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“That's quite a tune”: An Interview with Bruce Springsteen

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“What is there to lose? All of this beauty”: An Interview with Bruce Springsteen

Mark Kissling: Greetings from State College, Pennsylvania.

My name is Mark Kissling. I am an assistant professor of education at Penn State University. I’m also the guest editor of the *Bank Street Occasional Papers Series* issue #40 titled, “Am I Patriotic?” The purpose of the issue is to complicate how we think about and enact patriotism, with a particular focus on how teachers teach and students learn about patriotism.

So how does this relate to Bruce Springsteen and the interview that you’re about to hear (or read)?

In mid-December of 2008, I spent two days at the Woody Guthrie Archives—then in New York City, now in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I was working on a project investigating the history of Guthrie’s most famous song, “This Land Is Your Land,” including how teachers in U.S. schools over the past six decades have used the song as a curricular resource to teach about patriotism.

During this time, Bruce graciously sat down with me at his home in New Jersey for an interview to discuss how he learned the song and why he began playing it at concerts in the early 1980s.

The interview fell in between some noteworthy events. Six weeks earlier, Barack Obama had been elected to his first term as president. In the days leading up to the election, Bruce played several “Vote For Change” concerts at which he sang “This Land Is Your Land.” In the interview, you’ll hear him reference one such concert in Philadelphia.

Five weeks after the interview, Bruce—alongside legendary folk singer Pete Seeger and Pete’s grandson Tao Rodríguez-Seeger—sang “This Land Is Your Land” at President Obama’s “We Are One” inauguration concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Introducing the song, Bruce said, “We’d like you to join us in perhaps the greatest song ever written about our home.” They then sang a version of Guthrie’s song that included the often-omitted—particularly in schoolbooks—two verses that contain, as Bruce says in this interview, “radical politics.”

I encourage you to do a quick Internet search to see Guthrie’s lyrics, including the original, beautifully handwritten version that features his note at the bottom: “all you can write is what you see.”

Thanks for listening—and thanks to Bruce for generously sharing his time and thoughts. Enjoy the interview!

Interview

Mark Kissling: I have some questions about “This Land Is Your Land” and your thoughts on it.

Bruce Springsteen: Alright.

Mark: Do you remember when you first learned the song—and any specifics around that?

Bruce: I don't remember singing it in school. And I don't remember singing it in the Boy Scouts. The first time I remember singing it was when I put it in our show which was around 1980. I was aware of it—in the folk music boom in the mid-60s, it was obviously sung pretty often and folk music was on prime-time television. It was a momentary boom that had a famous show called “Hootenanny” that was a prime-time, middle-of-the evening, entertainment show.

Mark: Can you remember watching it?

Bruce: Oh yeah. That's how big folk music at one point got. When the world began to shift, which was sort of just pre-Beatles, post-50s-rock-and-roll, right on the nose of the Civil Rights Movement, people were looking for music to explain what—I mean, what is the purpose of art? It is to contextualize your life. Life is a random mess very often so people move to art, music, films—stories—to assemble, organize, and make sense of human experience.

So when the Civil Rights Movement really began to take off in the early 60s, I think that that was directly connected to why there was a sudden boom in music that, in theory, carried with it some social consciousness—now some of it did at the time and some of it was drained off into current pop music at the moment but still there was plenty of good singers and songwriters. Pete Seeger was on prime-time TV. The Weavers. Peter, Paul, and Mary were superstars. [This is] where people initially heard a Bob Dylan song. Nobody really heard of Bob Dylan doing a Bob Dylan song for quite a while.

At any rate, this was prime-time television, mainstream culture. It was mainstream enough that my cousin, who was an accordionist his entire life, picked up an acoustic guitar, taught me how to tune mine, showed me a few chords and I went down and bought a folk music book. And in that folk music book, of course, would be “This Land Is Your Land.”

I was thirteen then, and fourteen—1964. So I became aware of it though I didn't really know who Woody Guthrie was, what he did, and I didn't have any deep understanding of folk music outside of the fact that it simply was the music that was popular at the moment and it was guitar-based. A lot of time went by and shortly after I began reading intensely—I was kind of your age or maybe a little younger, but mostly your age, when I first began to really read; up till then I was kind of solely educated by music and life—I read the Joe Klein autobiography and that just immersed me in Woody Guthrie's life, the music, and I became just captivated by it. I put it into the show in 1980 because the band was sort of taking a turn towards the political: certainly with *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, a lot of class-based music; *The River*. There was a recession at the time. My brother-in-law was a construction worker—very similar now: construction stopped. No construction jobs. He became a janitor at the high school. This was my sister's life. Reagan was elected in 1980, which seemed like a disaster in the making for working people. That was when we brought it into the show and I started to sing it.

Mark: Did you consider other Guthrie songs or it was going to be that one?

Bruce: It was going to be [“This Land Is Your Land”] because it was a song I felt people knew but didn’t know, [that] they didn’t understand its full meaning and its greatness. It had kind of been diminished by overuse. Its popularization had cut away some of its depth at the time. I just looked at it as a piece of poetry, it was so beautiful. I mean, if you take away even the verses that contain some of what you might call the “radical politics,” the song still functions. It’s enormously beautiful. It’s one of the most beautiful statements of ownership of your own Americanness. The insistence of your place, that this is your place. That you have a place, not just geographically, but by birthright you are a player in history. By your belonging to *this* place, at *this* time, and making your claim of ownership of *this* place, at *this* time, marks you as a player in this moment in history. As such you are empowered, rather than disenfranchised.

That’s the core of the song. That’s what I believe was his intent, to provide empowerment, ownership, and a sense of each individual as a player in his moment in history. That was the essence of the song and that was a lot of what we were trying to say at that particular point in time. [It] was that “don’t allow your energies, your life, your youth, your strength to be wasted.” That “through joint effort and a commonality of an idea of the society you’re living in, you can be a player in history and a link in a long chain of meaningful lives and action.” And that was really the way that I saw our band, as a link in that chain, and that was the fundamental message of that song.

Its title: *this land is your land*. That’s a big statement. That’s a big statement. And particularly in the face of so much evidence to the contrary. He’s bucking an enormous amount of evidence to the contrary. So that’s why the song was oppositional. It was demanding. It was asking for something. It was *asking* for something.

At a particular moment when the country particularly was going in the direction of—the division of wealth was increasing tremendously. The mid-80s was when the rust belt crashed, so the steel mills were shutting down and we were out in quite a few of those places and I met Ron Weisen, who was a steelworker out of Pittsburgh and organized a food bank and was a union organizer in Pittsburgh. Central Los Angeles was an enormous steel-producing part of the country that nobody even knew about, in the middle of the city. So one guy was kind of turning on to the other guys, and I was meeting a bunch of these fellows, and at the time they were crashing, the steel mills were going down, and all these folks were being put out of work.

That’s where a lot of our thoughts were and what the band was interested in. It was always there but there was the whole Morning-in-America moment. I suppose the irony being at the time: I wrote “Born In The U.S.A.,” which was also a song that was sort of taken this way or that way—what verses do you need to hear and what don’t you?—it’s a funny irony. But I think using at the time “This Land Is Your Land” was also a way of trying to have our intentions more explicitly known.

We sang other [Woody Guthrie] songs. I think we sang “Plane Wreck at Los Gatos” and “Pastures of Plenty” and other songs that made their way in and out a little bit. But mainly it was [“This Land Is Your Land”] and it became a big part of the show at the time. We sang it pretty regularly, every night. And that was [in the early 80s] around *Nebraska* and *Born in the U.S.A.*; I seem to remember singing it over those series of years.

We had a young audience. I was 30, so the audience was in their 20s, my age maybe. I hadn't known a lot about it. I assumed a lot of my audience might not have been aware of Woody Guthrie or a lot of Woody Guthrie music. I sang it to clarify the work that I was doing at that time. It was a way of trying to get people to make the connections and focus in on what our concerns were during those years. I felt they were very similar to the song's. It was also a time when I was going back into the past a little bit to Hank Williams, and I was interested in making the connections between people who I thought were people who had influenced me or were in the process of influencing me or were my forbearers whose ideas and artistry I hoped to try to carry along in some way.

So that was a big part of it too. You're staking your claim to be a part of a certain lineage. And, the importance of lineage, of, like I say, people making the connections between what is happening in present-day America and what has happened in the past. The sense that history is important. The old story, if you don't know who you were, it's hard to know who you are. And I was interested in making all those connections, so that people saw that the political developments of our day were not isolated, that there was an ongoing thread running through American history where working people ended up on the short end of the stick. This was something coming to the fore in the 80s and it felt dangerous to me and undemocratic.

I had kind of grown up . . . on very class-conscious pop music—the Animals, which were very powerful—records that had a lot of political implications for me at the time. And then just maybe some natural inclination to side with the underdog through the fact that I was such an outsider myself. Which is where, I suppose, most artists start out. So that has something to do with it too.

I think I was in the middle of trying to forge an identity that I wanted my band and myself to be about. I thought these were the issues of the day that needed to be talked about, needed to be engaged. And I searched everywhere for things that would assist me in communicating what I thought was important. But the discovery of Woody's music—on one hand, it was another day, it was another time, I was as much a child of Elvis Presley, who wanted the pink Cadillac and the big house, so I might have been not that comfortable with the private property line myself. I wanted the pink Cadillac! I was in the unusual situation of feeling that both of these people were forbears of mine in some way. And that was just a part of who I was, what I did, the way that I did it . . .

I was just trying to make sense out of all of these conflicting urges and ideas that were coursing through my own music at the time. But it was a very important part of my musical development because it was essential in presenting the idea that your music and your gifts were to be of service and were to be at the service of some greater idea.

I think that struck home with me very deeply. It didn't exclude a variety of life's pleasures but it meant that a certain thrust of your songwriting and your power and your work, in order to be fully connected to your own life, and to the lives of the people around you, which is the only place where you find the true meaning of your work, that you needed to be at the service of some community, some philosophy, a set of ideas, that were intent on being a part of that joint effort that pushes things progressively forward.

Mark: How much would you say that your service, in that sense, is to an American idea, like a possibility rooted in country, or do you see it much larger than that?

Bruce: I think it's probably humanist. It must be larger because we have enormous audiences in Europe. I think it's more of a human idea, though there may be some American characteristics to it. I think the American idea, the democratic idea, is incredibly, incredibly powerful, and it's maintained its power, even in the shadow of the enormous doubt of the past eight years.

When we went overseas, we played in France, I think, just weeks after we invaded Iraq and people came out. I sang "Promised Land." That idea was always—I believe certainly in the European mind—has always been separate from any particular administration that was governing over here and our policies at any given moment. I was very interested in what it meant to be American.

I was very interested in what that American idea was. What I thought it was. What I thought it was supposed to guarantee. What I thought its birthright was. How I thought that applied to each and every citizen. And that this was an essential set of values that kept the country on a progressive heading and that made life here worth living. It was how I made sense of my own fortune, of my own luck and position that I found myself in. The fact that I had a voice and there were people interested in listening to it. It was my introduction to the idea of freedom as so much more than simply personal license.

We were politically active as teenagers. I remember doing a benefit for McGovern. I remember doing a benefit to send Vietnam War protesters to Washington. That was probably in my teens, you know. Because we grew up in the 60s, it was always a part of your artistic development and creative development but it was refocused again for me in the late 70s and 80s: by the Woody Guthrie music and also the fact that I had stumbled into the American dream myself, into what was considered its fulfillment. Right?

I had to stop and ask myself, "Okay, what's this about now, cause I'm in a completely different situation than I've ever been before in my life? What does that mean to me? What is its meaning?" And the only place I found that mattered to me was through the investigation in my work in the community I came out of, the community I wanted to forge and build and join and be a part of. And where do I fit in that American idea?

So those were all things that I was thinking about at your age—and that's ever since, to this day. To a couple of weeks ago when I found myself on stage in Philly, and you're trying to redefine that idea again and again and again and again. Moment after moment after moment after moment. Because its only power is in the present. And because democracy is only real right now. Today.

As long as the citizens are alert and guarded. There are all sorts of maps to follow. But in the end, they lead you to the present and to this very moment. That's why when the band is on stage at night—what are we still trying to define? This very moment. What do all these ideas mean *in this very moment*? And so from this time on, when I started to sing this song and before, that was, what do all these things mean in this moment right now? And where can we possibly take

these things when we step outside of this building, this theater, this club, this arena? What are the relevance of these ideas when you take them out into the real world? How do they apply? How can you apply them?

Those are the issues that we've dealt with over the past 40 years of my playing, that still fascinate me, that still put an enormous fire in the furnace and still make me want to go out each night and play and take it to the limit. These are all the things that are at stake when you're an American. On a daily basis, on a nightly basis, these are what's at stake. This is your moment to be that player. This is your historical moment.

Along with entertaining people, and writing romantic songs, and sexual songs, and dancing songs, and fun songs, underneath all those things, every night is that suggestion. In the beginning of the show it gets talked about: "Long Time Coming," "Long Walk Home," "Last to Die for a Mistake." It gets talked about at the end of the show. It's threaded through the show. It's not rhetoric. I thread it through the show the way I feel it's threaded in your life. Along with your girlfriend, and your daily job, and you've got to make your bills. It's at the center but I try to make it a part of the show the way that I think people live their lives.

Which is why these initial three verses are so important because if the song just had the two verses that explained its radical politics there just wouldn't be enough there. You wouldn't understand where that fire was coming from. You've got to initially get into, you've got to see where, those first three verses, they set the context, they set, once again: what can you lose? All this beauty. What is there to lose? All of this beauty. All of this possibility. All of these riches, gifts of God. He's letting you know, by the descriptive poetry in the first three stanzas, he's letting you know what's at stake. This is what we can lose. That's quite a tune.