Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet

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I

ADAM RAISED A CAIN

Biographical and Musical Influences

THE POWER OF PLACE

Bruce Frederick Joseph Springsteen was born on September 23, 1949, in Long Branch, New Jersey, the first child and only son of Adele and Douglas Springsteen. It would hardly be an understatement to say that he and his sisters, Virginia and Pamela, had an inauspicious beginning. The family settled in Freehold, a working-class town about a half hour from the fading tourist retreat of Asbury Park, whose reputation Springsteen would later establish as part of rock 'n' roll’s geographic lore. But that would come much later. In the fifties and sixties, Springsteen was trapped on the wrong side of the tracks in Freehold, “the kind of place where the inferiority complex comes built in” (Marsh 234).

It wasn’t that there weren’t nice areas of Freehold occupied by middle- and upper-middle-class families enjoying the upside of the postwar American Dream. It’s just that the Springsteens were stuck in the gritty, depressed underside of that dream. Bruce deeply felt the economic and spiritual poverty that enveloped his house on South Street next to Ducky Slattery’s gas station. Douglas Springsteen was often out of work; when he was employed as a bus driver, jail guard, or laborer in a local rug mill, the jobs featured low pay and long hours, leaving him unfulfilled, angry, and isolated.
If his home life was characterized by silence and desperation, it wasn’t much worse than school. Springsteen attended public and parochial schools, but at both St. Rose of Lima Catholic School and Freehold Regional High School, he was largely invisible, a poor to average student who “didn’t even make it to class clown” (Alterman 16). He was certainly intelligent, but there seemed to be no institutional avenue for him to apply his ability. He tried sports, football and baseball, but nothing seemed to give him any sense of belonging or purpose. At St. Rose, he constantly ran afoul of the nuns. In third grade, a nun stuffed him into a trashcan, telling him that is where he belonged. A few years later, one of the sisters disciplined him for “acting up,” by sending him to the first-grade classroom and having one of the young boys slap him in the face. Springsteen would later say, “I was there eight years . . . but I don’t remember anything nice about it” (Marsh 23). High school wasn’t any better. Springsteen’s long hair, ragged dress, and unusual personal style upset his classmates, causing him to be derided as a freak. One teacher even suggested to the other students that Springsteen not be allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony, to preserve the solemnity and importance of the occasion. At best, it “was like I didn’t exist. It was the wall, and then me” (Alterman 16).

Not surprising, Springsteen’s early music reflects the bleak nature of his upbringing and, in particular, his fear of never making it out of the cycle of poverty and drudgery that he watched his father and friends live out. For instance, his first album, Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ, features the lonely, “ragamuffin gunner” of “Lost in the Flood.” The protagonist is “like a hungry runaway” who has no roots; he wanders from town to town as if he is in search of some great dream that always eludes him. Resigned to his fate, he tries to carve out a place to stand, by racing “Sundays in Jersey in a Chevy stock car super eight.” His car is painted red, white, and blue and bears the words “bound for glory,” but it becomes clear that although he is brave and even heroic, his longing will remain undefined and unrewarded. Like the bravest of soldiers, he rides “into the hurricane,” but he cannot overcome the confusing array of societal forces set against him, forces embodied in the word flood. The kids may have romanticized him as “Jimmy the Saint,” but in the end, “there is nothing left” of his body; his blood stains the road, and the wreckage of his car is strewn on the horizon. The song’s landscape, populated by “wolfman fairies dressed in drag for homicide,” disinte-
grates into a surreal riot, the police fighting gangs of kids. Lives are
snuffed out in "five, quick shots," a hail of bullets ripping through the
town. A church towers over the scene, but religion can’t help any of the
characters. Bald pregnant nuns are “pleading immaculate conception,”
and all the characters are “wrecked on Main Street from drinking that
holy blood.” There is no meaning, no solace, no reason why. There is
only desperation, pain, and death. The young men may be heroic in
their insistence on trying to find a purpose in life, but none of them
make it out of the flood. As Springsteen concludes, “those cats are sure
messed up,” and as a kid who grew up watching dreams die in Free-
hold, he knew what he was writing about.

Other early songs focus on his father, clearly the most influential
family member on Springsteen’s initial view of the world as a hostile
place that can leave you lonely and numb if you aren’t careful. Spring-
steen’s raps about the tension between him and his father were stan-
dard concert fare in the 1970s, as if the stage became a therapeutic
platform on which he could exorcise the demons of his childhood.
Sometimes the stories were comedic. He frequently joked with his au-
dience, “When I was growing up, there were two things that were
unpopular in my house; one was me, the other was my guitar” (Marsh
11). Usually, however, the tales lamented the volatility of the relation-
ship between a man who felt like a failure and a son whose desire not to
end up like his father was so strong that he frequently ran away. When
his mother inevitably retrieved him, the story was always the same:
“We’d always end up screamin’ at each other. My mother she’d end up
runnin’ in from the front room, cryin’ and tryin’ to pull him off me”
(Marsh 26).

This raw emotion is most palpable on Darkness on the Edge of
Town. In “Factory,” Springsteen revealed that he understood his
father’s plight. The father in the song rises early to plod to his dead-end
job that “takes his hearing”; he trudges “through the mansions of fear”
and “pain.” The singer can see his “daddy walking through them factory
gates.” The job is brutal; it takes everything from the men who work at
the factory, and by the end of the day, they have “death in their eyes.”
Still, they will have to be back the next day and every other day to make
ends meet. Their frustration and anger will build until it spills outside
the factory and into their homes where “somebody’s gonna get hurt
tonight.”
Even after he had released *Born to Run* in 1975, an album that established him as a bona fide rock star, Springsteen felt the pain of his father’s legacy and wrote about it in “Adam Raised a Cain.” Released on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, the song opens with the protagonist being baptized as his “father held him to his side.” Though it has been many years, the speaker can still remember, “how on that day I cried.” He acknowledges that, even then, he and his father were like Adam and Cain, “prisoners in love, a love in chains.” The second stanza reflects his fear that no matter what he does, he will never be able to outrun his father’s legacy, which is “never over” and “relentless as the rain.” When the album came out in 1978, Springsteen had just won a lengthy lawsuit against his first manager, Mike Appel. The legal victory freed Springsteen to sign with new manager, Jon Landau, and produce his first new album since *Born to Run*. He was a star; he had more control over his art and career than ever; and his concerts sold out in minutes from coast to coast. Yet, as the song indicates, his fear of not being able to outrun his father’s fate was so powerful that it still defined him; he still worried that he wouldn’t be able to escape “paying for the sins of somebody else’s past.” He knows that his “daddy worked his whole life for nothing but the pain.” This image is permanently ingrained in the mind of the son who, no matter how much he succeeds, must still “inherit the sins” and try to battle to free himself from “the dark heart of a dream.”

Springsteen’s father isn’t the only family member whose difficulties influenced him. In 1980, Springsteen released *The River*, a double album whose title track tells the story of his older sister, Virginia, who had married young, had children, and in the late seventies was trying with her husband to hold her family together through perilous economic times. The words spring from a young disillusioned husband who loves his wife but feels beleaguered by life’s events. The young man is from a small town where “you were brought up to do like your daddy done.” Like Springsteen and Virginia’s husband, he clearly dreams of a better life, and he and his girlfriend would often “ride out of that valley down to where the fields were green.” He fondly remembers diving into the river with his beautiful Mary, and the listener is struck by the images of renewal, almost as if they were being born again into a better life. However, the sense of hope is soon extinguished. He “got Mary pregnant,” and after a joyless wedding, he is presented with “a union card” and gets a job working construction. Soon, he is laid off, and all of their
dreams “just vanish right into the air.” The couple grows distant, with him acting like “I don’t remember” and Mary acting like “she don’t care.” The memories of his hopes haunt him “like a curse,” sending him and Mary back to the river in search of what seemingly has been lost forever.

Yet, Springsteen himself did not fall prey to the darkness. He felt it deeply for himself, and he would always feel it for others, but he also transcended it. His mother, who loved music, particularly Elvis Presley, was a major reason why. When he was nine years old, he and his mom watched Elvis play on the Ed Sullivan Show, a pivotal event in his life. “I was nine years old when I saw Elvis on Ed Sullivan, and I had to get a guitar the next day. I stood in front of my mirror with that guitar on . . . and I knew that that’s what I was missing” (Alterman 17). His mother encouraged him to pursue music, protected him from his father’s anger, and eventually took out a sixty-dollar loan to buy him his first professional guitar. It was a substantial amount of money, and Springsteen never forgot it, later remarking that his mother “was just like superman” (13). He would later write “The Wish,” released on Tracks in 1998, as an homage to his mother who, though she could not keep him from looking through his father’s eyes to “a world so deadly and true,” did prevent him “from crawling through.”

Instead, Springsteen found hope in music. Onstage, he had a purpose, even a home. He joined his first band, the Castiles, in 1965 thanks to Tex and Marion Vinyard, a Freehold couple that sponsored local bands. He played with the group through high school, when most of the other band members moved on to nonmusical pursuits. After dropping out of Ocean County Community College, he formed several bands on the Jersey shore in the late sixties and early seventies, including Earth, Child, Steel Mill, Dr. Zoom and the Sonic Boom, and the Bruce Springsteen Band. He was doggedly dedicated to music as a way of finding a place, so much so that, unlike other musicians, he refused to work other, nonmusic jobs and even faked a mental illness to evade the draft. For Springsteen, music literally was life. Music “gave me a sense of purpose. What I wanted to do. Who I wanted to be. The way that I wanted to do it. What I thought I could accomplish through singing songs” (60 Minutes, 2008). Perhaps this is why many of his early songs are infused with hope. Greetings may have featured “Lost in the Flood,” but it also featured “Growin’ Up,” a rollicking song of youthful
exuberance in which Springsteen "combed my hair till it was just right and commanded the night brigade." He is unafraid, confident, and ready to stand up when everyone tells him to "sit down." In the end, he "lost everything I ever loved or feared" and boasts that he "found the key to the universe in the engine of an old parked car." *The Wild and Innocent* includes "Rosalita," a powerful, upbeat rocker in which a young musician believes that he will make it big, and he exhorts his girlfriend to tell her father that "this is his last chance to get his daughter in a fine romance" before the "record company" gives him a "big advance." *Born to Run* boasts "Thunder Road," in which the speaker tries to sweep the girl he loves off her feet, beckoning her to leave their "town full of losers" and pull "out of here to win." In *Darkness*, Springsteen testifies to his belief in a better life in "The Promised Land," a song in which the seemingly hopeless speaker rallies and insists that he will "blow away the lies that leave you nothing but lost and broken-hearted." Even on *The River*, home to several songs of bleak desperation, there are hopeful tunes, such as "Two Hearts" and "I Wanna Marry You," in which the protagonists insist on the possibility of love and meaning, and "I'm a Rocker," in which a feisty, fiery musician tells a girl that he is better than "James Bond" or any another "secret agent man." He is a "rocker, every day." He'll never quit, and he will rescue her, just as he was rescued by his guitar and his music.

This was Springsteen. Redeemed by his guitar, he needed only a band as dedicated to rock 'n' roll as himself. He found the musicians that he needed in and around Asbury Park in the early seventies. By the fall of 1972, Springsteen had formed the initial cast of the E Street Band, including Clarence "Big Man" Clemons on saxophone, drummer Vini "Mad Dog" Lopez, keyboard player David Sancious, and Gary Tallent on bass. Before the *Born to Run* album in 1975, Springsteen replaced Lopez with the now legendary Max Weinberg. Sancious left the group and was replaced by Roy Bittan. Danny Federici was added to play the organ and accordion, and Springsteen's long-time friend Steven Van Zandt joined the band as a producer and guitar player. With the E Street Band at his back, Springsteen's career took flight. After receiving critical praise but disappointing sales for his first two albums, Springsteen became a star—and a profitable one at that—with *Born to Run*, an album that would eventually sell over six million copies. After a three-year absence from the studio due to a contentious lawsuit,
Springsteen returned in 1978 with the relentless *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, another critical and commercial success. He then delivered *The River* in 1980. The double album sold over 1.5 million copies in the first few months. By the end of *The River* tour in late 1981, Bruce Springsteen was an international star. The poor kid from Freehold, with little hope and a stormy past, had made it.

A sure sign that Springsteen had reached superstardom was what he did on his next album, *Nebraska*. Released in 1982, Springsteen recorded most of the works in his house in New Jersey with his guitar and a four-track cassette recorder. Surrounded by all the trappings of success, Springsteen might have reveled in his money and status. Instead, he turned his attention to those who, like his father, were disenchanted and discouraged with life in the 1980s. With fans and record company executives expecting the powerful, perhaps even joyful rock sound of the E Street Band, Springsteen instead manifested his growing sense of autonomy by issuing eleven stark, austere solo songs that reflected the dark side of American life. Springsteen may have transcended the hopelessness of his childhood and his father’s rage, but the pain of others was not lost on him. In fact, his commitment to serving others by exposing their plight seemed to emerge most forcefully in *Nebraska*, where songs force the listener to stand in the shoes of those less fortunate—songs such as “Reason to Believe,” in which the speaker struggles with the incomprehensibility of life and the difficulty of maintaining faith; “Highway Patrolman,” which tells the tale of a good man caught between duty to his wayward brother and his job; “Used Cars,” which underscores the humiliation of a working-class family trying to scrape up enough money to buy a cheap car; and “Johnny 99,” in which a man on death row explains the desperation that led to his crime.

Springsteen’s songs clearly still had a dark, sobering quality to them. He was still looking into the darkness, but it wasn’t simply his own darkness; it was the pain and frustration of others about which he was writing on the *Nebraska* album. This transference of subject matter from his own life to the lives of others marked a significant transition period for Springsteen. As he recognized by the end of *The River* tour, “I drew a lot of my earlier material from my experience growing up, my father’s experience, the experience of my immediate family and town. But there was a point in the mid-eighties when I felt like I’d said pretty much all I knew how to say about all that. I couldn’t continue writing
about those same things without either becoming a stereotype of myself or by twisting those themes around too much. So I spent the next ten years or so writing about men and women—their intimate personal lives” (Percy). On his next album, *Born in the USA*, Springsteen would continue to develop his identity as a writer for the people, especially for the invisible members of the downtrodden masses whose voices would never otherwise be heard. Unlike the stark, lonely sound of a single guitar often heard on *Nebraska*, *Born in the USA* exploded in the ears of listeners in true rock fashion. The album spoke for millions who were struggling, with songs such as “Downbound Train” and “Glory Days,” but it also insisted that there would be a light at the end of the tunnel. Numbers such as “Cover Me,” “Dancing in the Dark,” and “No Surrender” featured characters with problems and imperfect lives who still saw possibilities for joy and triumph amid their difficulties. The title song, “Born in the USA,” is an angry work in which Springsteen takes up the cause of forgotten Vietnam veterans, but the story’s protagonist is still a “cool rocking Daddy” who will never give up. The album’s most personal song, “My Hometown,” is replete with images of “troubled times,” including racial tension, violence, and economic deprivation, but there is still a sense that the speaker and his wife will not give up on the place. Darkness but also light. Pain but also possibility. The record became a commercial bonanza. Seven of the ten songs reached the top ten on the singles charts; the album itself went to number one on *Billboard Magazine*’s chart, and it eventually sold over fifteen million copies in the United States alone. Tickets for the *Born in the USA* tour sold out in minutes, even for the larger, football-sized venues, such as London’s Wembley Stadium or the Cotton Bowl in Dallas. The tour grossed over $80 million. Springsteen followed up with a long-awaited live album, *Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band Live: 1975–1985*, which was just as successful. The world experienced Brucomania, and Springsteen became one of the most famous and richest musicians in the world.

On top of the world, Springsteen married actress Julianne Phillips in May 1985. However, the working-class New Jersey rocker and the upper-class Los Angeles model proved to be incompatible, and the gradual dissolution of the marriage exacted an emotional toll on Springsteen. The marriage ended in March 1989, just after Springsteen released what some might argue is his most biographical record, *Tunnel of*
Love. While the album clearly resonates with anyone who has gone through a divorce or rough times in a relationship, it remains a powerful expression of Springsteen's personal emotions. In “Brilliant Disguise,” a man is “struggling to do everything right.” He wants to love his wife, but he is plagued by doubt and insecurity. He hears someone calling her name from “underneath our window,” and he watches her hide something “in shame underneath your pillow.” He “walks this world in wealth,” just like Springsteen, but he is tormented. Is she cheating? Does she love him? Does he love her? “Is that you, baby, or just a brilliant disguise?” In the end, “his bed is cold,” and he is “lost in the darkness of our love.” All he can do is utter a weak prayer for God to “have mercy on the man who’s not sure what he’s sure of.” Likewise, “Tunnel of Love” underscores the frightening, destabilizing nature of a marriage gone wrong. A young couple at an amusement park embarks on what should be a fun, romantic ride; however, “when the lights go out,” they find themselves “in a room of shadows.” They see only in mirrors, in distorted “5-D” vision, and they come face-to-face in the dark with “all that stuff we’re so scared of.” This isn’t a funhouse; it’s a chamber of horrors where “it’s easy for two people to lose each other.” Love should be “easy” and “simple enough,” but “the house is haunted and the ride is rough.” In the end, all you can do is hold on and “learn to live with what you can’t rise above.”

*Tunnel of Love* took on an additional layer of meaning when Springsteen went through another breakup after his 1988 tour. Early in 1989, Springsteen parted ways with the E Street Band. In some ways, perhaps the separation was necessary. Springsteen needed time to move beyond being “The Boss,” a rock idol, a superstar, or any of the other highly pressurized roles that an international megastar must reluctantly accept as part of his fame and fortune. He needed time to figure out who he was and how to live with being, as he would write in “Better Days” in 1992, “a rich man in a poor man’s shirt.” He played with several artists, experimented musically, and, most important, fell in love with a woman with whom he could form a lasting bond. In June 1991, Springsteen married Patti Scialfa, whom he had known since the early days of his career on the Jersey shore and with whom he had an affair in the mideighties. Scialfa was a Jersey girl who grew up in the same area as Springsteen. She was a musician. They shared a common language and a common history. Between 1990 and 1994, the couple had three chil-
dren: Evan, Jessica, and Sam. With his wife and children, Springsteen seemed to develop a greater sense of self, an identity that was more than just being a singer. It also brought him a deeper sense of joy: “My relationship with Patti and the children brought an enormous amount of faith and hope. There’s little babies! You can’t afford despair, you gotta find faith someplace” (Sweeting).

In 1992, Springsteen released Human Touch and Lucky Town, neither of which earned the same type of critical acclaim or exuberant fan reaction as his earlier albums. However, several of the songs revealed his growing feeling of contentment. In “Better Days,” Springsteen acknowledges that he has been through some hard times, but he affirms that “these are better days with a girl like you.” He confesses that he was a sad sight, a man who was “livin’ in his own skin and can’t stand the company.” Yet, by the end of the song, he’s “half way to heaven and just a mile outta hell.” He proclaims that “better days are shining through.” In “Living Proof,” he reveals the hope that he found in the birth of his son. He admits that “he had crawled deep into some kind of darkness.” He had done “some sad and hurtful things.” Yet, he had not stopped “searching for a little of God’s mercy,” and in his son, he had “found livin’ proof.” He understands that life is still “a house of cards” and that the world is “so fouled and confused,” but it does not dampen his joy. The song ends with the warm image of husband and wife cuddling in their bed with their infant son as a storm rages outside. He repeats that he has experienced “God’s mercy” and will be content with what he has received from “the treasures of the Lord.” Lucky Town also includes “Leap of Faith,” in which the speaker delights in being “born again” as the result of falling in love, and “If I Should Fall Behind,” a touching song in which the speaker and his lover vow to wait for each other no matter what evils await them.

If Springsteen was less productive in the 1990s in terms of total album output and concerts played, perhaps it was that he had settled into a more contented role of husband and father. Yet, he was still making great art, music that showed that he had found and accepted his place as a spokesman for those who had missed out on their “beautiful reward.” In 1993, he played “The Concert to Fight Hunger.” A few months later, he wrote the soundtrack for Jonathan Demme’s landmark film Philadelphia, the story of a man who suffers the pain of discrimination and ridicule as he slowly dies from AIDS. “Streets of Philadelphia”
would win Springsteen a Grammy Award as well as an Oscar and, more important, create empathy for AIDS victims and increased acceptance for gays and lesbians. In 1995, Springsteen released *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, an acoustic album in the spirit of John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Every performance on the *Joad* tour was a reminder to the most prosperous nation on Earth that it had an obligation to protect its poorest citizens, which seemed to be growing in number even as the economy soared in the mid- to late nineties. Springsteen also turned his attention to the plight of immigrants, legal or illegal, on the album, writing “Sinaloa Cowboys,” “Galveston Bay,” “Across the Border,” and “The Line,” all of which made his listeners question whether America was living up to its reputation as a place that welcomed the starving masses yearning to breathe free.

By the midnineties, Springsteen had moved his family home to New Jersey, leaving Los Angeles, where he had lived since 1990. He had found his place as a family man, as a humanitarian musician in the tradition of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and as a man deeply rooted in the life and culture of the Jersey shore. As such, he spent the rest of the decade playing benefits for many worthy causes, many of which were centered in Freehold and Asbury Park. In 1997, he received the Polar Music Prize, essentially the music world’s answer to the Nobel Peace Prize, for his humanitarian work in the United States and around the world. In 1999, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. As the clock ticked away on the twentieth century, Bruce Springsteen had it all: a healthy family, wealth, a firm sense of professional and personal place, and all the accolades a man could ever want. Yet, one thing was missing—a reunion with the band that had helped make him great. Early in 1999, Springsteen once again joined ranks with the E Street Band, and they spent over a year barnstorming the United States and Europe, much to the delight of legions of fans. In 2000, he released *Live in New York City*, a collection of songs from the tour’s final stand in Madison Square Garden. The work was also released as a DVD, a production that won two Emmy Awards.

Unlike most reunion tours, which often end with farewell performances and reveal a band that just is not what it used to be, Springsteen and the E Street Band were better than ever and getting ready to embark on a remarkably productive and creative decade. Sadly, the renaissance was jump-started by the terrorist attacks of September 11,
2001. Much of the destruction was in New York City, just across the river from Springsteen's home in Rumson, New Jersey. Americans, particularly New Yorkers, were hurting. Springsteen responded with *The Rising*, to this date one of the only records to seriously address the terrorist attacks. With numbers such as "Empty Sky" and "You're Missing," the album allowed fans to cry and mourn the losses from the tragedy. In particular, "My City in Ruins" struck a chord with millions of listeners. Indeed, the song became a kind of rallying cry for many people who, inspired by Springsteen's love for New York, were moved to renew their love for their town. People mourned the ruins, but they also felt the hope that is infused in the song and throughout the record. In "The Rising," Springsteen invites his audience to "come on up for the rising," to "come on up" and "lay your hands in mine." It is a call for healing through community and solidarity, and it partners nicely with "Lonesome Day," in which Springsteen unites with his fellow Americans to accept the pain of the events and to encourage one another to look into the face of evil and defy it. The song is loud and powerful, and Springsteen is in full voice as he shouts, "Let Kingdom Come I'm gonna find my way through this lonesome day." The song's chorus is even more inspiring and is designed to be repeated by both singer and audience as a communal mantra of resistance: "It's alright, it's alright, it's alright!"

The first decade of the twenty-first century revealed an increasingly political Springsteen, a man who had accepted his place as an artist whose duty it is to question authority for the good of the people and to use his art to ameliorate human suffering. Released in 2005, *Devils & Dust* revisits many of the subjects and themes of the Springsteen canon. Lonely boxers, desperate lovers, world-weary cowboys, and several other long-suffering characters appear on the record, but the most notable song is "Devils & Dust," in which Springsteen takes the administration of President George W. Bush to task for waging fruitless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Specifically, Springsteen warns those in power not to make decisions based on fear, since those decisions often lead to wars fought by young people such as the song's protagonist, a young man who might kill or be killed at any time. Springsteen seemed to be looking American leaders squarely in the eye when he sang that "fear's a powerful thing" that can "take your God filled soul" and "fill it with devils and dust." In 2006, Springsteen unveiled *We Shall Overcome:*
The Seeger Sessions, in which he remade several of Pete Seeger's songs as a tribute to the great American folksinger. The tone, of course, was different from that of the songs on Devils & Dust, but the message was in keeping with Springsteen's newfound political voice that insisted on reminding Americans what is great about their country. The songs thus champion hard work, faith, hope, and humor as a way of overcoming evil and fear.

In 2007, Magic arrived in time for the presidential election season. The album includes “Last to Die,” in which Springsteen asks his government who “will be the last to die for a mistake?” “Long Walk Home” features a father professing his love for his town, a place that proudly flies the American flag as a symbol for “things that are set in stone.” It is representative of “who we are, what we’ll do, and what we won’t.” Springsteen clearly wonders what has happened to those promises in an age where a government fights wars based on lies and commits atrocities in the name of freedom. Something has gone terribly wrong, he cautions his audience, and it is “going to be a long walk home” as we try to reinvent the best of America. Springsteen pulled several of the songs out of his bag at various political rallies, a first for him, as he championed Barack Obama's presidential campaign.

In the end, Obama won the election, but Springsteen did not stop working to promote his own version of an American Dream. In Working on a Dream, Springsteen reissued his call for tolerance, inclusion, love, family, and sacrifice. In the title track, the speaker is a kind of everyman, whose “nights are long and days are lonely.” The rain is “pourin' down” and “trouble can feel like it’s here to stay,” but he vows to “straighten my back” and keep “working on a dream.” His enduring hope is that “our love will make it real someday.” As the album moves on, the listener gets a sense that, for Springsteen, that day has arrived. He will never stop speaking for the poor or for those who are hurting because, one gets the feeling, he knows and loves his place as an artist, a husband, a father, a friend, and a community leader. In “My Lucky Day,” the speaker has seen some hard times, but “the grace of your smile” reminds him how lucky he is. Similarly, the speaker in “What Love Can Do” bears the mark of Cain but insists that “we’ll let the light shine through” and that he’ll “show you what love can do.” In “Kingdom of Days,” he counts “his blessings that you’re mine for always” as they “laugh beneath the covers and count the wrinkles and the grays.” Final-
ly, there is "This Life," in which the singer declares, "With you I have been blessed, what more can you expect?" As he fingers the hem of her dress and considers the meaning of "this life and then the next," he concludes that "my universe is at rest." The kid from Freehold whom no one liked, who was stuffed in a trashcan by his teacher, had come a long way—and yet, he was only a few towns away from where he grew up.

THE POWER OF ART

As an artist, Bruce Springsteen is the definition of eclectic. He is a student of human nature, of books, films, newspapers, and journals. Of course, his earliest and most powerful influence is music. Yet, it is difficult to determine exactly who influenced Springsteen and how those influences play out in his music. Certainly, it is impossible to say that any one artist had a disproportionate influence on him. As he said in a 2010 interview, he did not mimic or copy other musicians for any of his songs. Yet, his music was generally informed by many performers: "That's studying. And whether you're drawn to gospel music or church music or honky-tonk music, it informs your character and it informs your talent" (National Public Radio, New York). As biographer Dave Marsh says of The River,


To this day, Springsteen listens to hundreds of bands a year. His influences are hard to pin down, but one can piece together certain patterns.

Springsteen himself has said several times that his earliest influence was Elvis Presley. The cover of Born to Run features Springsteen wear-
ing an Elvis button. In 1976, Springsteen, emboldened by his recent success, jumped the fence at Graceland and tried to meet his boyhood idol. Elvis was not home, and Springsteen was escorted off the grounds. It’s difficult to find a song where one can say the lyrics or music come straight from Elvis, but Springsteen thought enough of the King to record a cover of “Viva Las Vegas,” which appeared on *The Essential Bruce Springsteen* in 2003, and he wrote a powerful tribute song, “Johnny Bye Bye,” to lament Presley’s death. The song appeared on the 1998 release *Tracks*.

Another prominent influence on Springsteen’s early works was Bob Dylan. Springsteen was signed at CBS Records by John Hammond, the same executive who signed Dylan. Hammond saw in Springsteen the “new Dylan” for whom everyone had been searching. Initially, CBS wanted Springsteen to perform as a solo artist in the manner of Dylan, and despite his use of the E Street Band, several songs on *Greetings* have a solo feel. In addition, the free-flowing, raucous wordplay is reminiscent of Dylan. The album’s first song, “Blinded by the Light,” opens with “Madman bummars drummers and Indians in the summer with a teenage diplomat” and continues with “In the dumps with the mumps as the adolescent pumps his way into his hat.” This is clearly reminiscent of Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues.” Springsteen also covered several Dylan songs, including “Chimes of Freedom,” which he remade and released in 1988 as part of the Amnesty International human rights tour. Indeed, the commitment to political reform and civil rights is perhaps how Springsteen most resembles Dylan. As Springsteen says, “I used to say when I heard ‘Highway 61,’ I was hearing the first true picture of how I felt and how my country felt. And that was exhilarating.” Dylan had “tremendous courage to go places where people hadn’t gone previously. So when I heard that, I knew I liked that” (National Public Radio, Toronto).

Two folk artists, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, continue to be important influences on Springsteen, who has clearly picked up the torch as spokesman for the oppressed. Guthrie earned the moniker “the Dust Bowl troubadour,” and Springsteen covered his famous “This Land Is Your Land” on his 1985 live album. Still, Guthrie’s biggest influence is felt on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, a record dedicated to forcing middle- and upper-class America to notice those who are most vulnerable, those whom they do not want to see. Songs such as “Just
across the Border” even sound like Guthrie’s songs. Seeger, a friend of
Guthrie and fellow socialist, was so influential on Springsteen that he
dedicated an entire album, We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions, to
ensure his legacy. As Springsteen said in 2010, “there’s a part of
the singer going way back in American history that is of course the canary in
the coalmine. When it gets dark, you’re supposed to be singing. It’s dark
right now. And so I went back to Woody Guthrie and Dylan and the
people who said, ‘Take Pete Seeger, who doesn’t want to know how this
song sounds, he wants to know what’s it for’” (60 Minutes, 2009).

Country artists who affected Springsteen’s work include Hank
Williams, Johnny Cash, and Roy Orbison. The latter is featured in
Springsteen’s classic “Thunder Road,” in which the singer identifies
himself as “Roy Orbison singing for the lonely.” Orbison’s theatrical
influence is felt on Springsteen’s early records in songs such as “Incident
on 57th Street.” Orbison and Springsteen collaborated on several
songs, and Springsteen inducted him into the Rock and Roll Hall of
Fame in 1987. Springsteen viewed Cash as the ultimate blue-collar man
who, like his characters, lived life heroically in the face of certain devas-
tation. The entire Nebraska album is, in its own way, a tribute to Cash,
thematically and stylistically. Cash himself was so taken with “Johnny
99” that he covered it later in his career. Springsteen returned the favor
by signing “Give My Love to Rose” as a tribute to the Man in Black. In
the late seventies, Springsteen started listening to Hank Williams,
whose “Long Gone Lonesome Blues” inspired the lyrics to the song
“The River.”

Of course, one can never outrun one’s youth, and Springsteen cer-
tainly absorbed and ingrained the rhythms and ideas of his early rock ‘n’
roll heroes. Springsteen loved Buddy Holly’s innocence and respect for
his characters, on display in “Peggy Sue” and “Oh, Boy,” and those same
feelings are felt in the songs “Little Girl I Wanna Marry You” and
“Thunder Road.” Springsteen remade Holly’s “Not Fade Away” on The
River. As Springsteen remarked in the late seventies, “I play Buddy
Holly every night before I go on. That keeps me honest” (Leftfield).
Another staple of midcentury radio that had an impact on Springsteen
was Chuck Berry, whose good-time vibes that define “Maybelline” and
“Johnny B. Goode” can be heard in the songs “Ramrod” and “Cadillac
Ranch,” which, using cars as their centerpiece, harken back to a more
carefree age. Springsteen also admired the passion of Gary U.S. Bonds.
For years, Bond's "Quarter to Three" was a staple in Springsteen's shows, and his joy and sense that rock music is supposed to be fun and liberating are seen in songs such as "Two Hearts" and "Crush on You."

Other influences from his formative years as a musician include Mitch Ryder, Van Morrison, Duane Eddy, the Animals, and Phil Spector. Springsteen covered Ryder's "Devil with a Blue Dress On" and "Jenny Take a Ride" for years onstage, and his intense, loud rock sound is most powerfully felt in Born in the USA. Springsteen admired Morrison's poetic storytelling that made "Moon Dance" and "Brown Eyed Girl" so riveting, and one can feel Morrison's influence in many Springsteen songs. "Jungleland" and "Drive All Night" are two of the best. Eddy's "Rebel Rouser" and the Animals' "It's My Life" were also early concert fixtures whose raw rock power is evident in so many Springsteen songs. Spector, the famous producer, founded "the wall of sound" techniques that provided the big sound that Springsteen was looking for on Born to Run. The album made Springsteen a star, especially the title track, whose deep, powerful sound became his most lasting anthem.

Springsteen's musical influences are simply too numerous to catalogue, but the films and books that moved his art are varied as well. He told Will Percy, "I go through periods where I read, and I get a lot out of what I read, and that reading has affected my work since the late seventies. Films and novels and books, more so than music, are what have really been driving me since then." A poignant example of this is Nebraska, which in part sprang from several literary influences, including Henry Steele Commager and Allan Nevins's History of the United States, the fiction of Flannery O'Connor and Bobbi Ann Mason, and Robert Franks's photo essay The Americans. Springsteen was particularly moved by O'Connor's Wise Blood, with its grotesque, desperate characters struggling to survive and make meaning in a brutal world. As he later said, "right prior to the record Nebraska, I was deep into O'Connor," and he clearly understood what she offered:

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. They were a big, big revelation. She got to the heart of some part of meanness that she never spelled out, because if she spelled it out you wouldn't be getting it. 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 compo-
Certainly, *Nebraska* allows the reader to feel the meanness of the human soul, especially when that soul is ravaged by poverty, loneliness, and hopelessness.

*Born in the USA*, the album that followed *Nebraska* in 1984, was inspired by Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*, a powerful memoir of the Vietnam War. Kovic told the tale of being a kid growing up in the fifties and being taught to revere war heroes and to believe in his country’s leaders and causes. His unquestioning patriotism brought him to Vietnam, where he lost both of his legs. Paralyzed, Kovic was ignored and mistreated once he returned home, just like so many veterans of a war that many did not believe in and that we could not hope to win. Springsteen used “Born in the USA” to make sure that people could not forget about the veterans who were strewn across the American landscape and that no other generation of boys would be brainwashed into blindly trusting a government that would so carelessly lead them into war. As he wrote in the song, too many veterans had “nowhere to run” and “nowhere to go.” Springsteen has remained steadfastly determined to do everything that he can through his music to ensure that this does not happen again.

Other notable literary influences on Springsteen include John Steinbeck, Walker Percy, and Philip Roth. Springsteen was impressed with Steinbeck’s willingness to risk himself as a writer to help others, and he was especially taken with John Ford’s film interpretation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In 1995, Springsteen wrote *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, which functions in part as an homage to Steinbeck and Ford in its dedication to exposing the difficulties faced by present-day immigrants. The essays of Walker Percy were important to several of Springsteen’s songs in the early nineties: “I think about the part in the essay ‘The Man on the Train’ where [Percy] talks about alienation. He says the truly alienated man isn’t the guy who’s despairing and trying to find his place in the world. It’s the guy who just finished his twentieth Earl Stanley Gardner Perry Mason novel. That is the lonely man! That is the alienated man! So you could say, similarly, the guy who just saw the fifth Batman picture, he’s the alienated man” (Percy). One can hear this most vividly in “57 Channels” on the 1992 *Human Touch* album. In the song, a man
shoots his television and is arrested for disturbing the peace. When the judge asks for a defense, the man just says, “Fifty-seven channels and nothing on.” The judge responds, “I can see by your eyes friend you’re just about gone.” Finally, there is Roth, whose *American Pastoral, I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* “just knocked me on my ass. To be [in his 60s] making work that strong and so full of revelations about love and emotional pain—man, that’s the way to live your artistic life: Sustain, sustain, sustain” (Tucker). This is exactly what Springsteen continued to do in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2012, at the age of sixty-three, he released *Wrecking Ball* with its powerful track “We Take Care of Our Own,” in which the speaker has “been knocking on the door that holds the throne.” Getting no satisfaction, he decides that “wherever this flag is flown, we take care of our own.” No doubt, Springsteen will continue reading and performing in an attempt to take care of those who will listen.

**THE POWER OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EVENTS**

By the mideighties, Springsteen had moved from being a deeply introspective writer to an artist dedicated to “being introspective but not autobiographical.” He recognized that “it wasn’t until I felt like I had a stable life in that area that I was driven to write more outwardly—about social issues” (Percy). By the early nineties, Springsteen enjoyed that stability and has dedicated the last two decades to making his career a study in the type of social and political activism that he had begun to practice as early as 1979, when he participated in the Musicians United for Safe Energy concert at Madison Square Garden. Springsteen has continued to use his music to battle nuclear energy over the years. On September 20, 1981, Springsteen played the first of what would be many benefit shows for Vietnam veterans in Los Angeles. By 1984, Springsteen had adopted the cause of the homeless; starting with the *Born in the USA* tour, he began dedicating proceeds and fan contributions from each concert to food banks in the city in which he was playing. The practice continues to this day. In 1984, he participated in Michael Jackson’s “We Are the World” project, as well as Bob Geldof’s “Do They Know It’s Christmas” recording to help fight hunger in Ethiopia. In 1985, he helped Steven Van Zandt with his hit song “Sun City”
and supported the boycott of Sun City, a resort town in South Africa whose profitability continued to make apartheid possible.

Throughout the nineties, Springsteen continued to perform several benefit concerts every year to raise awareness for underrepresented groups or individuals at risk. For instance, in 1998 he arranged a Come Together benefit for Sgt. Patrick King and his family (a police officer killed in the line of duty). This type of practice has only increased in the new century. There are too many concerts to mention, but a few examples illustrate his commitment to serving those in need. In 2000, he performed at the first Light of Day concert to fight Parkinson’s disease. He has performed at all twelve of the Light of Day Foundation’s fundraisers. In 2004, he volunteered his services for the flood victims of Hurricane Ivan. In 2008, Springsteen went to bat to save the Count Basie Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey, one of many concerts that he has played in the last fifteen years to help save or restore local landmarks. In recent years, Springsteen has focused on helping children’s causes. In 2009, for instance, he played the Concert for Autism as well as the Bridge School Benefit to help special-needs children, another event in which he now participates annually.

Springsteen’s commitment to social justice has informed his studio efforts since Darkness on the Edge of Town told the story in 1978 of people who, despite their hard work and dedication, never achieved the American Dream. Certainly, he had people from his hometown whom he knew and loved in mind when he wrote The River and Nebraska: “I went back to where I was from, and I looked into that world and those lives, which I understood was only tangentially going to be my life from there on in. But if I was dedicated to it, and if I thought hard enough about it, and if I put in my time, I could tell those stories well. And that’s what I did” (DeCurtis). He did it not only to give them a voice but to encourage Americans to demand that their leaders address racism, class inequality, and unfair economic policies that held back so many people. The same can be said of Born in the USA and his three-decade quest to make sure that Vietnam veterans are treated with dignity. In “Streets of Philadelphia” (1994), Springsteen drew awareness to the ugliness of the discrimination against gays and lesbians in a way that powerfully affected many of his listeners. As mentioned, The Ghost of Tom Joad (1995), released in a time of growing anti-immigrant sentiment, is dedicated to reminding Americans that we are all descended
from immigrants and that current immigrants deserve respect and humane treatment.

In *The Rising* (2002), Springsteen confronted terrorism in a way that gave courage and hope to the victims without demonizing the perpetrators. The album remains one of a handful of artistic voices of reason that stood in marked contrast to less measured, emotional responses by government officials. Of course, the worst of those responses were the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which inspired Springsteen to write some of the songs on *Devils & Dust* (2005) and *Magic* (2007). As he confirmed in a 2009 interview, “we’ve lived through a nightmare . . . in the past eight years here. We had a historically blind administration who didn’t take consideration of the past; thousands and thousands of people died, lives were ruined and terrible, terrible things occurred because, there was no sense of history, no sense that the past is living and real” (Hagan). Songs such as “Devils & Dust,” “Gypsy Biker,” “Devil’s Arcade,” and “Livin’ in the Future” were all written to make sure that such historical amnesia never happens again. Indeed, it was his deep desire that no Americans die in unjust, illogical wars and that all Americans have a reasonable chance to partake of the promises of the American Dream that prompted Springsteen to use his music to campaign for Barack Obama in 2008. As he said from the stage at an Obama rally, “I spent most of my life as a musician measuring the distance between the American dream and American reality. For many . . . the distance between that dream and their reality has never been greater or more painful. I believe Senator Obama has taken the measure of that distance in his own life and work. I believe he understands in his heart the cost of that distance in blood and suffering in the lives of everyday Americans. I believe as president he would work to bring that dream back to life” (Hagan). In *Working on a Dream* (2009), *The Promise* (2010), and *Wrecking Ball* (2012), Springsteen continued to use his art to keep his version of the American promise alive for future generations. As he said in 2008, “I don’t know about you, but I want my country back, I want my dream back. Now is the time to . . . roll up our sleeves and come on up for the rising” (Hagan).