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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FREEDOM AND BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

AND ITS IMPACT ON OUR COUNTRY

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Abstract

This paper explores the life and music of rock icon Bruce Springsteen. To start, we must define what freedom is and what it means in the context of this research. Then we will analyze his life, where we see that Bruce Springsteen is a free spirited individual, and he wanted to show the rest of the world what it means to be free. After analyzing his early life, we must take a look at his young adult life, which serves as a transition to his professional music career. We then take a look at individual songs and their message of freedom. These songs had a significant impact on others, which we will examine afterwards. Then the research becomes tied into the course and its title, "Bruce Springsteen and the American Dream." We will not only define the American Dream, but apply Bruce's life to the definition and see how the course must include the importance of freedom to truly show what the American Dream is all about.

Freedom. A concept up for debate? An idea that can never actually come true? This topic is not one that is easily explained. To clear up the uncertainty of this vague term, we look to one of the most free spirited artists in Rock n' Roll: Bruce Springsteen. Before delving into Springsteen's life, we must take a look at what it means to be free. In a country like America where we preach freedom so openly, we do not truly practice what we preach. However, we will later find out that it is not up to our surroundings to determine if we are free. This topic would not be easy to discuss, unless we had an icon that we could turn to, whose life embodied freedom in its purest form. Springsteen's life and his messages are so powerful that I believe that we could all learn a thing or two from his way of life.

Freedom and America. "The two terms go together like a drum and its drumbeat" (Patterson, 2001). There are a few main freedoms to focus on, that trump all the rest. Among these are freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and financial freedom. Freedom of speech is commonly thought of as the ability to say anything you want, whenever you want. As reasonable law abiding citizens, we understand this is not the case. Laws such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act monitor speech online and prevent copyright infringement so that we have the ability to have credit for our thoughts (Bertoni, Sadinsky, 2015). We should have the freedom to express ourselves and our beliefs, not without judgement, but without fear of being mistreated because of said beliefs. We have this freedom to a certain extent, but in many cases, especially given today's political landscape, contrarian ideas are often attacked with hate and anger. In times like these, we must be wary and cautious when considering what we are able to say; there are consequences for our actions.

Religion throughout history has been one of the most controversial topics among any group of people. “Freedom of religion is considered as the third most important civil liberty after the right to life and personal liberty and the freedom of speech and expression” (Mustafa, Singh Sohi, 2017). The idea of someone saying your entire view of the world, or basis of the conception of your life, is wrong is not something that appeals to most people. Because of this, arguments and hateful acts occur. However, it is worth noting that our freedom of religion is much farther reaching than other countries. Having a different religion than those who control our government will not get us killed as it would in some radical countries. Similar to freedom of speech, we have the ability to believe what we want, but that does not mean there will not be consequences.

The last, and most important type of essential freedom is monetary. Without money, it is quite difficult to do just about anything. In our country, some believe that our leaders can use this money to win elections (Olson, 308). We need money to obtain necessities to survive, to provide for our families, and to participate in leisurely activities. It is worth noting that although money doesn't buy happiness, it certainly helps us pay for the products and services that make us happy in our consumer culture. There is a debate as to whether or not we have the freedom to make as much money as we want, and, quite frankly, it depends who you ask. My answer is yes, but that answer comes from a middle class white male who has the opportunity to attend a higher learning institution. Opportunities vary for everybody, but if someone wants it bad enough, they can achieve what they believe.

As we examine these types of freedom, the common theme is that even though there will be repercussions to our actions, we as humans are capable of freely expressing ourselves through

a variety of methods. These freedoms are what define us as a country, and because of these freedoms, we are able to make our own luck. We may start from working class roots, or come from little to no money. We may have parental figures who are supposed to be our caretakers, but often times we turn into theirs. We may be broke for the first quarter of our lives. But even if we all of these things are true of us, they were true of Bruce Springsteen, and, through his music and experiences throughout life, he overcame these obstacles and showed us what it truly means to be free.

Bruce's free spiritedness can be traced back to his early childhood memories of playing in the street outside his house. "Here, on passing afternoons, I am Hannibal crossing the Alps, GIs locked in vicious mountain combat and countless cowboy heroes traversing the rocky trails of the Sierra Nevada" (Springsteen, 3). This is an early indicator that in his adolescence he had no limitations. He could be whoever he wanted. Showing a creative spirit from an early age shows us that Bruce was free from the very beginning, which went on to show in his music later in his life.

The traditional sense of freedom of religion is also shown in Bruce's upbringing. "We live, literally, in the bosom of the Catholic Church, with the priest's rectory, the nun's convent, the St. Rose of Lima Church and grammar school all just a football's toss away across a field of wild grass" (Springsteen, 5). Living so close to a church, Bruce and his family were able to practice their faith which played an important role in their family dynamic. The sense of religion eventually faded a bit, but Bruce recalls that he still feels that he has a little bit of religion that he felt even after he stopped practicing his Catholic faith.

After growing up and seeing how little money his family had, Bruce's first longing for financial freedom sprouted when he was gifted a cheap guitar from his mother. He understood not only the value of the guitar and the potential it had to make him successful, but also the value of his mother's money that she had worked multiple jobs in order to save. Seeing how frugal his mother had to be, Bruce realized that he essentially had no other option than to be a success. Once he set his mind to it, he put his nose to the grindstone, and never stopped strumming that guitar, even decades later.

The gifting of his guitar served as a transition from Bruce's childhood to adulthood in a sense. Although only 13 years old, Bruce acted much older than he was, perhaps because he wanted nothing more than to be successful and the only way to do so was to be more mature and independent. This exemplifies the mentality that we should all have if we want to be free. We should have goals in mind that we want to accomplish, because we are free to accomplish these goals. This event in Bruce's life not only made him into a man, but also started his music career. A career in which he would continue to practice and preach this same freedom that he treasures so much.

Throughout Springsteen's history of hits, the theme of freedom is present in various ways. It is important to not only analyze the lyrics of individual tracks, but also the time in which these songs were written. Along with this, we must also take a look at whole albums and their messages. Each song shows freedom in a different light, whether that be the freedom to roam the streets as a young adult, the exhilarating nature of speeding down the open road, or the freedom to criticize our country's reaction to the Vietnam War.

Beginning with one of his first published tracks, “Growin’ Up” captures the essence of a young Bruce ready to hit the town for a night of magic and mischief. It serves as the start to the rock n’ roll revolution, which, as far as parents were concerned, was the end of the world as they knew it (Facciola, 924). The song emphasizes how having a free mind is really the best way to live life. The song begins by describing the routine of Bruce before he would head out, “I stood stone-like at midnight, suspended in my masquerade. I combed my hair till it was just right and commanded the night brigade.” Bruce stares at himself in the mirror, perhaps admiring his beauty and giving himself a quick confidence boost. With his troops by his side, the commander of the night brigade joins his army in the streets of Freehold for a night of mystery, magic, and mischief. This freedom in the early part of his life contributes greatly to the person Bruce had grown to be in his later years.

“Open All Night,” a track from Springsteen’s most unique album “Nebraska,” takes us on a midnight joyride where we leave our dead end jobs in the dust. The song itself is like a volcano, which begins by oozing little bits of freedom to us, and then erupting with a full blown freedom barrage in the chorus. How could one man’s infatuation with an inanimate object lead us to freedom? Well, for Bruce, his car is no inanimate object. It’s his second home. Arguably, as the song would lead us to believe with lyrics such as “I’m a all-set cobra jet creepin’ through the nighttime,” it is his true home. His safe space where not only he can convince himself he’s a pilot, but a place where he feels freedom radiating through every fiber of his being. Bruce has always been a daredevil. He is the king of the open road, his kingdom where he roams free. As he has been driving all night, Bruce tells us that what got him through those endless hours of driving was the sheer passion for the open road. Throughout his life, he had travelled these

highways hundreds of times. As our journey comes to an end, and we wonder how we can replicate the thrill of this mischievous night, Bruce teaches us that the only thing we needed to be free was the open road and a good set of tunes.

Branching out from the traditional sense of freedom as demonstrated through Bruce's lyrics, "Born in the USA" was more about the time in which it was written, and the context this provides for our idea of freedom. The song was a protest in a time in which Bruce's friends were being taken away from him and shipped off to fight a war that was not theirs to fight. He had so much distaste for the country at the time. The musical mastermind behind this song wrote it to mock the government, but our country so desperately needed a boost in morale to reinforce our American way of life, that we actually admired the song as positive patriotism. When Bruce says he was "Born in the USA" his aim is to be sarcastically critical of the situation at the time. During the feud, Bruce was not proud of what his country was doing, and he wanted us to know that. This song was a huge leap for what freedom meant at the time. Bruce had an outright hatred for what was going on, but he had the ability to write exactly how he was feeling, with no legal repercussions. This freedom of speech was exactly what gave Bruce life when writing. He never worried about what would happen if someone else heard his songs. Music was Bruce's puppet, and he was the puppeteer.

Our course is called "Bruce Springsteen and the American Dream," but before asking how freedom relates to this course, we must establish what the American Dream is. The truth is, there is no concrete answer. In my eyes, the American Dream is all about coming to the land of opportunity, making an impact on the world around you, and supporting a family to live a happy and healthy life. It is not necessary that you come from money, but it is necessary that you have a

desire to succeed. Bruce embodied this perfectly. He came from working class roots, from almost nothing, in a town where blue collar workers made up the majority of the town's livelihood. From this, he emerged as one of the greatest musical talents in history. Sure, he struggled. Sure, he was broke for a long time. But his ability to be free from his obstacles and overcome them is what resulted in his success. His American Dream is exactly what we should think of when we have unbearable circumstances.

Where would we be without the music of Bruce Springsteen? Well, without his plethora of timeless tunes, we would not know what the glory days were like, or how resilient our people were after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, or even how we can free ourselves from our day-to-day grind. Some say he even contributed significantly to the end of the Cold War (Gans Jr., 2013). Bruce has taught us exactly what it means not only to be free, but to live free everyday. His variety of music gives everybody something to listen and relate to, which bands us together as a country. Music in general has that odd effect. Whether it be in times of crisis, in times of celebration, or times where we just need a catchy tune to listen to, music can be our saving grace. That is what the legacy of Bruce Springsteen has taught us. Music and freedom go hand in hand, with the music being our fuel to empower us to be free. By reliving Bruce's life through his music, we see that freedom is not a concept, it's a way of life.

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