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BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Bruce Springsteen: Evolution of The American Dream

Abstract

Bruce Springsteen is a man many people associate with the ideals of the “American Dream”. He comes from a poor, working-class family. He is currently an incredibly successful musician and he has been for some time now. However, he does not think this way and he has not for some time now. He has changed his opinions on the “American Dream” over time, coming from one end of the spectrum in thinking that the “American Dream” is real to the other end where he now thinks that it is a lie, and the promised land is not real.

Keywords: Bruce Springsteen, American Dream, change

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Bruce Springsteen is many things. A singer, songwriter, husband and father, guitarist, poet, and many would say a symbol of America and its ideals. He is just a regular guy that came from a poor working-class family and worked his way up from a nobody to the success he has become today. His life is remarkably similar to what many people consider to be the “American Dream” in today’s times. However, Bruce Springsteen is not the poster child of this Dream that many people think he is. He *was* the poster child when he was much younger and at the beginning of his musical career, but his ideas have changed over time to something quite the opposite of what he once thought. His songs used to exude strong, positive feelings towards the “American Dream”. In his later work, however, he has started to show a disdain for this same concept. This transformation is what this essay hopes to address, this evolution of ideas he has had.

Bruce Springsteen started out his life in a poor, working class family. His dad worked in a factory and his mother took a job as a lawyer’s receptionist. (Springsteen, 2017, pg. 31-35, pg. 37). His first jobs were all manual labor jobs, in fact, that is how he paid for his first guitar, he tarred his neighbor’s roof. (Springsteen, 2017, pg. 56-57). So, he should believe in the American Dream and its values considering how he grew up, but for him, growing up was not easy. His father was an alcoholic and was often abusive towards Bruce and his family. (Springsteen, 2017, pg. 31-35). His father also had a slew of mental issues that no one addressed, mostly because it was the 1950s and people didn’t know any better. (Springsteen, 2017, pg. 31-35). His sister also got pregnant at 17 years old and he had to look out for her, along with her boyfriend (now husband). (Springsteen, 2017, pg. 35). Bruce’s parents and little sister moved out west to California, and him and his sister stayed in New Jersey because they had started something with their lives. (Springsteen, 2017, pg. 96-97). The band he was in started to gain notoriety, so he

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didn't want to leave possible fame, and his sister had a kid to worry about. (Clemons & Reo, 2010, pg. 70-72; Springsteen, 2017, pg. 35). Knowing all this makes for a pretty interesting case on his change of views later on in life. He believed that the "American Dream" was real as it was a sign of hope for him and his family to get out of the bad hand they had been given at life. He also managed to achieve the "American Dream" and after he did so is when his transformation began as he realized the unrealistic expectations this dream put onto people.

While Bruce Springsteen doesn't explicitly state in his music that he was once a believer in the "American Dream", he did have some hope left that it was still real. It wasn't until after his first few albums that he started straying away from the idea that the "American Dream" was alive. In his song "Born to Run", off the album of the same name, the first line is, "In the day we sweat it out on the streets of a runaway American dream", which is a good example of his acceptance that the Dream exists but it is a little harder to get to than he originally thought. The song is about a man talking to a girl, telling her he wants to be with her, and the life they'll have together. Later in the song, near the end, he further brings up the idea of hope in the "American Dream". He says,

"Together, Wendy, we can live with the sadness, I'll love you with all the madness in my soul / Woah, someday girl, I don't know when / We're gonna get to that place where we really want to go and we'll walk in the sun" (Springsteen, 1975, track 5).

He is saying that right now, the times may be tough ("Together, Wendy, we can live with the sadness") but later, when he has worked as hard as he can to achieve the "American Dream" (We're gonna get to that place where we really want to go), they can finally have the life they want to live, together (we'll walk in the sun).

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This can be compared to some of his work in his next albums such as *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and *Born in the U.S.A.* In the song “The Promised Land”, off the album *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, Springsteen says, “working all day in my daddy’s garage / Driving all night chasing some mirage” (Springsteen, 1978, track 6), the mirage he is referring to is the “American Dream”. The song title is even an allusion to the “American Dream”, the Promised Land is the “American Dream” and the character in the song is having a struggle in if they should still believe in the Promised Land or not, i.e. the “American Dream”. (McNichol, 2019). In “Factory”, another song off the same album, the character discusses the sacrifices his father had to make so he could work and provide for his family. His father went through a lot of pain while he slaves over his work, his life wasting away in the factory. (Smith & Rutter, 2008, pg. 116). But this can be seen as a necessary evil, something everyone must endure so they may one day reach their promised land. A hopeful notion still, but Springsteen’s tone would start to change very soon.

In Bruce Springsteen’s 1984 album *Born in the U.S.A.*, he had finally used up his last bit of hope in the “American Dream”. He now conveys the opposite of his once hopeful notions, a disapproval in the system he has lived with his whole life. In the song “Born in the U.S.A.”, the narrator is a poor citizen that gets drafted into the Vietnam War. He is upset by the actions of the U.S. during the war and he is making fun of his country. Not only is he making fun of his country, but he is also making fun of economic and social classes. He is realizing that he is a pawn to people in much more powerful positions than he is in and he is done with it. (Smith, 2000, pg. 311-312). When he is chanting, “Born in the U.S.A. / I was born in the U.S.A.” (Springsteen, 1984, track 1) he is not proud of that fact. He is miserable that he was dealt this hand in life and he knows he cannot get out because to him the “American Dream” is no longer

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real. It is a lie he has been told his entire life. The way the character feels marks the change in Bruce Springsteen's writings. He no longer has any hope in the system that has been instilled in him from birth. He has abandoned his ideas of the "American Dream" and now finds that the promised land he has been searching for does not exist.

These are not the only examples of this change in his behavior, however. He really seemed to start making the change in his album *The River*, with the song "The River" as well but the song is not as famous as his hit "Born in the U.S.A." and thus makes it less notable in comparison. However, it is still noteworthy and "The River" tells the story of a couple who go down to the river they fell in love at. When they get to the river it is all dried up however, and this song is a great example of how the "American Dream", while in the beginning seems magical, eventually dies just like the river did. (Powers, 2012).

While Bruce Springsteen sings about messages of a falling dream, his listeners many times find the opposite meaning than what he is trying to convey. Famously, the song "Born in the U.S.A." has been misinterpreted time and time again as a patriotic anthem that instills people with the spirit of America. Ronald Reagan has even promoted the song as a good example for the war in Vietnam. (Kot, 2014). Although this may be the case for some of his listeners this most certainly is not true for all of them. Many have found solace in his music as a representation of their oppression or hard positions in life. Many people losing hope in the U.S. also find hope and representation in his music. For example, he can be an outlet for people with little to no political say, so that they may get their voices heard and understood. (Cowie & Boehm, 2006, pg. 358-359). Since he gives this voice to people in need, he is impacting them in a way many others cannot. He does this because he knows what it is like to lose hope and faith in a system that seemed to work great when he was younger, or at least told that it worked great. He was

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impacted by his change in opinions and he wants other to be impacted as well so he helps them see what is right in front of them. He does not let them see the promised land, but instead he leads them to the truth.

The theme of this course matches well with the course title, seeing as the course is called Bruce Springsteen and the American Dream. There is a direct relationship between the theme in this paper and the name of the course. This course is about finding the meaning in Bruce Springsteen's music and how it relates to the class. Nothing is more relatable to a bunch of American students than the "American Dream". It is drilled into each student's head from a young age and they eventually come the realization that one day they will have to follow in the footsteps laid out for them so they may achieve that dream. The problem is that many find this dream unachievable but do not know what to do to compensate for this lack of hope they have just acquired. Bruce Springsteen fills this void by sending a comforting message that even though the "American Dream" is dead, it is not the only thing that can bring you hope in your life. He provides the hope that is so desperately needed at that point. In a sense, he becomes the "American Dream", not literally but figuratively.

This essay touch on many points throughout about how Bruce Springsteen has transitioned over the years from having hope in the "American Dream" to not believing in it at all. This change can be seen in his lyrics with songs in his musical infancy that show a glimmer of hope in the dream, such as "Born to Run" and "The Promised Land". Later on in his career can then be seen lyrics that have no more hope at all in the "American Dream", songs such as "The River" and notoriously "Born in the U.S.A.". Bruce Springsteen was told his whole life that the "American Dream" was real and he spent his early career chasing the promised land, but he

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found out himself the hard way that this is not the case. He has been sending this message ever since.

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