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## **Growing Up Working Class**

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Growing Up Working Class

US 297 Bruce Springsteen and the American Dream

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Arcadia University

## GROWING UP WORKING CLASS

### Abstract

Bruce Springsteen grew up in Freehold New Jersey. Supported by his working-class family he found his way to major success as a rock musician at a young age. This piece touches on Springsteen and his interaction with politicians, his infamous and misunderstood song “Born in the USA.” Charity involvement including Boys and Girls Club of America and Hurricane Sandy relief efforts are emphasized as Springsteen reconnects to his roots at the Jersey Shore. Factories such as *Farmland Dairies*, *Ocean Spray*, and *Mercedes Benz* headquarters have been shut down and outsourced work due to high New Jersey taxes. “Trenton Makes the World Takes” was once a sign that gave working class people hope for a better life. As they worked on opposite sides of the bridge, supplying the world with handcrafted goods while they provided a living for themselves and their families. Statistics show now that many people in the state of New Jersey live dangerously close to the poverty level. Although not close enough to receive any benefits.

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I come from a family of Italian and Scottish immigrants. Both of my grandfathers have almost an eighth-grade education. They found jobs as soon as they turned thirteen and then lied about their ages, so they could join the military. Incredibly poor and without any basic necessities, the military was a way for the both to have clean clothes, a roof over their head, a hot meal and a family that cared for them. After their service they returned home to women who had high school diplomas and working-class jobs such as a secretary and a waitress. They rooted themselves within a community of physical laborers along the Jersey Shore and took pride in the work that they did. Life was not easy, for if no one needed you to do tile work or electrical work you simply were out of work. Hoping that in a few days someone would call so you could make enough money to feed your family and shelter them.

I grew up the same way. For generations my family put food on the table and provided shelter with the swinging of hammers and sweat on the brow. My father worked six days a week as an electrician, while my mother ran the paperwork side of the business as she also was a stay-at-home mom. Growing up my sister and I were taken to work by my father. I was under the assumption it was because he needed the help or wanted us to see if we wanted to be in a trade as well. But as I came close to college years my mother told me I was only brought on the job because my father was hoping I would find it too difficult or boring. Pushing me to go to college so I could have a chance at a better life, knowing when I would retire. As opposed to my father, who will most likely work until the day he dies or becomes disabled. It is my opinion that the working-class built America. Not a day goes by when I don't thank God for the all that my parents have done for me. Even as I embark on my college journey, I still will always be a blue-collar woman in a white-collar world.

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#### US 297 Bruce Springsteen and the American Dream

Bruce Springsteen was born and raised in the low-income town of Freehold New Jersey, a town known mainly for its factories and jobs which encompassed physical labor. As time went on, these factories shut down due to inflation and outsourcing labor. Springsteen's father worked in some of these factories. Having since acquired no real job skills, he drifted job to job and sometimes found himself without work. Springsteen describes his upbringing as underprivileged, although he did not grasp his situation entirely. "We were clothed, fed and bedded. I had white and black friends worse off. My parents had jobs, my mother as a legal secretary and my father at Ford. Our house was old and soon to be noticeably decrepit. One kerosene stove in the living room was all we had to heat the whole place. Upstairs where my family slept, you woke up on winter mornings with your breath visible" (Springsteen, 2012, p. 9). This would not be the only house Springsteen would live in as a child. As tensions arose with his grandparents and money became tight, his family moved twice. However, he did stay within a tiny distance from his grandparents' home.

Springsteen's sister Virginia became pregnant at the tender age of seventeen. He recounts in his book *Born to Run* the working class struggles of his sister and her young husband. "Mickey worked in construction, suffered through the recession of the late seventies when building ceased in Central Jersey, lost his job and took work as a janitor at the local high school. My sister worked the floor at K-Mart" (Springsteen, 2012, p. 32). The song "The River" was written by Springsteen and dedicated to them. Many of the lyrics ring true to the certain economic hardships New Jersey went through at the time. "I got a job working construction for the Johnstown Company/But lately there ain't been much work on account of the economy"

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(Springsteen, *The River* 3:27-3:44). In the seventies there was an economic crisis which hit labor workers. The stock market had crashed, and sent union workers scrambling for job security as construction work slowed down to a halt due poor economic conditions.

Springsteen gathered his lyrics through speaking to his brother in law about the experiences him and Virginia went through. They had a few children and managed to afford to provide for their family and live a decent lifestyle. The song is not as haunting as many would believe it to be. It does in fact tell the tale of two real life people who at a young age become victims to teen pregnancy and are forced to take upon roles and jobs they may have never dreamed for themselves. But it is exactly what led working-class people to believe so strongly in this song. It's a story that many people find themselves written into, with or without their own intentions.

### **Springsteen and Politics**

In 2011 Springsteen published a letter in the *Asbury Park Press* in which he silently called out Governor Chris Christie without mentioning his name. "Springsteen complained of state budget cuts that "are eating away at the lower edges of the middle class, not just those already classified as in poverty, and are likely to continue to get worse over the next few years" Goldberg J. (2012). Christie adamantly replied that Springsteen was not really getting the big picture, and that he should learn the importance of budget balancing is. The truth is that the programs Christie cut are programs that helped the working class, something that Springsteen would know about.

Ronald Raegan was under the impression "Born in the USA" would make the perfect campaign song. It held the perfect amount of gusto and pride as audiences around the country sang along with Springsteen, blissfully ignorant to the meaning of the song. "The song's

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narrative, buried beneath the pounding music and the patriotic hollers of the chorus, explores a working-class man burning in the despair of deindustrialized, post-Vietnam America” Womack, K., Zolten, J., Dr., & Bernhard, M., Dr. (2012 p. 30). During the song’s heyday it was not uncommon for liberals and conservatives to try and claim the song for their own party. “Come back home to the refinery/Hiring man said "son if it was up to me"/Went down to see my V.A. man/He said "son, don't you understand" (Springsteen, Born in the USA1:28-1:44). In the first line we can sense a soldier coming home from the Vietnam war and looking to work his old job again at the refinery. Unfortunately, it seems as though someone had taken his place at work, or there is no more room at his company as described by his V.A. man. The song mentions military unemployment, and the sad reality of those who put their life on the line only to be turned away from job opportunities.

Listening to the song it is difficult to tell if it’s on purpose that Springsteen let his instruments have a high volume, while listeners struggle to hear the lyrics. It could be a sign of the under-dog trying to reach out, asking for help from the loud and corrupt government that might be trying to drown them out with loud chatter. It is known that the working-class is dubbed as “pawns” within politics. Seeing as they are uneducated, or least likely to have the time to watch the news or understand it. Within many political campaigns, farmers, welders, and blue jean wearing men are depicted as tireless hard workers who need a break from the system. These politicians claim they can give them this break, but never really explain how they can accomplish this.

### **Springsteen and Charitable Works for the Poor**

It is no secret that Springsteen has a heart of gold he never forgot where he came from, and never pretended he was too good to be around those who were less fortunate than him. In

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June of 2018 Springsteen performed at the refurbished Asbury Lanes, which was holding a benefit concert for the Boys and Girls Clubs of America. There is a chapter of this club in Asbury Park and the club's aim is to help give low-income students a place to go after school, to provide guidance and support. Springsteen finished his set by saying "it's been a joy" watching the rebirth of Asbury" (Associated Press 2018). It is a rebirth in the sense of the old bowling alley being repaired, and local children in an impoverished and working-class area being provided with opportunities and tools to have a better life. It is no secret that Asbury Park is a town divided by rich and poor, often with little to no interaction between the two groups. That night Springsteen helped bridge that gap as he himself came from a poor background and morphed into a wealthier person.

We know from the song "My City of Ruins" that Asbury Park was not always the fun, musical, and summer-loving spot it has always been. "There's a blood red circle/On the cold dark ground" (Springsteen, My City of Ruins 0:30-0:35). This describes the race riots and violent tensions Asbury Park went through in the 1970's. Still today the town and school system suffer acts of violence from guns and stabbings. This is mainly on the West side of Asbury where minorities and working-class/low-income people live. The East side holds a treasure trove of things to do and to buy for people with heaps of disposable income.

Many upper-crust folks who enjoy a nice vegan muffin and a seven-dollar coffee will mistakenly drive through the West side of Asbury Park. Gawking at the sights of boarded up houses and homeless people on the streets. "EBT accepted here" signs are propped up in every bodega window on main street, as gay pride flags line Ocean Avenue. There is a serious class divide, as homeless people are never even seen wandering the boardwalk, and people of color are rarely working in the kitschy stores in the East side of town. Towards the end of the song you



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can hear a gospel choir singing. Springsteen including this element in his song is extremely important, as it acknowledges the West side of Asbury Park, their many Baptist/Protestant churches and their strong sense of community.

Even with traveling the world and living in many different areas, Springsteen felt it best to stay rooted at the Jersey Shore. On October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Hurricane Sandy came and devastated the Jersey Shore. As people prepared for the storm, they boarded up their homes and windows with large pieces of plywood. Spray painted on the wood were small quips and quotes from Springsteen's songs such as "No Surrender." Many people who built their businesses and homes from the ground up soon found themselves homeless and without jobs. Springsteen got together with other artists, including some from New Jersey. They hosted a benefit concert called 12.12.12.

Springsteen also joined the Hurricane Sandy New Jersey Relief Fund advisory board. This board was put together by Mary Pat Christie, the wife of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. "The destruction that New Jersey has sustained is heartbreaking," Springsteen said in a prepared statement from the relief fund. "I'm humbled to play a small role by supporting the New Jersey Relief Fund and know that all of us will rally together to help our neighbors to come back better and stronger" Jordan C. (2017). Videos and pictures of storm damage are on *YouTube*, with any Bruce Springsteen song about redemption playing in the background. People from all walks of life connected to him and his music as they pieced their lives back together.

### **"Trenton Makes the World Takes," and Other New Jersey Rust Belts**

Due to New Jersey being so close to the coast line and other bodies of water, many shipping ports exist all over the state to ship goods in and out. Along with this, many factories

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are sprinkled all over the state to employ working-class and low-skilled labor persons. These facilities include *Nestle*, *Anheuser-Busch*, and *Johnson & Johnson*. “Over the years there has been an unfortunate and serious decline in factory and warehouse jobs. Many plants have shut down or laid off at least one hundred to three hundred workers. Also, companies have outsourced to other states or countries because New Jersey taxes had become too high” Woods (2017). Some of these companies include *Farmland Dairies*, *Ocean Spray*, and *Mercedes Benz* headquarters.

Above the Delaware River is a bridge with a red neon sign blaring large letters reading “TRENTON MAKES AND THE WORLD TAKES.” “In the early twentieth century, Trenton N.J., was a booming, industrial city with an economy based on manufacturing. In the 1960s and 1970s, factories and industries began closing, and like many manufacturing cities along the steel belt, it has been in sharp decline for the last 40 years” The Polis Blog (2011). Trenton has not been able to bring itself back to the condition it once was. Trenton is now filled with crime, little opportunity, and the government failing to help its citizens. The bridge opened in 1806, the sign has changed many times throughout the years with access to different types of electricity, materials and the city of Trenton being able to afford its upkeep. The slogan originally meant to be a proud saying that a city in New Jersey can build, create and provide for the world. Unfortunately, the citizens of Trenton view it as the world taking their last hope, their last dream, and their last dollar that may have provided them a better lifestyle.

### **Current Working Class Struggles in NJ**

New Jersey is a state with a very diverse income bracket, but unfortunately a large portion of its resident’s hail from low income and low-educated backgrounds. “Jobs paying less than \$40,000 a year now comprise 53 percent of all jobs in New Jersey, and these jobs are projected to be the primary source of labor growth in the coming years.” Stirling (2017) This is

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also an alarming piece of data that is collected by *ALICE*. The acronym stands for asset limited, income constrained, employed. *ALICE* is a term used for a person who typically makes an earning that does not allow for them to afford basic every day necessities, but their wage is above government poverty level. This means they cannot receive any assistance from the government for their daily expenses, and any minor financial setback can make them homeless or send them into spiraling debt.

Springsteen's upbringing can attest to this as his family and grandparents all lived together to afford a home, worked many physically demanding jobs, but there was no mention of welfare or food stamps. Again, it is possible Springsteen's family could have desperately used government assistance but did not meet the qualifications due to too many people with jobs in the home or high wages. It is rumored that Springsteen was a very young adult when he first received food stamps. "In the late afternoon, after lunch, Lopez and I were driving around Asbury Park and he started laughing and pointing. "That's where we went to get food stamps—all of us, Bruce, too," he said" Remnick, D. (2017). Former band member Vinny Lopez explains this was right before he was kicked out of the band. All the members suffered monetarily in the beginning, needing food stamps and often stopping in Asbury Park to pick them up. Springsteen was the only without a real job in addition to his music career.

In conclusion. Springsteen's life and upbringing are rooted in the working-class lifestyle. There are many stories of people who go from rags to riches only to forget who they once were, and to then denounce the people that they used to be. Springsteen often comes back to the digs he grew up around, not to criticize them but to acknowledge how they have made him stronger as a person. Not many of his songs speak of castles and lavish dinner parties, but they give tribute

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to the people who help build the world we stand on. Springsteen is deemed by many as a working-class hero, not only for his lyrics, but his never-ending support for the little guy.

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