

“Is that me, Baby?” Image, Authenticity, and the Career of Bruce Springsteen

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Introduction

In 1985, “Dr. Ruth” Westheimer declared that “Bruce is a national monument.”¹ Anyone in America at that time knew she could only be referring to Bruce Springsteen, the rock star known as “The Boss.” Although Springsteen is still a star in the early 1990s, he has shifted from center stage, and his “authentic” image is seen largely as an anachronism.

In this paper, I examine the career of Springsteen—from rock star to cultural icon, and then back again. I aim to shed light on the construction of rock music celebrity in American culture, suggesting that Springsteen’s career illustrates a shift in the nature of rock culture in the 1980s. I do not take the stance of a critic or analyst of Springsteen’s music; rather I offer a kind of meta-analysis—looking at how the various texts of contemporary popular culture changed his image from one of “authenticity” to one with multiple, contradictory facets. To be a true “superstar” in the 1980s and 1990s, a celebrity’s image *must* become multifaceted and potentially open to many “readings,” and Springsteen’s became so after 1984. In a postmodern culture of proliferating images, “authenticity” has become one choice among many, but is no longer a defining notion in popular music. Thus the issue is not whether Springsteen *is* authentic or not. Rather, I seek to explore the salience of the idea of authenticity in rock music culture.

Before presenting this analysis, I should provide a brief outline of Springsteen’s life and career up until 1984. He was born in 1949 in the blue-collar New Jersey town of Freehold, of Dutch and Italian ancestry. He dropped out of a local college

in 1969 and began developing a career as a rock musician. He built a huge regional following in the early 1970s, and released two unsuccessful albums—apparently he suffered from being promoted as the next Bob Dylan. In April 1974, his performance was seen by *Rolling Stone* record editor Jon Landau, who wrote in an enthusiastic review, “I saw rock and roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen.”²² Columbia Records seized on this comment and used it to launch a massive publicity campaign to promote Springsteen’s third album, *Born to Run*, released in 1975. This campaign brought Springsteen cover features in *Time* and *Newsweek* the same week in 1975. He was still seen as an untried entity—*Newsweek*’s writer wondered “whether Bruce Springsteen will be the biggest superstar or the biggest hype of the ’70s.”²³ However, the *Born to Run* album and the title track single were respectable hits and were critically praised, establishing Springsteen’s reputation as a spokesman for the frustrations of working-class youth, and with his E Street Band, a dynamic rock performer.

Between 1976 and 1978 a contract dispute with his manager, Mike Appel, kept Springsteen from recording, and his 1978 entry in *Current Biography* wondered whether this may have destroyed his career. However, in 1978, now managed by Jon Landau, he released *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, then *The River* in 1980.

These two albums established him as a major rock performer, and developed many of the themes of earlier work, exploring the dark side of the American dream. The songs repeatedly tell of the despair, frustrations, and broken dreams of white, working-class youth. Frank McConnell, an academic who uses Springsteen’s lyrics in poetry classes, quotes a student of his: “*Born to Run* is about, you’re 21 and you’ve got to get away; and *Darkness* is about, you’re 30 and you didn’t.”²⁴

During this period, Springsteen received considerable press in rock papers, virtually all focusing on his songs and their meaning. His personality was generally a side-issue—his personal relationships, for example, were rarely discussed. Likewise, the “celebrity” press rarely covered him, at least in part because he did not seek such publicity. By 1983, many seemed to agree with McConnell’s judgment that “he is a legitimate American mythologist, a storyteller of clear and authentic talent and, I would say, a major American poet.”²⁵ Just when he seemed poised for rock superstardom, he appeared to draw back from that possibility, with the release of his 1983 album, *Nebraska*. Although the album was originally intended to be re-recorded with the E Street Band, Springsteen and Landau eventually decided to release the solo, acoustic collection of songs recorded as a demo at Springsteen’s home. More than one reviewer likened the effect to Library of Congress field recordings, and the collection was indeed stark, unpolished, and decidedly non-commercial. The songs told stories about individuals suffering and surviving in a bleak middle America, and the singer acknowledged debts to Woody Guthrie, Flannery O’Connor, and Terrence Malick’s film *Badlands*, about mass murderer Charles Starkweather.



Figure 1. Front cover of “Born in the USA” (1984). Courtesy of Jon Landau Management.

Nebraska was a critical success, but Springsteen’s least popular record in some time. At this point, Springsteen and his management apparently decided “to see what it could mean to reach the biggest audience he could reach.”⁶ In 1984, *Born in the USA* appeared. It included several songs that were written in 1982, but not used on *Nebraska*, as well as new material, including the first single released, “Dancing in the Dark.” All the songs were given the full E Street Band rock treatment.

Springsteen said that year that his interest lay in producing “a body of work—albums that would relate to and play off each other.”⁷ Certainly, *Born in the USA* appears to follow logically from his earlier work. Not as bleak as *Nebraska*, it still traces the disillusionment of life for the have-nots in Reagan’s America, in songs like “Downbound Train” and “My Hometown.” The title song is about the despair of a Vietnam veteran, and the title echoes the irony of Ron Kovich’s *Born on the Fourth of July*, which Springsteen had read.

The album cover features a rear view of Springsteen against an American flag (Fig. 1), a choice of image that Springsteen may have regretted. As he said after the record’s release: “. . . the flag is a powerful image, and when you set that stuff loose, you don’t know what’s gonna be done with it.”⁸

“Setting Stuff Loose”: The *Born in the USA* Phenomenon

Until *Born in the USA*, the public image of Springsteen had been remarkably coherent—a clean-living, blue-collar American who articulated the fear, disillusionment but also hope of the working class. Although never overtly political, he had been making donations to such causes as food banks, union locals, strike funds, clean up campaigns and the like, and he continued to do so during the 1985 “Born in the USA” tour. However, everything else about this massively-promoted tour was very different.

Springsteen had always preferred playing smaller concert halls—his appeal had been founded on his energetic and powerful live performances. During the worldwide tour, 5 million fans attended the live shows, held mostly in large stadiums where the closest view they had of the band was the nearest video screen. The tour generated \$200 million in revenues, and the album sold over 13 million copies worldwide, making it the biggest seller in Columbia Records’ history.⁹

How could one album and one tour produce the kind of cultural impact that followed? Critical assessments of Springsteen tend to concentrate on his songs, or more specifically, on his lyrics and what they “mean.” Thus Hemphill and Smith use a rhetorical analysis based on Burke’s “representative anecdote” to characterize Springsteen’s work as “the working American’s elegy.”¹⁰ Alan Rauch analyzes his consistent use of the poetic device known as the dramatic monologue.¹¹ Ann Douglas calls him “a poet of profound emotional reach,”¹² while Frank McConnell compares him to Fitzgerald and Whitman.¹³ Andrew Greeley analyzes the use of Catholic imagery in his lyrics.¹⁴ The underlying assumption is that we can understand Springsteen’s mass appeal by understanding and interpreting his lyrical message—his “meaning” can, in effect, be read off his narrative texts.

In tandem with analysis of texts, commentators, from journalists to academics, unanimously stress Springsteen’s “authenticity,” a word that appears again and again. “Authenticity” is seen as inherent in the lyrics; thus Rauch attributes Springsteen’s appeal to his ability to challenge listeners to think about issues. “The challenge is made stronger because the narrative voice of Springsteen’s lyrics seems so familiar and so authentic.”¹⁵ Lyons and Lewis are unequivocal in their fandom: “Springsteen is genuine. . . . And in a day when rock is gradually being watered down to almost unrecognizable, commercial forms, it is a welcomed treat to hear music being played from the heart, for Springsteen has lived his music, and more importantly lives for his music.”¹⁶ There is no doubt that many of Springsteen’s fans were indeed drawn to his music because of the power of his message, and the perception that he was “authentic.” Journalists who asked fans why they followed Springsteen typically received quotes like one from 23-year-old John Bordonaro: “He’s able to say what we can’t about growing up . . . He’s telling us it’s our last chance to pull something off, and he’s doing it for us.”¹⁷

The perception of “authenticity” went beyond Springsteen’s music itself. As Simon Frith notes, his image was coded as authentic in numerous ways—his clothes, his emphasis on live performance, his un-flashy sexuality.¹⁸ Frith points out the increasing commercialization of rock music during the late 1970s and 1980s, as rock, which at one time represented opposition to commercial capitalism, became increasingly mainstreamed. Springsteen had come to stand for rock music as it supposedly should be—“authentic”. “That is why he has become so important: he stands for the core values of rock and roll even as those values become harder and harder to sustain,” writes Frith.¹⁹

Springsteen’s aura of authenticity had been consistently developed as his fame grew. After the initial 1975 media blitz, Springsteen and his management had kept tight control over publicity. In 1975, he told *Newsweek*: “We ain’t no phenomenon. The hype just gets in the way; people have gone nuts.”²⁰ From then on, he rarely gave interviews, and never appeared on TV or radio. This is not to say that Springsteen’s fans were necessarily seeing the “real Springsteen,” but rather that, as Lawrence Grossberg puts it, “he has constructed an image of authenticity for himself.”²¹

So up until 1984, Springsteen’s popularity was built largely on the power of his songs, and the development of a remarkably consistent, “authentic” image. This image contrasted sharply with such major artists as David Bowie, whose many constructed personae stressed the artifice of his performance and paved the way for Madonna, Prince, and Michael Jackson. “Springsteen, who has been viewed as ‘the last of rock’s great innocents,’ appears to be an artist concerned only with pursuing his music to enrich the lives of his listeners, which in turn, enriches his own life,”²² Lyons and Lewis write.

At this time, Springsteen was, as Mikal Gilmore puts it, “a masscult figure”—he had a large following, but not the enormous impact of, say, the Beatles or Elvis Presley.²³ With the release of *Born in the USA*, and the accompanying tour, he made the leap to pop culture icon.

The album was released at the peak of Ronald Reagan’s reelection campaign. Reagan appealed to young people, and so did Springsteen, and the fact that their politics appear totally contradictory did not stand in the way. A chorus of voices from every corner began to claim the Boss for themselves. Bumper stickers proclaimed: “Bruce—the Rambo of Rock!” An influential New York radio manager asserted: “He’s a spokesman for patriotism . . . He’s the Ronald Reagan of rock ‘n’ roll.”²⁴

From the other wing, New Jersey Sen. Bill Bradley, calling himself an “old rocker,” wrote admiringly about him in *USA Today*. A spokesman for the United Steelworkers of America said, “He’s something to be proud of,” and the President of the Vietnam Veterans of America, after getting \$100,000 from a benefit concert said: “My hope is 10 years down the road, he’ll run for president.”²⁵

Then on Sept. 13, 1984, George Will wrote a column, headlined in at least one paper “Yankee Doodle Springsteen,” holding him up as an example of a hard

worker dedicated to traditional American values.²⁶ While the lyrics of the album's title track chronicle despair, Will enthused, "his recitation of closed factories and other problems always seem punctuated by a grand, cheerful affirmation: 'Born in the U.S.A!'" While Martha Smith points to the homoerotic, or at least sexually ambiguous elements in Springsteen's performances,²⁷ Will and others proclaim that in Springsteen "there is not a smidgen of androgyny," a view that quickly became received wisdom.²⁸

Ronald Reagan had staged a photo opportunity with Michael Jackson in the White House Rose Garden, and invited Springsteen to do the same. Springsteen declined, but in a Sept. 19 speech in Hammontown, N.J, Reagan announced: "America's future rests in a thousand dreams . . . It rests in the message of hope in the songs of a man so many young Americans admire—New Jersey's own Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about."²⁹

In October, Springsteen tried to disassociate himself from the Reagan bandwagon: "I think there's a large group of people in this country whose dreams don't mean that much to him . . . you see the Reagan reelection ads on TV— . . . 'It's morning in America.' And you say, well, it's not morning in Pittsburgh. It's not morning above 125th street in New York. It's midnight, and . . . there's a bad moon rising."³⁰

But in spite of his public disavowals, Springsteen was becoming all things to everyone. Politically, his image was increasingly unclear. In a study of college students, only 34% of his fans called themselves liberal or radical³¹—after all, this was the very age group that voted heavily for Reagan. His social causes, such as the food banks and so on, could be and were reinterpreted as being examples of classic Reaganite volunteerism—the rich helping out the poor. During his concerts he made frequent comments about Reagan's America, but these were apparently unheard or unheeded. Until 1984, most popular media coverage of Springsteen was found in papers like *Rolling Stone*. Now, although he still refused most interview requests, and did not employ a press agent, he had become a bona fide "celebrity." Post-1985, after a career untroubled by gossip or paparazzi, he became a regular in *People* magazine, women's magazines, and tabloids, and is interpreted as an all-American sex symbol.

Thus a writer in *McCalls* expounds on: "Bruce Springsteen: Why he makes us feel good." Fans' comments were no longer restricted to music or message—"Bruce has great buns," "Bruce is a man who loves his work," "Bruce is a real man," "Bruce just seems to be a real nice guy."³² Nils Lofgren, a member of Springsteen's E Street band, commented, "Right now you've got 7 or 8 million people that are fanatic fans. Two years ago 5 or 6 million of them didn't know who Bruce was."³³

So what was going on here? Springsteen's music and performance style had not changed significantly with *Born in the USA*. Indeed, for those who attributed his success to his message, the sudden *Born in the USA* phenomenon was

unfathomable; it could only be explained by suggesting a misinterpretation of the message. Thus, rock critic Greil Marcus saw the anti-war song “Born in the USA” as the catalyst: “Clearly the key to the enormous explosion of Bruce’s popularity is the misunderstanding of that song. He is a tribute to the fact that people hear what they want.”³⁴ Rauch refers to the song “Glory Days,” about the fading memories of youth: “The point that the song is no more a nostalgic celebration of glory days than, say, *Death of a Salesman*, is something that most listeners have not understood.”³⁵

But critics who fretted over how young people could support both Reagan and Springsteen, were still tied into the idea that meaning can be interpreted only from texts—that people listened to the message and acted upon it. Some did, of course, but for many, the message was irrelevant.

Plato placed understanding and appreciation of music at the center of education, acknowledging that reason and lyrical appreciation are not necessarily the motivations for love of poetry and song. Rather, “Rhythm and harmonies have the greatest influence on the soul; they penetrate into its inmost regions and there hold fast.”³⁶ The overwhelming appeal of rock music is not cerebral, but emotional; lyrics may be the key for some listeners, but for many others appreciation is simply a matter of emotional response. Several studies indicate clearly that many listeners do not notice or care about lyrics, even when hearing “protest” songs, whose impact would appear to depend on the words.³⁷

As Grossberg suggests, fans may not relate to the actual experiences described in a song like “The River,” but they *feel* the same way because of the power of the overall performance.³⁸ And, as John Mendelsshon writes, Springsteen has “the greatest imaginable ability to convey joy, the most salubrious sort of charisma.”³⁹ A live rock concert is not an occasion for thinking about political issues; rather it is an opportunity to be temporarily transported. Springsteen himself may not have appreciated that fully; he was often apparently frustrated by the failure to get his message across in his songs and his regular monologues that introduced them.

Thus those baffled by the scale of the response failed to take into consideration that “mishearing the message” was frequently beside the point. Springsteen’s joyful charisma *could* be conveyed across large stadiums—in fact the vast numbers involved may have even intensified the experience. Certainly, as live and electronic audiences grew, the intended “meaning” of the music was transmuted and mutated. The larger the audience, the more open becomes the possibility of different interpretations and responses to the experience of the performance.

And most importantly, along with the transformation and multiplication of meaning came the proliferation of images and the shattering of the coherent image of authenticity. In extending his audience so hugely, Springsteen had to learn that his appeal was never related solely to his message. And in trying to blow up his image of authenticity to reach mass audiences, he effectively lost control of it.

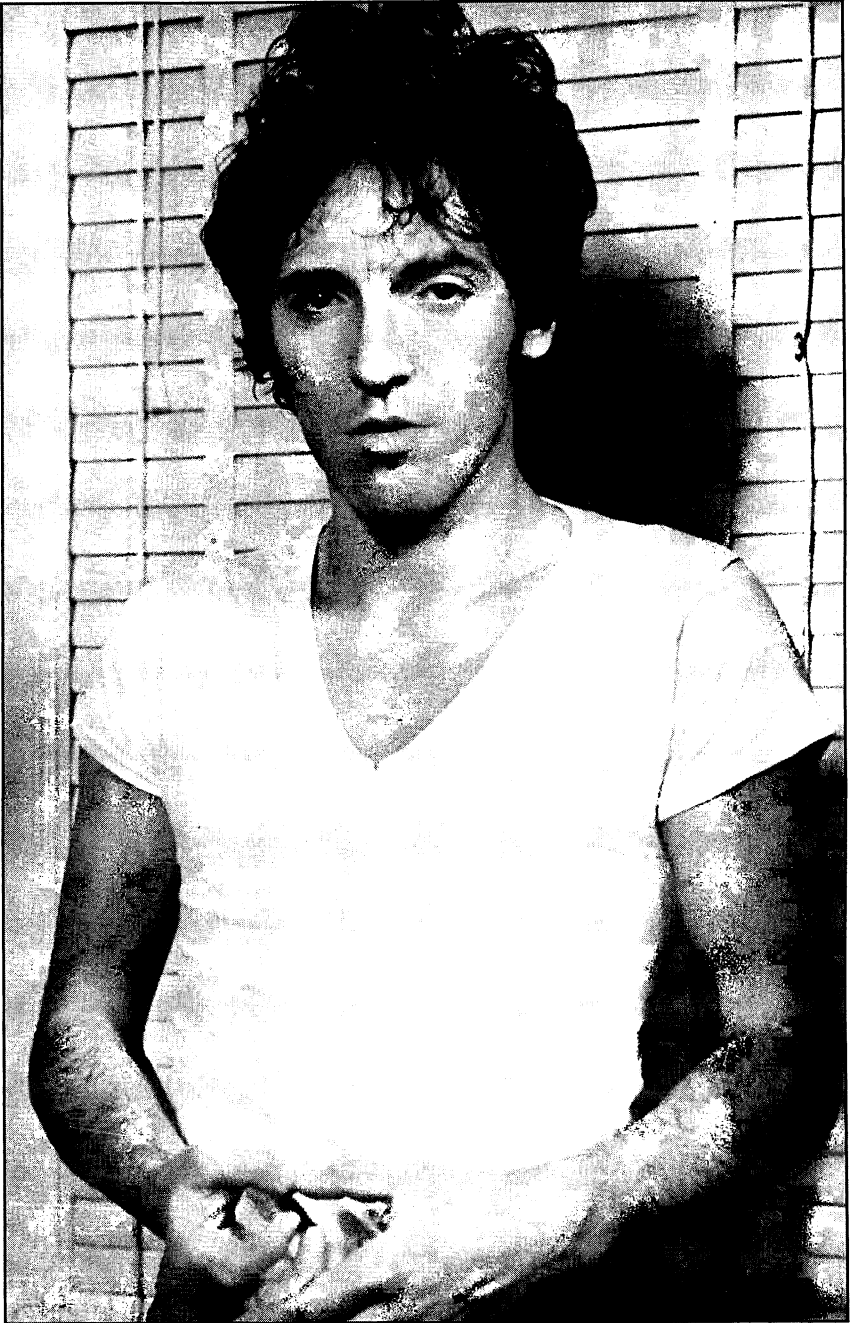


Figure 2. Rear cover of “Darkness on the Edge of Town” (1978).
Courtesy of Jon Landau Management.

It was the success of the contemporary celebrity-building process that accounts for the quantum leap in Springsteen's popularity—a process fueled by the creation of multiple images, whose “meaning” is largely unclear or irrelevant. Grossberg speaks of the “familiarization of the mass media,” which “has created a cultural logic of simulation . . . It is not merely that reality fails to give up its meaning to us, or even that it is meaningless, but that it has *any* meaning we give to it. The differences between reality and image has disappeared. It makes no difference which of the two is operating, they are equally effective.”⁴⁰

Daniel Boorstin wrote 30 years ago: “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness.”⁴¹ By 1985, Springsteen had become the epitome of a celebrity—people knew about him, and cited him *because* he was a celebrity. The development of celebrities as we know them today only became possible as technology became capable of producing an ever-increasing number of images: “As early as 1892, Simon Patten, a tireless apostle of industrial consumerism, affirmed that the mechanical reproduction of *images* would be the decisive hook of the new order.”⁴²

Indeed, the reproduction of images in the 1980s effectively did mark a “new order” in the marketing of rock celebrities. Anthony DeCurtis characterizes this new era: “To a greater degree than ever before, marketing—the creation and selling of an image—became an essential component of an artist's success. Videos, video compilations, long-form videos, corporate sponsorships, product endorsements, T-shirts, book deals, interviews, television appearances, movie tie-ins, songs for soundtracks—all that began to envelop what was once considered a rebel's world . . . and true to the Eighties ethic, you'd better be willing to put in the hours and produce—to smile and make nice with the powers that be—or you might as well go back to the bars.”⁴³

Contemporary social theorists agree that in the postmodern age this proliferation of images has indeed reached new heights. Today's popular culture, rather than reflecting society, is more closely akin to a hall of mirrors, the image reflecting back on each other endlessly. How you see the culture depends very much on where you are positioned among the images. Jean Baudrillard discussed the process of “absorption,” whereby a commodity—the commodity in this case being the celebrity persona—becomes saturated with different meanings that make it increasingly marketable.⁴⁴ As described by David Buxton, “This process of absorption, a major strategy of capitalism during this century through advertising, attempts to generalize the commodity to increasingly mass status by overdetermining it with symbolic value”⁴⁵—that is creating an ever-increasing number of images to add to the hall of mirrors.

The marketing and media strategy that went with the *Born in the USA* phenomenon produced exactly this outcome. Kaleidoscopic images of Springsteen appeared—a Reagan conservative, a radical, a man's man, a sex symbol, a blue-collar hero, a philanthropist, a patriot, a social critic. Just take your pick. Springsteen's elevation to the heights of celebrity was capitalism working

efficiently: "In spite of its reputation [as a medium of rebellion], rock remains one of the last bastions of pure, laissez-faire capitalism,"⁴⁶ as Buxton writes.

Springsteen may not have liked the result, but he participated in the creation of images. Previously he had refused to make specially designed promotional videos, explaining, "I've spent 20 years learning how to write so that when you hear the song you get the information you need . . . I'm hesitant to mess with that."⁴⁷ Things changed with the release of a Brian de Palma video of the single "Dancing in the Dark." Although purporting to show a live concert, the video was choreographed, lip-synched, and designed to show off Springsteen's new physique. 1970s descriptions of him often included words like "slight," "slim," even "elfin"; the album covers of "Born to Run," and "Darkness on the Edge of Town" show a figure who conforms to the then-prevailing image of rock star as undernourished rebel (Fig. 2). The 1984 version had been working out with a personal trainer, and sported hefty biceps that would not have been considered cool in the 1970s. The video launched Springsteen as a sex symbol, and one writer described it as the moment when Bruce learned to play to the camera.⁴⁸ Dave Marsh describes the peculiar, dissonant effect of the video, in which "his enormous, brilliant grin (he'd had his teeth fixed between tours) simply didn't jive with the anguish in the vocal."⁴⁹ Springsteen was unsettled: ". . . we go for authentic emotion and that gets all knocked out of whack when you're singing to something you recorded a long time ago."⁵⁰ But there exactly is the post-modern effect—"meaning" doesn't matter. The song took on yet more images when it was remixed and reissued in a longer dance version.

This record was followed by videos of more *Born in the USA* songs. The title track was put together from concert footage, and Springsteen refused to lip-synch, producing an odd, out-of-synch result. Then filmmaker John Sayles produced videos of "I'm on Fire," and "Glory Days"—both "concept" videos of the kind Springsteen had previously resisted. In 1984 and 1985, Springsteen's image was everywhere, even though he declined all commercial endorsements. Chrysler offered \$12 million for Springsteen to appear singing *Born in the USA* in a car commercial. Springsteen refused, so the company produced a commercial featuring a sound-alike music track built around a specially-written song, "The Pride is Back: Born in America." This marketing ploy was only one of many tried by countless companies that used what an advertising agent dubbed "the Springsteen heartland of America approach."⁵¹ As Safeway, Stroh's, and Miller's, among others, developed the theme, it became impossible to tell the difference between the opposite but merging images of Reagan's and Springsteen's America that were evoked.

So the Springsteen phenomenon is not attributable to a "mishearing" of his message, though this may have contributed to it. Nor is it due only to his demonstrable success and charisma as a performer. Rather, these things came together with other circumstances and with the process and nature of postmodern culture to make Springsteen "a reference point in popular culture."⁵² "Born in the

USA” converged with Reagan’s construction of a mythical America, with added impetus from such happenings as the preparations for the Statue of Liberty celebrations, the government’s hard line Cold War/Star Wars policies, and the jingoism accompanying U.S. successes in the Olympic Games. The result was a potent, swirling brew of images and emotions, upon which people could inscribe any meaning they liked, or no meaning at all—just pure emotion. Reagan, wrote Grossberg, “operates within the postmodern condition and logic, reducing complex questions of politics, values and meanings to individualized images of morality, self-sacrifice, victory and community.”⁵³ So also did Springsteen. “The culture of capitalism discovered both Springsteen and Reagan; their status as cultural icons is not an accident,” suggested Jefferson Morley.⁵⁴

In fact, it is arguable that Springsteen’s 1984-85 success would not have been possible without Reagan. Both Reagan and Springsteen used resonant American cultural symbols to reach their audiences, and Reagan had been hugely successful in appropriating these for his cause. These symbols, while understood as “American,” are extremely open in meaning, just as is the concept of “America” itself. American culture contains a notably populist, anti-capitalist stance, represented by union and labor activity, disdain for a class system, and so on. Musically, singers like Woody Guthrie expressed that stance. But Guthrie, who wrote “This Land is Your Land” as a populist protest, lived to see it become a jingoistic anthem, without any change in the lyrics. For being “American” may also mean jingoism, extreme individualism, distrust of foreigners. The stars and stripes means everything, anything, or nothing. Simon Frith points out that Springsteen’s populism was politically ambiguous—his songs may point to the destructive effects of capitalism, but they still celebrate the individual, employing the “well-worn iconography (of) the road, the river, rock and roll itself.”⁵⁵ To these might be added religious imagery, small-town life, and the family. Reagan and the Republicans employed much of the same iconography—the meanings they ascribed to it were different, but the emotional power of the images easily defies intended meaning. As Stuart Hall commented at the height of the *Born in the USA* craze, “Springsteen is a phenomenon that can be read, with equal conviction, in at least two diametrically opposed ways. . . . The symbols are deeply American—populist in their ambiguity; he’s both the White House and On The Road. In the ’60s, you had to be one or the other. Springsteen is somehow both at the same time.”⁵⁶

During all this, for a while Springsteen’s image still retained the aura of “authenticity”—in fact that was a crucial element in the American iconography. “[His] image is that of an ordinary person, exactly like us,” writes Grossberg.⁵⁷ And of course Reagan cultivated that same down-to-earth ordinariness; part of his appeal was his presentation of himself as “just plain folks,” opposed to the faceless bureaucrats in Washington. Grossberg argues that Springsteen was somehow able to “redefine authenticity onto the television screen,” expanding his audience into the hundreds of thousands “without losing the power of his presence



Figure 3. Front cover of “Tunnel of Love” (1987). Courtesy of Jon Landau Management.

or his relationship with, and his control of, the audience.”⁵⁸ In 1985, Springsteen released his boxed set of live performances, just in time for Christmas. The set was phenomenally successful, with Columbia suspending production of all other records to keep up with demand. Frith comments on a central irony of the marketing of the set—that while other artists were castigated for “selling out” Springsteen was perceived as somehow still standing for democratic populism and “the real thing.” “In short, the most successful pop commodity of the moment . . . stands for the principle that music should not be a commodity; it is his very disdain for success that makes Springsteen so successful.”⁵⁹

However, while Springsteen and his management quite successfully worked on maintaining the core image of authenticity for a time, the sheer proliferation of images began to become increasingly dissonant with that core image. This had very little to do with Springsteen’s music, but a lot to do with his becoming a “celebrity.” Daniel Boorstin argued that the proliferation of images and meanings in the creation of celebrities, may also mean that in the end those images start to lose all meaning—in Baudrillard’s terms, meaning “implodes” until only “fascination” is left. “While the folklore of hero-worship . . . and the pleasure in reverence for heroes remain, the heroes themselves dissolve,” writes Boorstin.⁶⁰

After 1985, media coverage of Springsteen becomes standard celebrity stuff, as the multiple images start to dissolve and collapse into the all-purpose Celebrity. Fascination with Springsteen continued, but his meaning, his “authenticity” was

increasingly irrelevant. Articles no longer focused on his apparent integrity, poetic ability, or democratic consciousness. Now *People* magazine and others chronicled his 1985 marriage to actress-model Julianne Phillips, a ceremony that was carried out secretly at midnight to avoid paparazzi. By 1988, they were also engrossed in his marriage break-up, precipitated by an affair with back-up singer Patti Scialfa.⁶¹ Paparazzi photos of the couple cuddling in their underwear on a hotel balcony were broadcast to media worldwide. We hear about Julianne's despair as her husband "parades that sleazeball all over town," while Patti's friends claim Julianne inevitably lost her man—after all "she's no brain surgeon."⁶² Then came the inevitable divorce, followed by the birth of Springsteen and Scialfa's baby. The press covered rumors of Springsteen's petty behavior in firing long-term employees, and the famous E Street Band gradually disintegrated.

So what had all this done to the image of "authenticity?" Fans and critics began to complain about Springsteen's remoteness and the artificial nature of his new image, suggesting that there is no "real" Springsteen at all. A writer for *People* magazine, in a review of Springsteen's Video Anthology, comments, "Over time, Springsteen grows more muscular in flesh and attitude. It's like seeing Paul Bunyan sprout up before your eyes. By (1986) . . . the bulked-up singer is stomping around all bent over, looking a lot like Atlas."⁶³ Joe Queenan satirizes the trend for affluent rock stars staging benefits for the needy, in his account of a fictional "Puppy-Aid" concert. "Springsteen, who helped organize the event, said that Americans have been spending too much time worrying about farmers, Africans, and unemployed factory workers lately, and have overlooked the important contributions of such down-trodden white-collar heroes as leveraged buy-out specialists, venture capitalists . . . and financial planners."⁶⁴

John Lombardi launched a bitter attack on the end of the image of authenticity: "He's *not* us, not any more, he's 39, he married a model (why do rock stars always marry models?) made \$56 million in 18 months . . . is pumped up like Schwarzenegger, sleeked down like television, as high concept as . . . *Miami Vice*."⁶⁵ All the factors that had constructed the image appeared to be falling apart—the working-man clothes were disappearing, the body had changed, the apparently joyous togetherness of the band was gone. If Springsteen was no longer "authentic," then he was no longer anything special—just another over-exposed celebrity.

This seems to have been a cross-roads of Springsteen's career, at which point he made a choice. In 1988 he told an interviewer: "You can become purely iconic, or you can become just a Rorschach test that people throw up their own impressions upon . . . With size, and the co-option of your image and attitudes—you know, you wake up and you're a car commercial . . ."⁶⁶ If we consider two other major stars of the 1980s, we see that the choice they made was to celebrate themselves as icons, while the publicity machines cooperated whole-heartedly. Madonna has made her career from proliferating images; her fascination is that

she makes no attempt to present a “real” or authentic persona, and her fans do not require it. Herb Ritts calls her “our Postmodern Goddess”: “Absolutely artful, a dream sent earthward from the soft-focus heaven of movie stills and fanzine spreads, she is flesh and blood become pop archetype: Vamp, Tramp, Star, Madonna. She is a conglomerate of images, a one-woman bonfire of the vanities . . .”⁶⁷ Similarly, Michael Jackson, Springsteen’s main male rival in terms of sheer popularity, “is the consummate expression of the commodity form.”⁶⁸ The “authenticity” of Michael Jackson is not even an issue: “Jackson produces each new Jackson as a simulacrum of himself.”⁶⁹

During the mid-1980s, that was exactly the effect of the commodification of Bruce Springsteen, as the image of authenticity was shattered into countless versions. It did not matter that these new images were contradictory, because meaning was not the issue in the construction of celebrity. Maybe Springsteen could have continued to become a bigger and bigger mass icon, at least until the public’s fascination wore thin. Instead, he apparently chose to draw back and set about repairing the image of authenticity. In 1987, after a three-year gap, he released another album, *Tunnel of Love*, and went on tour, returning to smaller concert halls and speaking out on issues much less. “It was a season,” wrote Mikal Gilmore, “when Oliver North enjoyed status as a cultural hero and when George Bush turned patriotism and flag-waving into viciously effective campaign issues.”⁷⁰ The album was successful, selling 2 million copies and receiving critical praise, several critics drawing direct comparisons with *Nebraska*, and the cooling effect that had on his career. As if defying the macho posturing that accompanied many fans’ enjoyment of *Born in the USA*, his video for “Tougher than the Rest” shows a montage of couples in love, including three clearly identified as gay. Presented matter-of-factly, apparently as an appeal for tolerance, “these pictures are not the lascivious or decadent play of the Rolling Stones or David Bowie,”⁷¹ as Martha Smith notes. The album cover seems chosen to downplay Springsteen’s physical appeal, presenting an image far different from the young rebel’s pout of “Darkness on the Edge of Town,” or the blue-collar muscularity of “Born in the USA” (Fig. 3).

Many of the songs on *Tunnel of Love* explored the difference between illusion and reality, and the price one pays for success, echoing Springsteen’s comments to another interviewer in 1984, that money and fame are “the consolation prizes, if you’re not careful, for selling yourself out, or lettin’ the best of yourself slip away.”⁷² His promotional video for the *Tunnel of Love* single “Brilliant Disguise” seemed deliberately pared-down and simple. It presents a black-and-white image of Springsteen apparently sitting at his kitchen table, strumming a guitar (it was, of course, a soundstage set up to simulate a kitchen).⁷³ The vocal track is not the polished recorded version, but a live recording in which his voice sounds hoarse and strained as he asks the question, “Is that me, baby, or just a brilliant disguise?”

After *Tunnel of Love*, Springsteen waited five years before making another record or performing live, except for his appearances in such events as Band Aid, No Nukes, the Amnesty International tour and other benefits. He did not seem to want to risk misunderstanding or misappropriation of his message, singing only within the frame of such politically-charged events. His appearance at concerts for the Christic Institute, an organization pursuing a law suit against United States-sponsored covert operations in Nicaragua, signalled “a far more radical stance than he has ever taken.”⁷⁴ During those concerts, he further distanced himself from the Reagan years and their images with comments like, “When everybody starts believing those big illusions, you end up with a government like the one we’ve had for the past decade.”⁷⁵

And as the mass hype has died down, he seems to have recovered the image of authenticity that was rapidly imploding. He worked on this by avoiding the media, but the popular media themselves co-operated in restoring his image to something like its pre-1985 style (having very little else to work with).

Thus Steve Reilly, profiling Springsteen for *People* as one of “20 who defined the decade,” painted a picture of a man who could not be anything but authentic: “And when he *tried* to be cool—marry a model, like Jagger or Joel—he messed that up, too, and eventually just went with the girl in the band . . . Not a drop of Hollywood in him.”⁷⁶ Nowhere was this repairing of the image more clear than in the coverage of Springsteen’s 1991 wedding to Patti Scialfa. Lombardi had sourly remarked that the Springsteen/Scialfa match was “a liaison virtually mandated by the public, which had never liked the tall, unassuming Julianne.”⁷⁷ The media, however, had been critical of Springsteen for his open affair. Now, an anonymous *People* writer waxed lyrical about the “very romantic” wedding. A “friend” of the couple was quoted extensively: “With Julianne . . . Bruce was euphoric, but it wasn’t real . . . frankly, I think Julianne was a dream, a digression . . . Patti and Bruce were meant for each other.”⁷⁸ Julianne lasted almost exactly as long as the *Born in the USA* hype, and the implication is clear. If Julianne was a digression, so was all that; now Bruce is “real” again. The editors of the fan magazine, *Backstreets*, introducing a book compilation from the magazine, explained that true fans were interested in the music, not the media hype: “This magazine has been highly critical of some of Springsteen’s career moves (playing stadiums, doing funk remixes, and, in general, the gross over-commercialization of his career around the time of *Born in the USA*).”⁷⁹ By 1989, they note approvingly that Springsteen has returned to his roots; the “real” Bruce is back.

Springsteen in the 1990s

Little was heard of Springsteen until April 1992, when he released two new albums, *Lucky Town* and *The Human Touch*. In his first long interview since 1986, Springsteen told *Rolling Stone* that in 1988 and 1989, “I had nothing to say . . .

. I didn't have a new song to sing."⁸⁰ He recalls struggling with the "icon" that had been created during the *Born in the USA* days: "The whole image that had been created—and that I'm sure I promoted—it really always felt like, 'Hey, that's not me.' I mean, the macho thing, that was never me."⁸¹ He had been in therapy, and eventually emerged in public as a family man with two children.

The records were fairly heavily promoted, and by July had sold about 1.5 million each, but their quick slide down the charts prompted discussion of their "failure."⁸² Springsteen made his first ever TV appearance, performing three songs on *Saturday Night Live*, and embarking on a tour in June with a new band. The press coverage and reviews of the new albums and tour were favorable. *Time's* reviewer, claiming, "Springsteen's reborn and running again," described the records as "a twin testament to the power of redemptive love, to the resilience of Springsteen's gifts and to the restless spirit."⁸³

And perhaps the most striking aspect of the 1992 assessments is the reaffirmation of Springsteen's "authenticity," but with a new twist. Now, this is seen as a curious anachronism, deliberately chosen, and largely relevant only to the aging baby boomers in their middle-class families, representing "the seasoned sound of a man who has changed some diapers."⁸⁴ "The world Springsteen left in 1987, and the place he held in it, no longer exist for him," wrote one critic."⁸⁵ As Pareles writes, "The twang of hand-picked guitars and the kick of real drums represent a fortress for a family man, a defense against a post-modern world of rootlessness and moral ambiguity, of synthesized sounds and video games."⁸⁶ The songs are no longer working-class anthems; Springsteen apparently recognizes that he can no longer create such lyrics and still sound credible. "It's a sad funny ending to find yourself pretending/A rich man in a poor man's shirt."⁸⁷ These days, he says he would like to reach young audiences, but "all I can do is put my music out there. I can't contrive something that doesn't feel honest. . . . I want to sing about who I am now . . . with all the 42 years that are in me."⁸⁸ Grossberg suggests, "Rock and roll substitutes style for authenticity (making the latter into another style). . . ."⁸⁹ One cannot deny the central role of image construction in Springsteen's career—his "authenticity" is, of course, a cultural construct. As fans or commentators, we cannot "know" Springsteen any more than we can "know" Madonna. Springsteen himself seems often to deny or debate his own "authenticity." DeCurtis reports his response to a fan at the Christic Institute concerts who shouted, "We love you, Bruce." "But you don't *really* know me," the singer called back.⁹⁰

Whether Bruce Springsteen is or is not "authentic" is an unanswerable question. But it is clear that the idea of authenticity has been a key theme in rock music culture, and my concern is with the way in which that theme has played out in the Springsteen's career. Grossberg and Frith both suggest that during the flowering of rock culture in the 1960s and early 1970s, rock music was seen as everything that mass culture was not—it was "real" in a way that the image world of television never could be.⁹¹ The reality of the commodification of rock was

denied. Springsteen emerged as this period of “authenticity” was on the wane, and he was the last major pop music star whose popularity depended on his fans placing value on perceived “authenticity,” rather than artifice. Grossberg suggested that Springsteen was successfully “operating at the intersection of these two economies”⁹²—the economies being the elite fan world of rock music and the democratic image world of television. But in fact, that fragile balance was impossible to maintain, and it marked a juncture for popular music. In the heyday of the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and their contemporaries, popular music was a relatively unified culture—the fragmentation into Top 40, Album Rock and on to numerous sub-genres had not begun. Springsteen was probably the last major rock star reaching huge audiences whose popularity was built on the older rock culture that held “authenticity” as a central value. As Frith sees it, the 1985 Live set was a monument that “celebrates (and mourns) the dead, in this case the idea of authenticity itself.”⁹³

Springsteen’s career demonstrates the impact of the 1980s image explosion on the creation of rock celebrity. To become a huge star in the 1980s and beyond, postmodern image proliferation seems inevitable. Joshua Gamson chronicles the changes in celebrity construction during the 20th century. He points out that until fairly recently, celebrity journalism sought to evoke authenticity—to allow the fan the illusion of seeing the “real person” behind the star. Today, authenticity is largely irrelevant; in fact, fans are invited to embrace “the notion that fame is based in artifice.”⁹⁴ Springsteen’s “authenticity,” for which he achieved such acclaim, is, in 1994, an anachronism. This is not to say that the notion of “authenticity” has disappeared from rock culture. Rather, “authenticity” has become one choice among many, and rarely a mainstream one. “Alternative” bands like REM, throwback singer-songwriters like Tracy Chapman, “grunge” rock, and others indeed have “images of authenticity” that appeal to particular audiences. But as a unifying, defining value of popular music, “authenticity” is no longer relevant.

Springsteen’s career is instructive in that he emerged as a performer in the tradition of the 1960s, yet found himself the center of a post-MTV 1980s image explosion unlike anything even the Beatles experienced. He apparently managed to reclaim his image of “authenticity,” largely by keeping or winning back the fans who grew up with him. But for fans of rock celebrities who have emerged in the last few years, the concept of “authenticity” is often beside the point. Young fans revel in “the embrace of artifice.”⁹⁵ In 1987, Springsteen asked, “Is that me, baby, or just a brilliant disguise?” For the MTV generation, perhaps the answer is simple: “Who cares?”

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