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Jessica T Palmer

Dr. Buckley

Bruce Springsteen and The American Dream

12/10/2020

Cover Page for My Research Paper

A Guiding Force

Abstract

In this paper, I will be addressing the main factors which influenced Bruce Springsteen's career and songwriting, specifically regarding interpersonal relationships the singer has had and how that is evident in his work thus far. I will be relating that concept to his latest album release, "Letter to You" by analyzing track by track and attempting to find that common thread of connection that seems to speak so well to him and his audience.

Why?

I chose this topic and album because throughout this course I have really enjoyed dissecting Springsteen's work and relating it to a bigger picture. As I have progressed throughout this course, I have been able to elevate my writing and approach song analysis in a new, more refined way. I also felt as though choosing "Letter to You" would allow for me to make the most accurate interpretation of what Springsteen is trying to say in the current moment since it just got released a few months ago. Overall, I wanted to write about this because it allows for some creative freedom, a stream of consciousness and a continuation of the work I have been trying to perfect over the semester in this class. I also just find it interesting to see into Springsteen's life and mind when he writes.

How This Topic Relates to The Course

The theme of interpersonal relationships in Bruce Springsteen's life relates to this course in several ways. Most clearly, he discusses his connections with others through his music, and his autobiography. In this paper, I will cite his experiences in his own words, as well as analyze his newest album through that lens. The theme overall relates to the course in that there is a clear link between his work and the things he has experienced throughout the years. All of this to say that the connections with people he has had make for some interesting work and reflection that people can relate to a lot.

Do you ever think about what inspires and influences you? Repetitive themes in your life that keep popping up, people that you are drawn to for whatever reason seems fit at the time. These elements, seemingly involuntary but powerful in nature, impact our interactions with the world, nonetheless. Famed German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "invisible threads are the strongest ties" (Nietzsche, F. Goodreads Quotes). While the context of this sentiment is unclear, it seems to ring true when considering the impact of music in forming bonds. More specifically, the ways in which human beings relate to one another as they journey throughout life, experiencing this widely used form of expression on a daily basis. One of the most glaring examples of the common thread that is human connection magnified by music can be found in the works of American singer-songwriter, Bruce Springsteen; In particular, the interpersonal relationships he has been a part of throughout his life and career - all the while providing a medium that speaks to his audience and connects listeners to the themes that he has explored in his work thus far.

There is no more relevant and up to date example of this idea of relationship than Springsteen's latest album "*Letter to You*", released in October 2020. Despite some of the songs being written decades ago, this 12-track release took a measly 4-5 days to fully record (an exact number is disputed) and sparked the reunion of Springsteen and the E Street Band after a few years' hiatus from one another. How fitting that one of the main themes presented in the album is the importance of connection to the people around us.

To further bring home this idea, I will be breaking down examples of the theme of connection track by track. Kicking things off on a high note, is the premiere song on the

album, "One Minute You're Here." The approach to this song is slow and somber wins the race, apparently. In this case, Springsteen begins with a toned-down guitar solo and a direct, somewhat cold resonance in his voice. As the song progresses, Springsteen employs pauses and repetition of the chorus "one minute you're here, next minute you're gone" to prove some points. While the argument could be made that the first song on the album is about death, what I see is the impression of someone's presence antemortem. While there is certainly discussion of loss and missing this person that Springsteen is addressing, it is evident that their shared life together was impactful enough to reflect upon in an in-depth way. To further this idea, Springsteen belts, "baby, baby, baby, I'm so alone, baby, baby, baby, I'm coming home." It is in this sentiment that implies a particular connection has left a void in his life and that one day he would like to be reunited with them to cure his heartache. There will be more discussion of this idea as it relates to Springsteen's attachment to God and spirituality. As a continuation on personal bonds and reflection, Springsteen mentions later on in the song "I thought I knew just who I was, and what I'd do but I was wrong, one minute you're here, next minute you're gone." This line speaks to a few emotional dimensions that the singer is experiencing... On the one hand, he is grappling with loss of a person, but also a loss of self. He is aware of the person-shaped hole now in his life, and the grieving process that comes along with that. The emotions that are experienced during that time are somewhat surprising in their intensity and ability to change who we thought we were before devastation hit. It is also within this line that Springsteen drives home the point of the song, which is that how you relate to something, be it an experience or person, can shift once that entity is no longer in your immediate space. Despite all of this, memories remain, and the singer is forevermore changed due to

the interaction. (so much so, that he continuously revisits this topic throughout his discography) The starting piece, as well as the full album shines a light onto Bruce Springsteen's personal life and what messages speak to his soul. It immediately begins to plant seeds in the listener's mind and provides insight into just how deeply those around us imprint upon our lives.

In a somewhat off-putting shift of tone, the album continues, and listeners are greeted by the second song, the title track. "Letter To You" has an almost celebratory atmosphere, with its quick tempo, instrumental build-up, and passion behind Springsteen's voice. He states "tried to summon all that my heart finds true and send it in my letter to you" - a declaration of authenticity and a yearning for expressing what he feels to someone he has known. At first glance, Springsteen is relaying a narrative in which he has disclosed a vulnerable state to an unknown figure. When hearing these lyrics, the message seems to be about a connection in which he directly speaks to, simultaneously belting about it to the world. While this song appears to be a dedication to another person, beneath the surface lies what I believe to be the true meaning. As stated in the previous track's analysis, the album as a whole thematically references how the connections in Bruce Springsteen's life have influenced his music and perspective on life; taking this a step further, he is also transformed into a more introspective and well-rounded individual as he discovers connection to self. This is something Springsteen has valued throughout his many ventures in life. "Letter To You" perfectly encapsulates that idea because it could just as much be addressed to Springsteen himself, let alone another person. The depth in which this album goes to prove that relationships of all kinds leave marks on us is paramount to

understanding where the artist is coming from and shows how the idea of connection is subjective yet universally experienced in nature.

In an additional turn of events, the third single from the album, "Burnin' Train" sheds light on a darker side of what it means to be attached to another. This song follows a similar structure as the previous one, notably in the use of a long pause between instruments and vocals, a space that allows for reflection and implementation of one's own interpretation as to why it is structured that way. Consequently, a long pause between when the instrumental starts and when Springsteen begins to sing makes it an experience in the present and a journey into one's mind. It is in this reflection that the idea of connection can be explored. Contained in the first verse, is the line "I wanted you to heal me, but instead you set me on fire", an emotionally gripping and imagery-filled statement. When Springsteen expresses this, what comes to mind is a passionately detrimental relationship. On the one hand, the singer had hoped for this bond with someone to fix his broken pieces, and yet it seems as though there are more pieces in the aftermath of this relationship than when it commenced. It is quite the juxtaposition; a person searching for better, thinking they've found it, and then being left with ruins of what could have been. He continues, "I brought you shining gifts, wiped the sweat from your brow" - a testament to his dedication to this connection and a tangible image of what it looks like to sacrifice yourself for another. In any standard term, this would be called a Toxic Relationship. Springsteen then makes a contradictory reference to Cain from The Bible, which details a man killing his brother as a sacrifice. Though it is a religious reference (that Springsteen is known for), it provides worldly context for an act of sacrifice that nobody should want to be on either side of. Regardless, the song continues with a pleading man stuck in his ways

with someone that is unwilling to give, only take. Lost in a trance of infatuation, the singer repetitively states “take me on your burnin’ train” as if to say, “I know this ship is going down, but I will stay with you.” What Springsteen does in this song is paint a picture of what happens when good intentions turn sour, and a connection doused in gasoline ignites. One person reaps all the benefits, and the other is left in the dust. All of this to say, that Bruce Springsteen is able to convey many lived realities that can be positive or negative. Furthermore, how the multifaceted nature of relationships can shape us to act in certain ways in response to events that transpire within them.

Connection to others can be expressed in a number of ways: as noted, romantic relationships leave scars all can acquire, and also provide inspiration for some great hits. In another vein, when considering the forms of ties there is a less direct link that can be formed. This is present in *Letter To You’s* fourth track, “Janey Needs A Shooter.”

Something sounds familiar here... something I can’t quite put my finger on... in actuality, It’s about as obvious as saying a cliché like “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” ... I’ve heard this before. Shifting gears from explaining how singles from Bruce Springsteen’s latest album gives insight into his personal relationships, it is worth mentioning how impersonal relationships also play a part in his story and shape how he approaches the songwriting process. To anyone with a grasp on rock and roll and Springsteen’s early years, it is no surprise that in this track, the artist channels the likes of Bob Dylan. As soon as the first notes hit your eardrum, comparisons can be made, influence is noted, and the connection these two legends have through their music is undeniable. For context, Springsteen was thought to be the “next Bob Dylan” when he first entered the

entertainment industry; this could have been due to elements such as his classic American roots, approach to storytelling through song, and even his star-like, distinct appearance. It is no wonder that in his latest album, parallels continue to be drawn. The ways in which this connection is most glaring is in the instrumentals. As the song starts, Charles Giordano shines on the organ. The result is like-a-rolling-stone-esque. To further this point, Springsteen utilizes a harmonica midway through the piece. Overall, it is a very structured track filled with a certain musical influence that is recognizable instantly. A reviewer from the well-known newspaper, *The Guardian*, put it best stating “the organ can’t help but recall Bob Dylan’s thin wild mercury sound of the mid-60s” (Petridis, A. *The Guardian*, 2020) Further proof that clear influence has been exerted on Springsteen’s work, and that a connection to fellow singer-songwriters exist, albeit in a somewhat indirect manner.

One of the most effective ways of gauging the strength of a bond is through the memories that tend to pop up when reflecting upon that connection. The concept of connection, loss and lasting impact as a result of events transpiring is most prominent in the album’s fifth track, “Last Man Standing.” In this composition, we find Springsteen going down memory lane. He emphasizes the impressions people have left on his mind by relaying details of his early years in a band, The Castiles. Not only is it impressive that he provides in-depth analysis of what he experienced with them, but the lyrics also highlight Springsteen’s loneliness after losing them. He repeats the line “I’m the last man standing now” about six times, showing just how greatly the absence of a connection can alter you just as much as the presence of one. It becomes almost like a mantra to him, potentially overtaking the more positive side of being around others at times. An official review from *Time Magazine* states “He’s the last surviving member of that band, and he takes his status

as a keeper of memories seriously” (Zacharek, S. Time, 2020). The article continues, “We don’t want to be reminded of what we looked like then, but we also don’t want to forget. *Letter to You* blurs the distance between then and now. Its alternate title could be *The Song of the Last Castile*.” I believe this to be a perfect sentiment for the track “Last Man Standing” in particular because it combines the progression of life, emotional response to the ebb and flow of encounters with others, and how that influences the human psyche when loss occurs.

As a means of grappling with these many facets of human connection, Springsteen, throughout his life, has found it vital to connect himself to a higher power for guidance. It is through this grappling that he can explore a personal relationship with his Creator and thus birthed the single, “The Power of Prayer.” The song provides a soft introduction with an accompaniment of piano, and as it progresses, more instrumentals take the forefront. What makes this song stand out, though, is the way in which Springsteen approaches his many forms of relationships. In one instance, he addresses an optimism he experiences when in love. Joyously he sings “I’m going all in 'cause I don't care. They say that love of comes and goes, but darling what, what do they know” in this verse, Springsteen has shown evolution from his previous records and former perspective on life. The song also addresses a tie to his religion and harkens back to the formative years of his youth. The chorus has a few variations, not least of which is ‘I’m reaching for heaven, we’ll make it there - Darling, it’s just the power of prayer.’” In this case, Springsteen emphasizes the importance of his spiritual relationship, how that bleeds into the other connections he makes, as well as how he relates to the man in the mirror. It is through this medium that Springsteen is able to contextualize every other connection he experiences. This theme is

discussed more thoroughly in the Broadway show, aptly named "*Springsteen On Broadway*." The show takes on various topics relevant to Springsteen's life, and features a more personal, stripped-down version of the celebrity. In the 2-and-a-half-hour runtime, he shares stories from different points in his life, and explains through joke or song how that has shaped who he has become. In what appears to be a conclusion of ideas, Springsteen, with guitar in hand, recalls why introspection is so vital to understanding the journey of life. He recounts his influences, why he is the way he is and how that can relate to the broader public. In a stream of consciousness, he states:

"I wanted to know my story and your story. I felt like I needed to understand as much of it as I could in order to understand myself... who was I? Where I came from and what that meant. What did it mean to my family? Where was I going? Where were we going together as a people? And what did it mean to be an American? And to be a part of that story in this place and in this time... more than anything else I wanted to be able to tell that story well to you... and this is what I have pursued as my service. This is what I have presented to you all these years as my long and noisy prayer, as my magic trick. I wanted to rock your very soul! And have you bring it home and pass it on... I hope that I've been a good traveling companion" (Springsteen On Broadway, 2020, 2:05:00-2:07:00).

It is in this same show that he expresses his various entanglements with people around him, his family, his band, God and the fans that have impacted his thought process and journey of self-discovery, growing as a person throughout his 7 decades of life. He emphasizes how "eternal" it is for him to know them and how none of these interactions ever leave him. Instead, he carries with him the accumulation of muses and uses his craft to

express them in a tangible way. Anecdotally, Springsteen expresses ideas in his work that allow for people to gain insight into his life, a way for him to process through his experiences, and for all of this to simultaneously connect those involved on a broader scale. An instance in which Springsteen recalls bridging the gap between connecting the music to himself and to his audience was when a fan gifted him a guitar. He detailed this experience in an interview and it is yet another way in which connecting to something has changed him and his work. There will be more discussion on the full impact Springsteen has both made and recognizes through his fans in the conclusion of this paper.

When considering the theme of connection and how that has power to influence an individual or group of people, Springsteen can convey that in straightforward terms and not so direct ones as well. This can be viewed in examples such as when discussing the loss of his band members, but as seen in the previous example, he leaves room for more abstract concepts of connection to join the conversation. In the seventh track on the album, "House of A Thousand Guitars", one can surmise that the thematic link is that of human being to musical instrument and all that goes along with that. The song follows a similar structure to those that have come before it, creating a sober depiction of what Springsteen is trying to express before picking up some speed. He belts "Wake in search of the lost chord, That'll band us together for as long as there's stars. Yeah, in the house of a thousand guitars." That line implying that the "lost chord" could be a passed individual, or more literally a musical note that Springsteen yearns to play. To expand on this idea, and back it up with textual evidence, Springsteen continues with "Brother and sister wherever you are, We'll rise together till we find the spark, That'll light up the house of a thousand guitars." In this verse, he gives precedence to the transformative quality of music and how it can

simultaneously ignite and unite people. In an interview with Zane Lowe, with the main focus being “*Letter To You*” and other ventures, Springsteen explains (in reference to one of his guitars) “it’s like my arm. I put that on, and I don’t even feel like I have an instrument on. It feels just like a piece of me” (*Letter To You, Reuniting with The E Street Band, and Broadway*. Apple Music, 2020. 31:00. Published on YouTube). While a lot of what he says catalogues his personal relationships to those around him and even to fans, it is quite interesting to see how connection can be found in unlikely places like a musical instrument. What has furthered his connection to his fans, as well, has been his commentary on politics and a direct response to what is going on in the world through his music.

In the eighth track on the album, Springsteen addresses the elephant in the room, what has been on everyone’s mind for the past four years, the “Rainmaker”, President Donald J Trump. Once again, the song is reminiscent of previous tracks on the album in that it follows a succession of sounds that build on one another. The way in which Springsteen is able to get his ideas across and make a statement on current events is most evident in the line “Sometimes folks need to believe in something so bad, so bad, so bad, they’ll hire a rainmaker.” This statement provides some insight into the singer’s personal views, but also serves as a mascot for those against the current administration. While listening to this piece, you may either find yourself feeling more connected to Springsteen or left out in the cold, alienated. I think that juxtaposition of connection and disconnect is a perfect analogy for the divide in the United States at the moment. Rolling Stone Magazine notes, “Springsteen has said he wrote the song before Trump took office, but the fact that it’s coming out now speaks volumes” (Grow, K. Rolling Stone, 2020). To comment on politics gives Bruce Springsteen an advantage over less-controversial artists because when he

makes a statement, the butterfly effect ensues. A discussion can be had when using his platform, and by extension, social change is possible. It is through this means that he can in turn embody the very influence that has surrounded him throughout his life. By making "Rainmaker" Springsteen has declared a position and by that very act has both gained and lost followers. Despite this, he remains authentic in his approach and uses music as a way of expressing larger truths that he sees fit.

The factor that has been paramount to allowing associations to be made in other areas of Springsteen's life, like his personal relationships, public reception, and closeness to fans, has got to be the up and down relationship with The E Street Band. This subject is something that has impacted Springsteen deeply, prompting lots of inspired work. To quote him, "The band is my life. Rock n Roll has been everything to me. The first day I can remember lookin' in the mirror and standin' what I was seein' was the day I had a guitar in my hand" (Sawyers, J. *Racing in The Street: The Bruce Springsteen Paperback*, 2004, p.56-57). In a recount of events, Springsteen addresses in his autobiography, times when he and the band have not seen eye to eye. He recalls the times when the band was shifting gears:

"I suppose, it suggested mistrust, but those contracts and their future counterparts protected our future together. They clarified beyond debate out past and present relationships with one another, and in clarity lie stability, longevity, respect, understanding and confidence" (Springsteen, B. *Born To Run*, 2016, p.375-76).

All of that to say that his band, music, and the ability to express himself is crucial to his wellbeing and the connections he has made throughout his career have influenced and shaped his identity boundlessly - both the good and bad. One of the more positive aspects

to the everchanging union that is his band, was the introduction of Springsteen to his current wife, Patti Scialfa. The two met officially when she auditioned to be a backup singer for the E Street Band, and the rest is history. The special connection that these two have had is evident in their interactions, as well as the music that Springsteen has produced. References to this pair can be found in the track "If I Was The Priest." The second verse states "There's a girl over by the water fountain and she's asking to be mine" which appears to be about his union to Patti. Later on in the song, Springsteen sings about personal growth and evolving from certain relationships. He states, "It's about time I played the man, took a stand where I belong, and I forget about the old friends and the old times." What this song appears to convey is that Springsteen has seen many connections throughout his life, and now that he is older, he is being more selective about the ones he values. He takes on the role of a priest when allowing some relationships to die when they've reached their end and continues to be shaped by the ones he has crossed paths with. To Springsteen, those he encounters become a part of him and warrant care, especially when recognizing them in the format of song.

It goes without saying, that a huge shift occurred in the E Street Band when they lost saxophonist Clarence Clemmons, and ultimately this loss influenced Springsteen in a plethora of ways. The impact of this event is potentially expressed in the tenth track on the album, "Ghosts." Despite being upbeat in nature, the song points to some very intense ideas. A line that gets repeated throughout is: "Ghosts runnin' through the night, our spirits filled with light, I need, need you by my side." Through this sentiment it becomes clear that Springsteen relies on others to guide him through the darker times in life, and that by leaning on people he has been close to, he makes it through. That suggestion is verified

when in the Apple Music interview, he states “those that pass away don’t ever leave us... they walk alongside us forever. The people that we love don’t ever truly leave us. Pain slips away, the love remains, and they live in that love... as a part of your spirit” (Letter To You, Reuniting with The E Street Band, and Broadway. Apple Music, 2020. 40:00. Published on YouTube). As much as Springsteen looks to get help from others, he also fills that role for listeners.

In the album’s eleventh track, “Song For Orphans”, Springsteen uses his influence to speak to “characters” but it could just as easily be you and me. He states, “Believe me my good Linda, the aurora will shine your way... the hounds are held at bay.” What those lyrics seem to express is the idea that Springsteen has been through enough to get to the other side of an emotion. He is calling out to those who think like him, who take on their life experiences like badges of honor. To keep pushing on to brighter days. He is basically acknowledging that “we’re all in this together.” That statement allows for a Segway into the final track on the album, “I’ll See You In My Dreams.”

An interesting point to make about this final song is that unlike the others on this album, listeners hear Springsteen’s voice before the instrumentals start – as if to say that he is talking directly to you. The song goes on and settled between numerous instrumentals are the lines “I’ll see you in my dreams, when all the summers have come to an end, I’ll see you in my dreams, We’ll meet and live and love again. I’ll see you in my dreams, yeah, up around the river bend, for death is not the end.” What makes this line so powerful and touching is that Springsteen can get to the heart of what it means to be human. There are moments of uncertainty, filled with fear about the future, and a big question mark about

how to deal with losses of all kinds of connections. He addresses all of these concerns in an extremely comforting way by saying the person lost is within reach when we close our eyes. He uses his experiences to influence his lyrics on this album, and by extension helps the listener relate to those ideas and confront them fully, with emotional depth. To add to this, he has said “you can help people repair themselves through your music, ...I’m a repair man. You’re into an identity search” (Letter To You, Reuniting with The E Street Band, and Broadway. Apple Music, 2020. 44:00. Published on YouTube). The closing song is a perfect conclusion to the album and ends by fading away slowly, prompting reflection on multiple levels.

Overall, this album deals with a lot of complex issues, but one thing is for certain, Bruce Springsteen is emotionally intelligent and uses the interpretation of his own life’s events to give way to followers doing the same. It is by having “a direct conversation between me and my fans, at a level that I think they’ve come to expect over the years” that Springsteen is able to get through to people and use his various attachments as a lens through which others can process their own. Author Stephen King put it best, stating:

“You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair - the sense that you can never completely put on the page what’s in your mind and heart. You can come to the act with your fists clenched and your eyes narrowed, ready to kick ass and take down names. You can come to it because you want a girl to marry you or because you want to change the world. Come to it any way but lightly. Let me say it again: you must not come lightly to the blank page” (King, *On Writing*, 2000, p. 106.) The notion of attacking the process of storytelling is one that Springsteen is not unfamiliar with.

Throughout his entire career, there are great examples of Bruce Springsteen using his real-life inspirations and sometimes fleeting influences to relate to his listeners and make personal statements that become almost universal. The album "*Letter To You*" integrates all these ideas in a symphony that takes the listener on a journey of the heart and mind, and by extension, leaving them changed eternally.

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