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BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN TRIES TO DISCOVER HOW WE CAN SURVIVE THESE HARD TIMES

By Louis P. Masur
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Wake up. An alarm is sounding. A siren. Can't sleep through this one. "We Take Care of Our Own", opens *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen's 17th studio album and his finest work since *The Rising* a decade ago. A pulsing guitar fixes our attention and Springsteen propels us on a journey — musical, lyrical, spiritual,

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confrontational — to discover how we can survive these hard times, these dying times.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
WRECKING BALL
Columbia
2012-03-06

Wrecking Ball, as the cover design suggests, is the act of a graffiti artist drawing on all that is around him, and has come before him, to shake us out of our slumbers. He's not on the sidelines, not now. No whistle while you're working on a dream epistle. No steadfast long walk home. There is no home anymore. In "Death to My Hometown", Springsteen sings about the destruction of factories and houses. But this is no dirge, it is a brass march, a pennywhistle parade, which includes a sample of a folk poem performed by the Sacred Heart Singers and recorded in 1959 by Alan Lomax.

Building tension between lyrics and music is an old Springsteen device, and never has he used it to greater effect than in the songs on *Wrecking Ball*. In "Shackled and Drawn", he sings "another day older and closer to the grave" as a joyous hootenanny. On "Jack of All Trades", the narrator assures "We'll be alright", but the interlude can pass as a New Orleans funeral procession lightened only when Tom Morello's solo guitar hints that maybe there is "a new world coming". "Rocky Ground" features Michelle Moore and the Victorious Gospel Choir, samples "I'm a Soldier in the Army of Our Lord" (recorded by Lomax in Mississippi in 1949) and fuses soul, rap, and gospel to inspire us to keep our feet moving across a blighted landscape.

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The sonic palette used by Springsteen and his producer Ron Aiello, who also contributes guitar, bass, keyboards, and drums to several tracks, has a range of colors that threaten at times to spill off the edges, but are contained without being homogenized. This is vital, visceral music, filled with loops and synthesizers, drums and percussion, horns of every type, and resonant backing vocals. He also makes use of a hip-hop aesthetic that fuses old technologies to new, through sampling and through such sounds as scratchy records, to navigate the disjuncture between what was and what is.

Springsteen's voice is also employed as an instrument. If the vocals on *Magic* and *Working on a Dream* sounded at a remove, buried in the production, here they are in conversation with the music. "This Depression", for example, would not work without the grainy vocal performance of a man down and lost seeking love. We have to believe it, and we do. The guitar screams, the drums pound, Springsteen groans: "And I've always been strong / But I've never felt so weak." Listen to the timbre of his voice on the word "and"– hope and resignation in a beat.

If musically *Wrecking Ball* is the most innovative album of Springsteen's career, thematically it continues to explore the territory Bruce has been mapping for nearly 40 years: what does it mean to be an American. As he told journalists in France last month, "My work has always been about judging the distance between American reality and the American dream."

In 1975 Bruce probed “the runaway American dream”. But now, it is not just that the dream has eluded us, it has trampled us and we need new resources and weapons with which to fight back. The diagnosis of the problem in *Wrecking Ball* 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 banking man grows fatter / The working man grows thin” he sings in “Jack of All Trades”. “It’s a world gone wrong,” in “Shackled and Drawn”.

On albums such as *Born to Run* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, work was something to escape from; on *Wrecking Ball* good, honest work and a fair wage is all a person needs. “Freedom, son, is a dirty shirt,” Springsteen admonishes. The “Jack of All Trades” is willing to mow, clean, mend, hammer, and harvest. In “We Take Care of Our Own”, Springsteen asks, “Where is the work that sets my hands, my soul free.” But there is no work to be done.

For Springsteen, one solution to the crisis of dislocation has always been spiritual. If anything, religious faith is more pronounced on *Wrecking Ball* than in his earlier work, and there is plenty of redemption to be found there as well. The “Jack of All Trades” hopes “We’ll start caring for each other like Jesus said that we might.” Jesus appears again in the gospel number “Rocky Ground” where “you pray the hard times, hard times, come no more.” Love, spirit, heart, faith, promise — here is the vocabulary of salvation.

Yet prayer carries us only so far. More than 30 years ago, in “Promised Land”, Springsteen screamed, “Sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode.” That was individual frailty borne of cultural malaise and despair; now the weakness and weariness is social and we know just what, and who, is causing it. Then, Bruce wanted to blow away the dream; now, he wants the 99% to achieve it.

But how? Beneath the spiritual thrust of the album, there is the threat of violence. Not since *Nebraska* has Springsteen sung so openly about the demons compelling us to fight back. It may not be sufficient, as he sings in “Rocky Ground,” to “Pray your best / That your best is good enough.” You have to do more than pray. “I’m a soldier,” a voice from the past sings repeatedly, and not only a soldier in the army of the Lord. In “Easy Money”, the narrator has a “Smith & Wesson .38”. “Be ready for when they come,” he advises in “Death to My Hometown”, a song that mentions cannonballs, rifles, bombs, and blood. The most shocking moment on the album arrives at the end of “Jack of All Trades”: “If I had me a gun / I’d find the bastards and shoot them on sight.”

Revolution is coming and we outnumber the bastards. On the final song, “We Are Alive”, he resurrects the dead who fought in the strikes of 1877 and the battles of 1963 and who have perished in attempts to cross the border today. In the song, Springsteen samples the country classic “Ring of Fire”, and he places the countless dead within its ring, which is a ring of love. Those dead are available “to fight shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart”.

Springsteen also summons two previously written and widely performed songs. “Land of Hope and Dreams” debuted live in 1999 for the reunion tour, but now he makes explicit what was implicit then: it is a tribute to and a continuation of Curtis Mayfield’s “People Get Ready”, a song inspired by the March on Washington in 1963 and other events of the civil rights era. And both Springsteen and Mayfield hark back to Woody Guthrie’s “This Train is Bound for Glory”. The centennial of Guthrie’s birth approaches in July, and the presence of folk and blues on this album, like gospel and soul, is unmistakable.

“Wrecking Ball” was written ten years after “Land of Hope and Dreams”, on the occasion of Bruce and the E Street Band closing down Giants Stadium, which was soon to be demolished. By making this song the title track, Springsteen lifts it from a gimmicky grave. We can now hear it as a call to beckon “the dead” and to “hold tight to your anger, and don’t fall to your fear”. Sure “hard times come, hard times go”, but that doesn’t mean we sit back and wait for them to pass. In 2009, we were in the path of the wrecking ball. Now, we, the people, are the wrecking ball and watch out because we are in motion.

Wrecking Ball is a solo album — the remaining original members of the E Street Band do not appear, except for Max Weinberg on two songs. The late Clarence Clemons provides the sax solos on “Wrecking Ball” and “Land of Hope and Dreams”. His sound is vital to the tone and message of the album. Like all the dead who labored for peace and justice, he too continues to fight by our side.

Wrecking Ball seeks to startle, inspire, incite and enlist. It will wake you up and it will knock you down. But if you listen to the sounds of America surging forward, it will also raise your spirits and give you the strength to battle on.

Louis P. Masur is a cultural historian and the author of *Runaway Dream: Born to Run Bruce Springsteen's American Vision* (2009). He would like to thank Davarian Baldwin and Christopher Phillips for their insights and support.

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