has not one but two albums out.

Then, as *Born to Run*, bursts on the scene in 1975 to enormous success, the scrapbooks include more and more news coverage, with journalists even writing to Adele and Bruce's father, Doug, to ask **them** for interviews. For example, a typed November 6, 1975 note to from a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter reads, "I am very interested in talking to you for a story I would like to write." Adele's handwritten annotation at the bottom reads, "Wants to write a story on how it feels to be the parents of a rock star."

Bruce never forgot the role his mother played in his success. As he sings in the first lines of 1998's "The Wish":

*Dirty old street all slushed up in the rain and snow
Little boy and his ma shivering outside a rundown music store window
That night on top of a Christmas tree shines one beautiful star
And lying underneath a brand-new Japanese guitar*

The song concludes:

*Last night we all sat around laughing at the things that guitar brought us
And I layed awake thinking 'bout the other things it's brought us
Well, tonight I'm takin' requests here in the kitchen
This one's for you, ma, let me come right out and say it, it's overdue*

Adele Springsteen died January 31, 2024.

Reviews

Mary Climbs In: The Journeys of Bruce Springsteen's Women Fans, written by Lorraine Mangione and Donna Luff (Rutgers University Press, 2023, 252 pages).

Recently, my favorite television show, *CBS Sunday Morning*, featured a story about fandom and psychological research that tries to explain it. The tone of the piece, even among the scholars who study this topic, was mostly dismissive and eye-rolling. The host and guests chuckled at the thought that hardcore fans feel in relationship with the objects of their adoration. As one of those hardcore fans, I felt frustrated by the lack of nuanced conversation about what it means to focus devotion on celebrities, and musicians, in particular. There are many types of fandoms, of course. But because music is so personal and so emotionally and nostalgically affecting, it creates an unusually potent connection between the artist and their fans. Rather than dismissing this resonance as silly, I think the problem is that our language is limited when it comes to the various forms of relationship. For the most part, we only have words to describe the connection between friends, family, coworkers, or lovers—in other words, people you can call or email because you have their contact information.

What about this connection that arises via the bridge of music—a third thing, in and of itself? Music creates a bond that fans obviously feel, and that artists, including Bruce, often reference as real and significant. I think this is still a relationship (even though Bruce has yet to give me his cell number). And it is nothing to roll your eyes at.

Mary Climbs In: The Journeys of Bruce Springsteen's Women Fans, by Lorraine Mangione and Donna Luff, is a loving attempt to understand this

relationship (although some of the fans they quote deny this connection is “real”). As fans themselves, Mangione and Luff are interested in, “What being a Springsteen fan means for women and what impacts it has on their lives” (5). The authors argue that this is an important missing component in our understanding of Bruce’s decades-long fans. Indeed, it may be hard to find another artist that is more associated with the masculine ideal, male fans, and what is sometimes referred to as “dad rock,” than Bruce. Women, though, make up a significant portion of his dedicated fanbase. As social scientists, Mangione and Luff conducted two surveys of women to explore their perspectives on things like their initial discovery of Bruce, how his music serves as therapy, whether his portrayal of women characters is sexist, and more. Approximately two thousand respondents were recruited through personal networks and *Backstreets.com*.

Mary Climbs In is an important addition to our understanding of Bruce’s cultural impact and relevance, and it helps to peel back the invisibility—or outright dismissal—that so often obscures our perception of women’s roles in music and culture. As Mangione and Luff point out, “Fandom for women has traditionally been thought to relate heavily to sexual and romantic fantasies toward the rock star, though some feminist writers have argued for a variety of motivations in women’s fandom” (12). The authors dig deep to reveal the multifaceted, complex, and even contradictory, motivations and feelings that Bruce’s women fans bring to their devotion. Their work urges us to take seriously the contributions of Bruce’s many women fans and how they have co-created the vibrant audience community that has sustained his career for half a century.

One of the most interesting questions explored in Mangione’s and Luff’s surveys is how women perceive Bruce’s drawing of female characters. He has been criticized for singing about women as little girls in

the early part of his career. He's also been challenged for centering men in most of his songs. Respondents, though, tend to see the complexity in Bruce's characterizations, and they often take into account what they know of his personal relationships with his wife and mother, and his seemingly attentive, loving parenting of his children. One fan notes, "These relationships have definitely helped him understand women and respect them" (51). Explorations like this are a welcome contribution to our understanding of this towering musical icon.

There are some weaknesses in the book. While *Mary Climbs In* seeks to understand what is particular about women's fandom, it fails to offer any point of comparison with Bruce's male fandom to get at that particularity. Gender is a socially constructed spectrum, with femininity at one end and masculinity at the other. These two end points can only be understood in conversation. Without some discussion of what we know about his male fans — what is particular about how men relate to Bruce and his music — we can't know that what his female fans express is "the particular and relational nature of fandom for women" (6). For instance, Mangione and Luff demonstrate that "many women fans...found solace or companionship in Springsteen's work..." (120). I'm sure, however, that many men would say the same. Likewise, the authors discuss how women fans first connected with Bruce's music, "For some the hook came from a single song...Sometimes one finds oneself in a song...Major moments in life, family relationships, and a song can coincide....[M]any women specifically stated that live shows were the experiences that cemented their identity as fans" (30-31). All of this is true, but I'm not sure how it's particular to women. Given this lack of comparative analysis, much of the book reads as description.

There are two other ways in which the book can be improved. Organizationally, the authors jump back and forth between topics. For example, the question of the relationship between Bruce and his fans is covered at least twice (in chapters 2 and 4). Also, I see a missed opportunity to discuss the generational context of this fandom in greater depth. Mangione and Luff do touch on the fact that some fans have been listening to Bruce for fifty years, while others were not even born until decades after *Born to Run* or *Born in the USA* hit the scene. I wonder, though, if it would have made an interesting narrative to organize at least part of the book around these generational waves. In fact, the authors note “the significance and consequence of what was happening in the culture as people grew up...Springsteen’s music was part of the culture and many fans’ lives as they negotiated adulthood” (23). That means that someone discovering his music in 1978 will have a different experience than someone who became a fan in 2005 or 2015. The book could benefit from teasing out these generational nuances to a greater degree.

Overall, *Mary Climbs In* is a welcome contribution to the literature, both for expanding our understanding of this significant and committed fanbase – which, in turn provides greater illumination of Bruce’s place on the American and global stage – and for challenging the idea that women need not be taken seriously as consumers and drivers of musical culture.

Carrie Pitzulo

Renegades: Born in the USA, written by Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen (Crown, 2021, 303 pages).

They might seem like strange dialogue partners—the former two-term President of the United States and the dynamic American rock music star. But during the summer of 2020, Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen got together for a long discussion. Their conversation is recorded in this coffee table-style book, complete with photographs of the two speakers, their families, friends, and comrades; words from their songs and speeches; and hand-scribbled notes.

Despite their different walks in life and their very different paths to success and fame, Obama and Springsteen appear to have much in common. Neither man was born to success. Obama was born in Hawaii in 1961 to a White mother; his Black father left the family for a scholarship at Harvard University, then moved to his native Kenya, established another family there, and remained absent from his son's life. Obama's mother, however, had a very positive influence in his life: "She infused me with a basic sense of who I was and why I was blessed to have this beautiful brown skin and to be part of this grand tradition" (31). Springsteen was born twelve years earlier into and grew up in a working-class New Jersey family. He claimed that he never really knew his father: "He was simply an unknowable man with a great penchant for secrecy" (194).

Obama and Springsteen see themselves as part of a great American story: being born into very modest conditions but becoming world-famous after excelling in their life work. Springsteen began playing the guitar at a young age. He states, "When I hold a guitar, I don't feel like I'm holding anything. It's just a part of my body, you know? It's just another appendage. When I strap it on, it feels like my natural state" (83). By the

time he was a young adult, he was playing in a rock band in New Jersey bars, college dances, and other venues, making a living but not accumulating great wealth.

Obama's path was more traditional, though not typical for a Black kid raised by a single parent: Columbia University, Harvard Law School, and then a move into the political world. He served in the Illinois State Senate from 1997-2004 and in the United States Senate from 2005-2008. At age 47, in 2008, he was elected President of the United States.

Both men spoke about the great influence of a romantic partner. For Obama, it is his wife Michelle, always by his side, encouraging his professional and political endeavors. They met when both were young attorneys working and living in Illinois. Shortly after Obama met Michelle, he said to himself, "This is somebody I could see spending my life with" (221). Both wanted careers and a family, and they mutually and affectionately worked to make that goal possible.

We learn about the development of their relationship, which was born from their mutual appreciation of popular culture. Obama and Springsteen had opportunities to mutually celebrate their successes. While he lived in the White House, Obama often staged musical nights--an evening of Motown music, Broadway hits, Latina music. Rock and folk stars like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder, Mick Jagger, and Cheryl Crow performed in the Obama White House. Springsteen got the chance to perform before President Obama and his family at the White House. The rock star and the president enjoyed each other's company.

Their discussion in *Renegades* goes beyond their personal lives. Political issues, economic issues, racial issues entered their conversation. Springsteen discusses his *Nebraska* album, which explored the nation's

middle-class slippage. He feels guilty when he begins to earn good money and buys a nice home. His hit song "Born in the U.S.A." highlighted the economic issues facing many Americans. During his first presidential run, Obama discussed middle-class decline during the presidencies of his immediate predecessors, Republican Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. This economic decline among the American working class became a key campaign issue for Obama.

Both men speak frankly of the racial issues and changes that occurred during their lifetimes. Springsteen usually played in racially integrated bands. His famous saxophonist, Clarence Clemons, a Black musician, joined Springsteen's band early on and played with him until Clemons's death in 2011. Obama broke the most fortified racial barrier when he was elected President of the United States in 2008.

Springsteen and Obama discuss at length the racial issues and dynamics that they faced growing up and in adulthood in the post-World War II United States. Springsteen calls upon Americans to deal patriotically with our racial and political issues: "politically connecting across party lines; rediscovering common experiences, the love of country, a new national identity that includes a multicultural picture of the United States that's real today, rooted in common ideals and just seeing each other as American again, whether it's blue, red, Black, white" (265).

This dialogue introduces these two noteworthy Americans in an interesting and provocative way. Readers will learn about their lives, their work, and their beliefs. Their dialogue goes far beyond an encyclopedia description or a biographical summary. Readers get a sense of their personalities and their values.

The dialogue ends with kind words exchanged by these two contemporary American giants:

President Obama: I think we've done some good work today, brother.

Bruce Springsteen: We did, yeah. Thank you, brother.

President Obama: I learned something.

Bruce Springsteen: So did I.

The readers of *Renegades Born in the USA* will learn something – about these two formidable men and their culture. Their extended dialogue gives readers insights into their lives and their time.

James Tackach

Because the Boss Belongs to Us, hosted by Jesse Lawson and Holly Casio (iHeart Podcasts, 2024, 7 episodes).

I love straight trash, artsy or not, smart or not, especially from the 1990s. I too am burdened and blessed with sometimes-life-sustaining queer connections to straight icons, though mine tend to skew Quebecois: Celine Dion and Leonard Cohen. What resonates with the podcast hosts in Bruce Springsteen's lyrics and cachet—his 'uncool' locale, working-class consciousness, maybe-camp masculinity—resonates with me as well. Yet, when I turned on the podcast, I couldn't say I had a strong attachment to Bruce. And I still don't. Though, as I'll suggest below, that matters little.

The podcast is led by two hosts, Jesse Lawson and Holly Casio, who guide seven episodes, each focusing on a key factor that may or may not qualify Springsteen as a queer icon: his campiness, his underdog status, his sense of masculine failure set against his vast commercial success, and the likelihood of queers crying, dancing, or "fucking" to his music. The hosts employ a motif of "science," claiming they are testing their fandom hypotheses by gathering evidence from a bevy of experts. In all, this podcast is an interdisciplinary tour de force that models the best of infotainment: scholarship, dialogue, curiosity, playfulness, and gravity, all at once.

The hosts and their many, many guests across disparate fields—from a lesbian fashion historian to a friend's elderly straight father who has seen Springsteen live eighty times—were personable, intelligent, sensitive, genuinely humorous, personally invested, and earnest. In short, it was fun hanging out with this crew.

Much of today's mainstream queer cultural production still centers on the relational modes and histories of cis gay men (consider, for instance,

that cross-identity 'queer icon' status tends to adhere almost exclusively to straight women via reverence by gay men), while this podcast demonstrates the potentials and pleasures of an alternative. One such pleasure was the lineup's focus on what the hosts call the trans-guy/dyke nexus—the shared histories and collaborations of trans guys and women-loving-women that no longer seem as popular a mode of queer affiliation.

The memories of the hosts and many guests of growing up queer in the 80s and 90s in rural spheres reminded me of how important just one lyrical line could be before the internet: the hosts rightly seize on Springsteen's "I wanna change my clothes, my hair, my face!" as one of his many echoes of concurrent queer self-doubt and urgent self-transformation. There is enjoyable nostalgia and a sense of grief that runs through the podcast and its listener (well, this listener) too, from the recurring theme of Springsteen-as-source-of-closeted-queer-catharsis to the recurring setting of the historical-gay-bar-as-vital-community-center, where one may meet a long-time lover or best friend or a super-significant relationship that lasted just half a song (during which you did indeed dance in the dark).

Straight cisgender masculinities are not the 'real' or original things that lesbian, trans, or dyke masculinities then copy; as Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, and many others have pointed out, straight cis dudes are at least as derivative as the rest of us—Springsteen's stylistic resemblance to (or is it citation of?) early kd lang being one example the hosts offer. Queer fandom can be a source of pleasure, politics, connection, community, and intellectual work, no less a matter of devotion, narrative, projection, and hope creation than, say, sports fandom or expert-music-bro fandom. As much as queer fans find and/or create queer content in straight artists, so too can our fandom of these artists serve as a way for us to learn about how

to live in a straight world (Springsteen as gentle-pedagogue-of-heterosexuality?).

“Masculinities” are contextual, plural, and certainly not homogenous; as one guest states, masculinity feels and signifies differently for those upon whom it is forced, admired, and praised versus those for whom it is forbidden, shamed, and punished. Ultimately, in the podcast’s last episode, a tough panel of expert judges decides whether or not the hosts have made their case convincingly (a skewering of academic peer-review conventions that I quite enjoyed), and the outcome can be best summed up by a panelist who concludes that fandom is a matter of faith, not facts – of fan relationality, not rationality – a conclusion with which this reviewer agrees heartily.

There was an intermittent suggestion (largely by guests) that queers these days may no longer need ‘straight’ icons, now that more celebrities are ‘out,’ to which I ask: 1) Are queers necessarily better equipped to be queerly iconic (I’ll take Celine Dion over Lady Gaga all day), and 2) Isn’t the cross-identity naming and claiming a crucial part of the queer pleasure and process? Queer covers of Springsteen seemed a conspicuous absence, but that may just reflect my membership in the cult dyke/post-dyke following of queer Canadian duo Tegan and Sara’s live rendition of “Dancing in the Dark.” The less compelling portions of the podcast occur when the hosts slide from considering Bruce-as-persona to Bruce-as-person, which may have lightly undermined the broader enterprise of taking the relational art of personae and fandom seriously as visceral realities in their own right.

Relatedly, when we entered those moments of “But what about the real Bruce?” I felt nuance slip away; I sensed the hosts imagined queer Springsteen fans as necessarily different (maybe even ‘better’?) than other

Springsteen fans; I wondered if the arguments about Bruce bringing together disparate demographics or representing working-class culture were somewhat uncut by what I heard, at times, as moralizing. I would want to call in the historians to respond to the repeated claim that women-driven subversions of masculinity are “newer” or “more recent” than men-driven parodies of femininity (though I certainly take the point that the latter have been far more recognized and valued). Since one of the podcast’s high points comes when the hosts and a couple of musician guests debate if Springsteen’s music makes for a good sexual soundtrack (“Can you fuck to it?”), I would have loved more sexuality context and content (“Hey little girl, is your daddy home?” didn’t launch an ‘Is Bruce daddy?’ episode?!), though I note approvingly the central role afforded to Springsteen’s posterior throughout.

Make no mistake: *this is a very positive review*. As many voices mention on the podcast, we offer critical feedback on things we love, and I’d add, on things that offer enough food for thought that we’re whetted. Students in communications, music, popular culture, queer theory, transgender studies, and queer history should listen to this, and it could easily be made part of many cool assignments. Scholars of fandom, Springsteen, queer culture, emotion, and fashion will all find plenty of infotainment here, and I’d wager, a few solid lines of inquiry that will make them think. Springsteen fans who feel surprised or disgusted by the existence of this podcast should listen to posthaste!

Lawson and Casio should be commended, and if they ever want to take their work to the page, I think their work could easily find its way into Bloomsbury’s 33 1/3 series, U of Texas’s “Music Matters” series, or Duke’s “Singles” series. The day before I drafted this review, Springsteen played a concert five blocks from my house, and though I doubt I will regret not

going, I may, of course, become wrong one day—because, although attaching to a new queer icon doesn't happen overnight or through analysis alone, podcasts such as this one may well be the start of something.