

**BORN IN THE U.S.A.: BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN IN AMERICAN LIFE,
3RD EDITION**

Jim Cullen

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There is a growing worldwide interest in Bruce Springsteen's work within American and Pop Culture Studies. Scholars increasingly aim to provide readers with unprecedented access to his oeuvre. Donna Luff and Lorraine Mangione's *Mary Climbs In: The Journeys of Bruce Springsteen's Women Fans* (2023), Warren Zanes' *Deliver me from Nowhere* (2023) and Phillipe Margotin and Jean-Michel Guesdon's *Bruce Springsteen: All the Songs: The Story Behind Every Track* (2020) illustrate the different perspectives from which the artist has been studied recently. Jim Cullen, who holds a PhD in American Studies from Brown University and has published over twenty books—including *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (2003) and *Bridge & Tunnel Boys: Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, and the Metropolitan Sound of the American Century* (2023)—revisits his landmark work, *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen in American Life*, initially published in 1997, to convey the prominent leitmotifs in the singer's output in the twenty-first century, providing an in-depth analysis of his last nine albums that broadens discussions from the previous two editions. This updated and expanded version is a must-read for fans and scholars interested in Springsteen's portrait of American society.

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Cullen organizes the book into seven chapters that explore Springsteen's compositions in terms of politics, masculinity and religion, placing special emphasis on the singer's upbringing, influences and echoes from previous cultural movements in the US. The first two chapters explore the meaning behind the book's title, taking the misinterpretation of one of Springsteen's most iconic

songs, “Born In The U.S.A.” (1984), as a starting point. Both sections discuss how the New Jerseyan depicts the society of his country, particularly through the lens of the working class, aligning with the simplicity and “American artistic individuality” pursued by Walt Whitman. Cullen also explains how the writer, who has been baptized as “America’s world poet”, sought national identity through musical performances, firmly convinced that “he believed that it was music that was loved and shared by all Americans; it was music that could bring the nation together” (Kun 2016: 31). Building on the work of predecessors like Woody Guthrie or Stephen Foster, Springsteen evokes Whitman’s legacy through lyrics, unlike Whitman’s expansive poetry, characterized by its concise and economical expression. Both artists devote the vast majority of their work to the working class, while sharing “this passion for the open road”, chasing the dream of upward mobility (Garman 2020: 226).

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Yet, in the words of Springsteen, Presley revealed “a world that had been previously and rigorously denied was being PROVEN TO EXIST! It was a world with all of us in it... together... *all of us*” (Springsteen 2016: 40) due to his blues, gospel and R&B influences. This book outlines how Springsteen also aims to emphasize that *American* music is neither Black nor White, but rather encompasses all kinds, embracing the power of racial integration.

Linked to this sense of equality and justice, the fourth chapter, “Borne in the U.S.A.”, delves deeper into how the singer deconstructs biased visions of the United States regarding the aftermath of the Vietnam War. This section remains the keystone of Cullen’s book, as it sheds light on the rock icon’s motivations for becoming the voice of his country’s working class. While his previous album, *Nebraska* (1982), marked Springsteen’s first engagement with broader societal issues in Reagan-era America, it was not until 1984, with *Born in the U.S.A.*, that he made the leap onto the global stage, addressing the social discontent of working-class America. Cullen also emphasizes how war is a recurrent theme for the New Jersey native, as it is “one of the most fundamental elements of human experience, and it powerfully shapes even those ignorant of its impact and legacy” (2024: 107).

While the four previous chapters establish the foundations of Springsteen’s values and motifs, Cullen follows up with an exhaustive analysis of the duality of the American Dream in Springsteen’s songs, both celebrating and criticizing it, particularly in relation to wealth and leisure. Chapter 5, titled “The Good Life”, examines how the singer’s narratives about working-class struggles expose the hollowness of a materialistic pursuit of a “good life”. Being aware of this, a 26-year-old Springsteen personifying a contemporary Peter Pan would invite Wendy to pursue “the runaway American Dream” by escaping from a town “that rips the

bones from your back”, evading work-related responsibilities in what it is potentially his magnum opus, “Born to Run” (1975). Additionally, this section focuses on how songs like “Glory Days” or “My Hometown” (1984) grapple with the promise of prosperity and the collateral emotional consequences of chasing a higher social status. Nevertheless, Cullen appears to overlook some of Springsteen’s recent songs, like “That’s What Makes Us Great” (2017) or “Rainmaker” (2020), released during Trump’s first term. Inclusion of these tracks would have provided valuable insight into the singer’s reinterpretation of the American Dream in a contemporary context.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Cullen elaborates on how Springsteen’s masculinity and religious beliefs are reflected in his work, contextualizing a wide array of songs across different life stages. The New Jersey native frequently explores manhood from various facets, often reflecting a sense of brotherhood with a touch of nostalgia as evidenced in “Glory Days” or “No Surrender”, all tracks from *Born in the U.S.A.*, in which unfulfilled teenage dreams and an unequivocal melancholy seem to strengthen friendship. Cullen also delves into *Human Touch* (1992) and *Working on a Dream* (2009) to explore Springsteen’s perception of companionship, as a rejection of traditional machismo. Nevertheless, the analysis of the latter lacks depth and is less detailed than that of earlier albums, offering only limited engagement with the lyrics. This section also analyzes the profound influence of the paternal figure on Springsteen’s narratives. Through a close reading of works such as “Born to Run” (1975), “Adam Raised a Cain” (1978) or “My Father’s House” (1982), the author explains how Douglas Springsteen simultaneously operates as an omnipresent influence and a haunting absence shaping the musician’s narratives of conflict.

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Chapter 7 elaborates on how Springsteen’s Catholic upbringing is reflected in his songwriting. This spiritual facet adds another layer to the singer’s storytelling, especially in tunes like “The River” (1980) or “Paradise” (2002), in which the protagonists struggle with moral dilemmas and search for hope amid chaos. Songs like “I’ll See You In My Dreams” or “Ghosts”, included in *Letter to You* (2020) would have enriched this analysis. Finally, Cullen draws parallels between religion and the devotion fans feel toward Springsteen, who embark on “pilgrimages” to attend his concerts. However, the question of how the musician builds strong bonds with international audiences remains unresolved and goes beyond the scope of this book.

Although this third edition of *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen in American Life* serves as an invaluable resource for those already familiar with his career, it is primarily focused on earlier works and does not engage as deeply with later albums like *Wrecking Ball* (2012). This album’s depiction of the aftermath of the 2008

financial crisis could have enriched Cullen's discussion of Springsteen's working-class consciousness. Similarly, *A Letter to You* (2020) receives little attention in the book. Cullen disregards its emphasis on brotherhood, discussed in Chapter 6, even though it was the first studio recording with the E Street Band since 2012. The album also reconnects with Springsteen's early career through previously unreleased songs such as "If I Was A Priest", which links this teenage vision of America with his current one. These lingering questions could serve as a compelling starting point for future research. Nonetheless, this volume does a superb job of summarizing Springsteen's work over more than five decades, and its legacy will resonate for years to come.

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