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Working for a Better Life

Bruce Springsteen and the American Dream

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Abstract

There has been an obvious divide when it comes to the working class; Bruce Springsteen brings this topic to light throughout his years of being a musician. This paper will discuss how Bruce Springsteen grew up in the working class and how he was able to beat it and become successful by making songs that connect with people. Although Bruce Springsteen was able to escape his hometown, that never let him give up on where his roots were and who his people were. Specific examples will be used from Bruce Springsteen's autobiography, as well as his songs "Born is the U.S.A" and "My Hometown." This paper will connect those examples to how Springsteen is still currently attempting to defeat the social issue of the working class. This paper will also touch on how the Vietnam War drastically changed the working class which made Bruce want his voice to be heard even more.

The working class is to be considered a group of people that work at minimum or low wage jobs that include physical labor such as plumbers or janitors. Usually the working class has little education and can only afford the basic needs in life. (Jane, 2018). In America, the working class is a big part of our society. Its sole identity, “like any other, is never a given” (Crowe & Boehm 2006). The identity of the working class has many parts, and when people try to define them, it is hard to give just one definite definition. The best way to explain who they are is, “Working people resist any formulaic or singular representation of themselves, offering instead a more seamless web in which worlds of family, neighborhood, and community were woven together with work and workplace in their own identities” (Crowe & Boehm 2006).

The working class as seen through Bruce’s eyes is similar to what the exact definition of what the working class is. Bruce witnessed people working hard at their jobs, making minimum wage, and always getting the short end of the stick when it comes to the social issue of the working class in America. He saw this through his family and as he grew older, he saw it through the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Recession, different presidential elections, almost every important event that affected America in some way also affected the working class.

During the duration of this course we have gone more in depth about Bruce Springsteen and his outstanding work as an artist. From the basic beginnings up until

his current work, Bruce has been a part of various social issues that America has dealt with over the last four decades. The most blatant of social issues that he has brought to light is the social issue of the working class, which Bruce experienced as a child. Bruce Springsteen was a small town boy, had big dreams, and was able to achieve them and leave his underprivileged, feeble life behind him. However, he always kept in mind where he came from.

The Springsteen family was in the working class. Young Bruce did not notice it since both his parents and grandparents were living under the same roof. Bruce, as a child ruled the household while his grandmother adored him and his mother surrendered to his dominance. In time, Bruce's mother moved the family out of his grandparent's house into what was a tiny, half-shotgun house that was four blocks away from his grandparents' house. Bruce spent the greater part of his childhood living with his grandparents as he felt as if they were his true parents (Springsteen, 2016).

Bruce was raised in Freehold, New Jersey. Freehold was a non-prosperous town, where factories would constantly close which left men and women out of jobs. "I come from a boardwalk town where almost everything is tinged with a bit of fraud. So am I." "I drift into the greatest and saddest sanctuary I have ever known, my grandparents' house." (Springsteen, 2016). Springsteen was always grateful for what he had, but he knew he wanted more and one day he would get more. Bruce knew that

there were other people who had it better than him, but with his hard work he would be free of the working class.

Bruce Springsteen was born into a working class, Irish- Italian family, and observed the struggles his family had to face while he was growing up. As he grew up, his family fell to the economic struggles of the working class and he had to move in with his grandparents so he could avoid living on the streets. If it weren't for the close family ties he had, Bruce may very well have had it far worse than what he was handed.

In order to survive, his mom, Adele, worked as a secretary, and his father, Douglas, worked at a Ford dealership, but often worked multiple jobs at once since factories were frequently closing; even with both parents working it was hard to live comfortably. At his house growing up, Springsteen (2016) shares “We have gathered in my grandfather’s 1940’s sedan waiting to be deployed to dig through every trash heap overflowing from the curbs of our town” (Springsteen, 2016). They would grab all the old radios as well as anything electrical that people threw out, and would be recycled back into the living in order to make more money. In modern day terms, it was almost like “dumpster diving”, another way to make money in order to bring food to the table. These moments, of watching his parents work every day, his family gathering old electrical scraps to spend hours trying to make radios work, these were the moments that Bruce would never let leave him.

Bruce and his father did not have a good relationship growing up. His father was a drunk and often was an angry drunk. But Bruce admired his mother. "Supported by his mother, Bruce's passion for music developed instantly, and it became clear to young Bruce that he wanted more for himself than the life that his father lived" (Garman, 1996). Once Bruce came to this realization, his mother took out a loan to buy him his first guitar, on which he discovered his true talent. Bryan Garman discusses the influences of Bruce's early career by stating, "Springsteen's first three albums, *Greetings from Asbury Park* (1973), *The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle* (1973), and *Born to Run* (1975) - are grounded firmly in his working-class experience, but, as Jim Cullen argues, are primarily concerned with escaping the economic limits that circumscribed his life (Garman, 1996 , pg 73). "These "working-class" experiences became the framework for the stories of the characters that constitute the music of Bruce Springsteen. (Bumpus).

Bruce was already a well-known artist in Asbury Park, New Jersey by the time he got discovered. He spent most of his time playing with a band and in bars to get his music career started. The struggles with poverty that Springsteen experienced throughout his childhood and into young adulthood prompted the foundation of the blue-collar characters that live their troubled lives in Bruce's songs. The choices these characters make to improve the quality of life that differ between his albums. Bruce's

albums are filled with stories of criminals, hard-working citizens, and dreamers that are attempting to flee the working class and the conditions in which they live in.

The working class undeniably changed from the 1970's, when Springsteen was just gaining momentum in his career, until present day. In the 1970's when the Vietnam War was going on, which was described as "the fighting force as made up largely by the poor" (Barnett, Stanley, & Shore 1992). The war was nicknamed the "working class war", since a majority of the soldiers who got sent over there were from the working class. America needed soldiers to come fight the unsupported war so they sent out draft notices, where people had to report to different stations and had to get a physical performed in order to be sent out to war. However, there were ways to get out of having to get sent overseas, and "the Vietnam draft system effectively allowed the rich and the clever to avoid service" (Barnett, Stanley, and Shore 1992). It was no secret that the working class had to be the ones to buck up and get ready for battle, since there was an unfair advantage for the rich to pay their way out of service.

Springsteen, even though he was a part of the working class, was able to get out of serving his country. Bruce and some of the members of his band and his friends would stay awake for days so they were shaky, some wouldn't shower for days and others acted crazy, they would do anything to get out of the draft and not be sent overseas.

Even though Bruce did not serve, he still felt the agony and pain. His friends came back and were not the same, most had severe PTSD and some of his friends did not even return. O'Brien describes what the men had to carry even after the war ended, the mental struggle that they endured day to day. O'Brien (1990) states "They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or hide, and in many respects, this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture" (O'Brien 1990). The working class was affected in every way possible through this war. It just was not fair that all the rich were able to pay their way out of not serving while the working class men were dragged away from their family. The families of the men that were sent to fight in the war struggled every day, wondering if their brother, husband or dad would return home after the war.

In "Born in the U.S.A", Springsteen focuses on the Vietnam war, and the effect it had on the working class. Ironically, that is not how the song was interpreted by most of America after it came out. It was used as a rally song during a presidential election, by Reagan, in order to get more votes to go his way. People viewed the song as more "pro- America", more than anything, and Reagan used that as leverage towards his campaign. The beauty of this song is where Springsteen portrays the working class and tells the story to his fans, the true story that is. In his lyrics, Springsteen writes:

Born in a dead man's town, the first kick I took was when I hit the ground

End up like a dog that's been beat too much, till you spend half your life
just covering up

Born in the U.S.A, I was born in the U.S.A

(Springsteen 1984 track 1).

In these lyrics above, Springsteen is beginning to tell the story of what the costs were from fighting in the “working class” war. His writing describes the suffering of where he grew up, how someone can work so hard, but America will still not treat you how you should be, America will kick you when you are down. The chorus, “Born in the U.S.A” is not a patriotic anthem in any way, it is stating the fact of where someone grew up, and what it will ultimately lead too. Springsteen has the ability that most artists don't, which is the talent to tell a true story through music, and in “Born in the U.S.A”, his poetry of the working class shines through. The best thing about Bruce Springsteen's work is that all each of his songs are authentic and relatable since he writes his songs about real life events.

In “My Hometown”, Springsteen sings about where he grew up, and how it has corroded and aged, all from the collective economic collapse over the years with the working class. Bruce tries to paint the picture of a run down, boarded up, deserted town, where all the working people had to go try to find another place to get money in order to survive. Springsteen writes:

Now Main Street's whitewashed windows and vacant stores
Seems like there ain't nobody wants to come down here no more
They're closing down the textile mill across the railroad tracks
Foreman says these jobs are going boys and they ain't coming back
To your hometown
Your hometown
Your hometown
Your hometown

(Springsteen 1984 Track 12).

Even though that song was written for Springsteen's hometown of Freehold, it can relate to so many other towns of the working class citizens all over the states. Too many towns in America were part of the downfall of the economy. Springsteen was able to capture those moments and put them into a song that people can relate to. Bruce knows that the working class had it rough and he wants people to be able to relate to him and his songs and use them as an outlet for when they are thinking about those tough times.

To this day Bruce is still involved in making a difference in any way he can. Bruce has done many concert contributions for many different events. One event that stuck out to me was his contribution to the 9/11 attacks, Bruce wants to help his people heal. "As America mourned in the wake of 9/11's terrorist attacks, Bruce Springsteen

made *The Rising*, an album that offered comfort and light in the cruelest, most impenetrable darkness” (Rees, 2016). Bruce was able to see the attacks and the collapse of the twin towers from across the river from his house in New Jersey. Bruce wrote two songs specifically for his event, *Into the Fire* and *You’re Missing*.

I selected to write about Bruce Springsteen and him growing up in the working class because I feel as if so many people can relate to this area in Springsteen’s life. The events that occurred in Springsteen’s life has had a huge contribution to his success. The events that occurred in his childhood and young adult life shaped him into the artist he became. His songs are authentic and personal, they tell a story about real life. The thing I like most about Bruce’s writing and songs is that he never says anything about how amazing the American Dream is, he is realistic. I feel as if some people from other countries picture America as freedom, having picture of a perfect with a white picket fence, when in all reality, that is not what America is like, especially back when Bruce was growing up. Bruce makes songs that people are able to relate to, the working class was a huge issue during his life, his songs are helping the public heal.

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