
Springsteen's American Dream



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A rocker at seventy. The idea might once have seemed ridiculous. Rock and roll always flaunts its youthfulness, rebelliousness, and self-awareness. It is filled with songs that celebrate the genre (Chuck Berry's "Rock and Roll Music" and scores of others). Some of those tunes also speak of mortality. The Who declared, "I hope I die before I grow old," but Pete Townsend and Roger Daltrey are still touring in their seventies. And Neil Young wrote "It's better to burn out than fade away," but, at age seventy-four, how much fire can he have left? Other icons from the 1960s and 1970s continue playing around the world: Bob Dylan (seventy-eight), Paul McCartney (seventy-seven), Ringo Starr (seventy-nine), Mick Jagger (seventy-six), Van Morrison (seventy-four). In 2018, Paul Simon (seventy-seven) did a farewell tour, but he has also said he will continue to perform. Not only is a rocker at seventy not ridiculous, it is now standard fare.

Springsteen differs from some of his septuagenarian peers in that he continues to take chances and develop new material. He spent 2017–2018 on Broadway performing a one-man show that united narrative and song to tell his story, a story of appearance versus reality, escape versus homecoming, sin versus salvation. As with all his work, it is a story about love. Whether with the full E Street Band or alone onstage, he delivers

a show that transcends the moment and leaves audiences feeling hopeful and uplifted even as he carries them across pits of darkness and despair. He is a self-described magician and conjurer who will not reveal his tricks but continues to hone his craft as he enters his seventies.

A great artist requires a great theme and Springsteen's is the American dream. "I have spent my life," he said in 2012, "judging the distance between American reality and the American dream." The American dream has never been easily defined, but it centers on a cluster of ideals that promise a better life for those who work hard and seek the opportunity to prosper. Democracy, freedom, equality, and justice are the high-concept pillars that support it. When he first ran for president, Barack Obama sought to "reclaim the American dream" from those who advanced a politics of inequality, exclusion, and division. "America," Obama declared, "is the sum of our dreams."

Springsteen's story personifies the American dream. A working-class kid who resented his Catholic school education and dropped out of community college, who survived an abusive father (diagnosed late in life as schizophrenic) and was nurtured by a loving mother, Springsteen found salvation in rock and roll and the dream of escape that it offered. Elvis Presley first embodied the seismic shift represented by rock music and rock fame, and the revolution ushered in by Presley marked Springsteen at an early age (he was seven years old when he saw Elvis on *The Ed Sullivan Show*). It is no accident that in Eric Meola's cover photograph on *Born to Run* (1975), Springsteen is wearing an Elvis fan club pin. Several years after Elvis's death in 1977, Springsteen rewrote the Presley song "Follow that Dream":

Now every man has the right to live
 The right to a chance, to give what he has to give
 The right to fight for the things he believes
 For the things that come to him in dreams

That is as keen an account of the meaning of America as has ever been written. As for many other figures in American history, self-education guided Springsteen's path to understanding the country. On *The River* tour in 1980–1981, Springsteen often spoke onstage about a book he was reading—Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager's *A Pocket History*

of the United States—and how “I started to learn about how things got to be the way they are today, how you end up a victim without even knowing it, and how people get old, and just die after not having hardly a day’s satisfaction or peace of mind in their lives.” Springsteen kept reading. In his autobiography, he namechecks Flannery O’Connor and John Steinbeck and alludes to *Moby-Dick* and *Death of a Salesman*. Film, too, shaped his vision of America, whether the work of John Ford or Terrence Malick.

It is the dark side of the American dream that first preoccupied Springsteen: broken promises, lost opportunities, failed relationships, dead lives. “If dreams came true, oh, wouldn’t that be nice,” he sings in “Prove It All Night.” It is a dream fueled by hunger—a hunger for more, a feeling that one deserves better. To reach for it, he tells us, is to “pay the price,” a phrase he also uses in “Badlands” and unpacks in “The Price You Pay” (“caught up in a dream where everything goes wrong”). We can strive to make it in America, but to do so we often leave behind the wellsprings of our identity and we suffer for our transgressions. We can “talk about a dream / try to make it real” (“Badlands”), but in the end the striving and waiting are a waste.

In “The River,” a story about a young couple trapped by circumstances, the narrator asks, “Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true / or is it something worse?” Believing in the American dream and not having it come true makes the dream worse than a lie—it becomes a cancer that consumes individuals and leaves them hollow. If only, as in “The Promised Land,” we can “Blow away the dreams that tear you apart / blow away the dreams that break your heart / blow away the lies that leave you nothing but lost and brokenhearted.” But we can’t. We are trapped between the desire to get away, to remake ourselves, and to define our own terms in a society that dangles the promise of success for those who play along.

As Springsteen dissected the underside of the American dream, he began to address the social conditions that oppressed people and prevented them from achieving any semblance of the nation’s promise. In doing so, he shifted from dream to reality. The problem wasn’t the myth itself, it was the economic forces that made it unattainable: “ain’t been much work on account of the economy” (“The River”), “debts no honest man can pay” (“Atlantic City”), “went out looking for a job but he couldn’t find none” (“Johnny 99”).

Born in the U.S.A. announced that Springsteen would offer both a critique and a defense of America. That his meaning was misunderstood made the work all the more powerful. This was not the blind patriotism praised by Ronald Reagan, who was running for reelection; Reagan said America’s future “rests in the message of hope in the songs of a man so many young Americans admire: New Jersey’s own Bruce Springsteen.” Instead, Springsteen was offering the patriotism of a loyal son calling on the nation to live up to its highest ideals. He responded to Reagan in concert by playing “Johnny 99,” a song about an unemployed auto worker who kills a night clerk and tells the judge “the bank was holdin’ my mortgage / they takin’ my house away.”

On *Born in the U.S.A.*, Springsteen continued his critique of a society that limited the chances for upward mobility for the working class: “I got laid off down at the lumber yard” (“Downbound Train”), “closing down the textile mill across the railroad tracks” (“My Hometown”), “the times are tough now, just getting tougher” (“Cover Me”). As always in Springsteen’s work, there are conflicting themes that appear both musically and lyrically: there are verses cast as the blues and choruses that ring as gospel; there are good times and there are hard times; and the narrator who declares “no retreat, no surrender” ultimately submits to packing up and leaving town. Hope and despair, freedom and fate, connection and betrayal are the features of Springsteen’s American landscape.

Over a long career, Springsteen has embodied multiple personas, and he soon abandoned the hypermasculine working-class American hero for the voice of conscience, the singer-songwriter in the tradition of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and folk Bob Dylan. In 1995, he resurrected “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” forever fighting for justice on behalf of the downtrodden. He would return to the song time and again, and, in 2008, he performed it alongside Tom Morello, who had recorded a version with Rage Against the Machine in 1997. Springsteen and Morello exchanged verses, and Morello delivered two blistering guitar solos that made the song explode with revolutionary zeal. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, it would become a staple for portions of the 2012–2013 *Wrecking Ball* tour. In June 2018, Springsteen changed the set list of his Broadway show for the first time in 146 shows and included “The Ghost of Tom Joad.” He sang it after delivering a message about American democracy and justice in the face of the Trump administration policy of separating

immigrant children from their parents at the border. People of conscience, he said, cannot and will not stand by in the face of scenes that are “so shockingly and disgracefully inhumane and un-American that it is simply enraging.”

Since the 1990s, Springsteen’s direct engagement with social justice and political action has grown ever more robust. In 2000, he performed “American Skin (41 Shots),” inspired by the police shooting of Amadou Diallo. In 2004, he campaigned for John Kerry and participated in Vote for Change, and four years later he participated in rallies for Barack Obama. At Obama’s inauguration in 2009, he played “This Land Is Your Land,” a song he first performed on *The River* tour, along with eighty-nine-year-old Pete Seeger (eighty-nine!). They sang all the verses, including the usually omitted ones about private property and public relief.

The rock star who made his fame singing about the dream of escape and getting out while young now found himself at the center of American power: he had the ear of the president of the United States who agreed with him about renewing the American dream for all. In 2006, Springsteen wrote about taking a “Long Walk Home,” and it is telling that he chose to include the song in his initial Broadway set list. In one of the verses a father speaks to a son:

Your flag flyin’ over the courthouse
Means certain things are set in stone
Who we are, what we’ll do, and what we won’t

Springsteen has reclaimed American patriotism from those who would use it for partisan purposes. The flag is a proud symbol, and America offers a promise that stands the test of time and cannot be shaken by adverse political winds. Returning home is as much a key component of the American dream as getting away (think *Wizard of Oz*), and, in the song, Springsteen invites us to walk the road back to where we began.

What he discovers on his return turns out to be painful, and a few years later in *Wrecking Ball*, a musical, lyrical, spiritual, and confrontational masterpiece, Springsteen offered a searing indictment of the broken American promise. In 1975, Springsteen had engaged “the runaway American dream.” But in 2012, it was not just that the dream proved elusive; ordinary Americans were being trampled. New resources and

weapons were needed to fight back. Springsteen’s diagnosis of the problem is clear: the world of “fat cats” (“Easy Money”) and “robber barons” (“Death to My Hometown”) has destroyed the dignity of work and the sanctity of home. “The banker man grows fat/the working man grows thin,” he sings in “Jack of All Trades.” In “Shackled and Drawn,” “it’s a world gone wrong.”

Springsteen summons the past in a new battle for the present and future. He samples tunes recorded long ago (“I Am a Soldier in the Army of the Lord” from 1949, on “Rocky Ground”), and while many of the songs offer prayers and references to enduring faith, they also encourage anger and violent resistance. On the final song, “We Are Alive,” he resurrects the dead who fought in the strikes of 1877, the civil rights battles of 1963, as well as those who have perished in recent attempts to cross the border. Sampling the country classic “Ring of Fire,” Springsteen places the countless dead within its ring and makes them allies, available “to fight shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart.” By invoking the past, Springsteen becomes a lyrical historian, reminding us that the struggle to make America live up to its promise is as old as the promise itself.

On *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen also affirms that the United States remains a “Land of Hope and Dreams,” a song first debuted live in 1999. Similarly, “American Land” begins with a seemingly simple question, “What is this land America, so many travel there?” and celebrates those immigrants who gave their lives to build the country and make it their home. Springsteen’s musical palette embraces folk, country, blues, gospel, soul—the wellspring of sources that birthed rock and roll. For Springsteen, the music itself underscores themes central to our identity: love, faith, work, and community.

Springsteen understands that the American dream, which he has lived, critiqued, and defended, can be kept alive only through continuous engagement and action. Performance is a form of action and Springsteen loves to perform. He once said he felt alive only onstage. Hopefully, decades of therapy and treatment for depression have allowed him to find life as rewarding off the stage as on. One of the great gifts he offered in his autobiography was to confess to a lifetime struggle with unhappiness and a need for antidepressants. How can that be?, we wonder. Isn’t he famous? Isn’t he wealthy? More than ever, in this culture that

vaunts celebrity and fortune, we need to be reminded that the real American dream includes rather than excludes, nourishes rather than famishes, satisfies rather than disappoints.

“So you’re scared and you’re thinking that maybe we ain’t that young anymore.” He was twenty-five when he wrote that line. I was eighteen when I heard it. I’m still scared, and I’m definitely not that young anymore. But I listen to Springsteen, savor the past, and feel inspired to dream about the future.

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