

“Cigarettes and a bottle of beer, this poem that I wrote for you”: Representations of Veterans in the Music of Bruce Springsteen

Annotated Discography for 2016 NEH Summer Institute on Veterans in Society

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These eighteen songs encompass more than thirty years of representations of veterans. By hearing them alone the listener gets an image of one artist’s vision of what it meant to be a veteran in the United States at a certain time; when hearing the songs in conjunction with one another, distinct changes across time become evident. The complementary module works to answer questions about Springsteen’s authority in speaking for “America” and in depicting veterans, but his popularity, presence as a subject for critical study, and commercial success define him as important. The brief selected annotations below are meant as a guide for educators hoping to incorporate Springsteen’s music in their classrooms. The notes are far from complete—please, give the songs a listen.

Springsteen, Bruce. “Born in the USA.” Bruce Springsteen. *Born in the USA*. Columbia Records CK 38653, 1984, compact disc (rerelease).

A cultural touchstone and (possibly) the most popular song of the 1980s, this track’s pumped up music, to go along with Springsteen’s 80s persona, is seemingly the definition of proAmerican music and rhetoric. A closer look at the lyrics, as well as this module’s accompanying critical sources, shows this song as anything but straightforward and indeed sends an ambivalent message about what it means to be born in the USA. Focused entirely on one veteran, the song’s narrator recounts: legal trouble leading to an Army enlistment, a tour in Vietnam, a return home to joblessness despite the VA’s best efforts, and a brother that did not come home after Khe Sanh. Yet, the rousing conclusion still reaffirms the narrator’s status as a “cool rocking daddy in the USA.”

Springsteen, Bruce. “Born in the USA.” Bruce Springsteen. *Tracks*. Columbia Records CXK 69475, 1998, compact disc.

- “Brothers Under the Bridge”
- “A Good Man is Hard to Find”
- “Shut Out the Light”

This collection of songs covers many of Springsteen’s unrecorded versions and was not released until 1998. Here, the original recording of “Born in the USA” (recorded with *Nebraska* in 1982) makes the song’s meaning clear, and small changes in the lyrics focus it more on Vietnam. Gone is the upbeat pro-American music, replaced instead by the haunting pain that characterizes *Nebraska*. The other three tracks each recount a soldier’s homecoming from Vietnam and are especially interesting because of their treatment of women—female characters are often portrayed as the “savior” of the veteran, but the protagonist is left on the home front in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” These work best with unit 3 of the module. Each song echoes various degrees of pain and struggle should the veteran make it home.

Springsteen, Bruce. "Devils and Dust." Bruce Springsteen. *Devils and Dust*. Columbia Records CSK 55416, 2005, compact disc.

With strong undertones of Springsteen's increasingly anti-war stance, this track begins in first-person with an uncertain soldier on patrol in Iraq before taking the listener through a journey of moral questioning. Containing vivid imagery of battlefield blood and death, contrasted with a repeated refrain of "God on our side," this track places the soul (the national soul?) as what is at stake in recent U.S. wars before calling out "every woman and every man" who has sent this soldier to war. As the song moves through these complex issues, the listener loses the soldier to a dream, the narrative voice becoming a "we," until the "I" returns to affirm "faith just ain't enough." It's possible, the song seems to suggest that the dangerous fear that led the U.S. into Iraq was really just "devils and dust." While it's ambiguous whether the soldier actually makes it home (becoming a veteran) and questions the war, the overall implication for military members, and indeed U.S. civilians, is clear.

Springsteen, Bruce. "Galveston Bay." Bruce Springsteen. *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. Columbia Records CK 67484, 1995, compact disc.

- "Youngstown"

These two Vietnam songs also work best with module unit 3 (Gender), but "Galveston Bay" also contains a unique (for Springsteen) story of a South Vietnam soldier (Le Bing Son) who emigrates to the U.S. after Saigon falls and takes up residence in Texas. Soon his success as a fisherman puts him at odds with Billy Sutter (wounded and sent home in '68) and a group of violent Texans. The song's positive ending belies the music's acoustic lament. "Youngstown" covers over 100 years of U.S. military actions—Civil War to Vietnam and beyond—and the narrator is again a Vietnam veteran. Both tracks uphold the woman as savior—"Sweet Jenny" and "[Billy's] sleeping wife—but each works with different narrative techniques and through different stories to arrive at very divergent endings. "Galveston Bay" is a hope for reconciliation, and "Youngstown" ends in the "fiery furnaces of hell."

Springsteen, Bruce. "Gypsy Biker." Bruce Springsteen. *Magic*. Columbia Records 88697 17060 2, 2007, compact disc.

- "Last to Die"
- "Magic"

Ranked #2 on *Rolling Stone's* "Top 50 Albums of 2007", Springsteen's *Magic* was his most political album to date when it was released. The title track refers to a feeling of being deceived in Iraq by political sleight of hand, and the rest of the album runs along a similar path. "Last to Die" was allegedly inspired by John Kerry's 1971 testimony to the Senate and "Gypsy Biker" is the story of a KIA soldier being brought home from Iraq. The tracks are powerful in their antiwar message, but also carry important depictions of veterans and U.S. military action.

Springsteen, Bruce. "Highway Patrolman." Bruce Springsteen. *Nebraska*. Columbia Records TCA 38358, 1982, compact disc (1990 rerelease).

This song is the story of brothers Frank and Joe Roberts. Failed farmers, upstanding Joe is now a Sergeant in the Michigan Highway Patrol, while troublemaker Frank returns from Vietnam (leaves in '65 and "comes home" in '68) and brutally beats a boy in a bar. Joe gets the call and gives chase, but ultimately allows Frank to flee to Canada, because "when it's your brother, sometimes you look the other way." This track does a great job of portraying one common depiction of returning veterans but is also available for analysis on the level of metaphor. The depiction of "Maria" as the main force behind saving Joe and possibly losing Frank is also significant.

Springsteen, Bruce. "Nothing Man." Bruce Springsteen. *The Rising*. Columbia Records CK 86600, 2002, compact disc.

- "Paradise"
- "Worlds Apart"
- "You're Missing"

The Rising debuted directly after 9/11 and many of the songs on the album embody the spirit of grief and hope that was so prevalent following the attacks. These four tracks each uniquely represent depictions of that wartime moment. "You're Missing" embodies the spirit of those left behind while loved-ones are in danger or do not come back. "Paradise" embodies the voice of a Muslim and the first verse strongly suggests a suicide bomber, while "Worlds Apart" suggests a possibly metaphorical relationship between a Muslim woman in "dust and dark" and her (American?) lover, the narrator who remains 'worlds apart.' "Nothing Man" is the most pertinent song for veterans studies, chronicling the first-person account of a narrator who was seemingly awarded the Medal of Honor and his struggles to reintegrate into mundane American society.

Springsteen, Bruce. "The Wall." Bruce Springsteen. *High Hopes*. Columbia Records 88843015462, 2014, compact disc.

Written as a tribute to one of Springsteen's boyhood idols and friends (who died in Vietnam), this track is powerful in its mourning and reference to the Vietnam memorial. The narrator's desire for his friend to return, "laughing" and "[looking] so bad [cool]," struggles against the desire for some sort of recompense from "these men who put you here." The narrator calls out Robert McNamara (who died five years before the song's release) by name before affirming that "apology and forgiveness got no place here at all." Finally, the listener is left with a powerful feeling of grief and mourning while also receiving Springsteen's antiwar message. This track is especially relevant in a conversation about memorial, national mourning, and the relationship between grief and time. The narrator's grief and anger are undiminished even though the principals all seem to be deceased.

Springsteen, Bruce. "We Take Care of Our Own." Bruce Springsteen. *Wrecking Ball*. Columbia Records 88691 94254 2, 2012, compact disc.

Often considered an update to "Born in the USA," this track covers some of the difficult social-political events prior to its release. Similar to "Born in the USA," the song works to question whether America is living up to its ideals and mythology or whether "there ain't no help, the cavalry stayed home." In keeping with Springsteen's now overt politics, this track is also useful in relation to the question of the U.S.'s continued responsibility for events in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as responsibility "at home."