

**The University Of Jyväskylä  
English Department  
2009**

**Workin' On a Dream: The American Dream in the Lyrics Of Bruce Springsteen, 1995-2009**

**A Pro Gradu Thesis**

**by**

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Pro Gradu -tutkielma

Syyskuu 2009

123 sivua, yksi liite

Tässä työssä kerron, miten Bruce Springsteenin musiikissa tulee esille American Dream, amerikkalainen unelma. Olen jakanut työni neljään eri ydinkappaleeseen: työ, uskonto, luvattu maa ja Manifest Destiny. Nämä kuuluvat amerikkalaisen unelman merkitykseen.

Käsite alkoi muodostua, kun Kolumbus "löysi" Amerikan vuonna 1492. Eurooppalaiset ajattelivat, että uusi mantere oli Jumalan antama Luvattu Maa. Siirtolaiset lähtivät kohti USA:a uskoen olevansa valittu kansa. Uskonnolliset arvot ovat siksi yksi osa amerikkalaista unelmaa.

Uskonnollisia viittauksia löytyy Springsteenin kaikilta albumeilta. Mutta hän ei moralisoi tai tuomitse. Hänen henkilöihahmonsensa eivät elä ihanteellista kristityn elämää. Usko ja Jumala ovat osa ihmisten arkea. Toisinaan uskokaan ei riitä ja edessä on traaginen loppu. Springsteen tuo esille myös vanhat testamentillisen käsityksen perisynnistä ja Kainin merkistä.

Springsteenin henkilöt ovat pääasiassa tavallisia duunareita. Joskus he joutuvat työttömiksi ja elämä muuttuu vaikeaksi. Amerikkalaisen unelman mukaan USA:ssa on mahdollista nousta köyhyydestä rikkauksiin, jos vain tekee tarpeeksi töitä. Springsteen kuitenkin kuvaa tosielämän kovuutta.

Silti vielä nykyäänkin jotkut menevät Amerikkaan paremman elämän toivossa. Perinteinen siirtolaisunelma paremmasta maasta on yhä olemassa. Amerikan lännen maisemat ja valtatie ovatkin vapauden ja mahdollisuuksien symboleja. Springsteen kuvaa kuinka siirtolaiset haaveilevat Amerikasta ja pitävät sitä upeana maana. Mutta sitten kun he saapuvat USA:n, niin todellisuus onkin kovaa.

Se että amerikkalainen unelma ei ole totta kaikille kansalaisille on saanut Springsteenin ottamaan kantaa poliittisesti. Hän kannatti Obamaa presidentiksi ja toivoo, että nyt amerikkalaiset tekisivät yhdessä töitä, jotta USA olisi parempi maa. Springsteen ei ole kannattanut Vietnamin, Korean, eikä Irakin sotia. Hän kertoo sodan turhuudesta ja hänestä Irakin sota on virhe kuten Vietnamin. Hän ei pidä sotien syitä ihanteellisina, vaikka amerikkalaisia onkin lähetetty vapauttamaan kansoja ja tuomaan demokratiaa. Manifest Destiny on käsite, joka viittaa siihen, että Amerikalla olisi erityinen tehtävä levittää vapautta maailmassa.

Keywords: Bruce Springsteen, the American Dream, rock, folk, work, religion, Manifest Destiny, Promised Land, America, born in the U.S.A.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

*BITUSA = Born In The U.S.A.*

*BTR = Born To Run*

*D&D = Devils & Dust*

*DOT = Darkness On The Edge Of Town*

*GFA = Greetings From Asbury Park, New Jersey*

*GTJ = Ghost Of Tom Joad*

*HT = Human Touch*

*LT = Lucky Town*

*SS = Seeger Sessions*

*TL = Tunnel Of Love*

*WOD = Working On a Dream*

*WFW = Wings For Wheels: The Making of Born to Run*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I got my first Bruce Springsteen CD for Christmas in 2003. It was *The Essential* (2003), three discs of Springsteen's music. The discs cover Springsteen's career from the 1970s to the 2000s. One of the things I found appealing in his music were the cinematic American settings. For example, "Thunder Road" opens like a scene from a movie, and the song is one of Springsteen's rock classics from the 1970s that still moves people today. It holds a promise of a better life.

The idea for my Pro Gradu came from the course "Ballads And Oral Tradition" (Smith, 2007). In the course we looked at traditional ballads and their elements. We also gave presentations and wrote essays about folk singers. I did mine about Bob Dylan's album *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (1964). At the end of the course I started to think about what makes someone a folk singer, because Bruce Springsteen had released some folk albums and even his rock records seemed to have similar elements to those that came up in the course. Folk singers had an important role in the society of their time as social commentators, and I find that also Bruce Springsteen's records are significant reflections of contemporary America.

Springsteen is often seen as a representative of the American Dream and positive American values also in Europe. After his concert in Tampere 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2009, Finnish magazines praised Springsteen's intense show and found that one reason why he is so successful is that he represents the kind of Americanness that also Europeans admire (Kostiainen, 2009). The American Dream and the ideals that the country represents still exist in the minds of people. In this paper I will show how Springsteen's lyrics reflect the Dream.

Springsteen's latest album is actually called "Workin' On a Dream". I chose it as a title of this thesis because it sums up my idea in many ways. Springsteen is often seen as a working-class hero and he sings about those who are not doing well. He finds that Americans should work together to make the American Dream real for all the citizens. Springsteen also still keeps

working hard on his music even though he has been a successful artist for years. The title also aptly describes my experience in writing this thesis.

There are many publications about Bruce Springsteen. Kähkönen (1995) has actually written her M.A. thesis about the same topic as me. Her title is *Promised Land: The American Dream In The Lyrics of Bruce Springsteen*. As she did hers in 1995, I will focus on the albums released in 1995-2009. However, Springsteen has released two albums of his greatest hits during this period and of course I will not analyse the songs that have already come out before 1995. He has also released two albums, *Tracks* (1998) and *18 Tracks* (1999) which contain his old songs that have now come out for the first time. I will not include these in my analysis because even though Kähkönen has not analysed these, they have similar themes as Springsteen's earlier albums, and Kähkönen has already covered those themes. I view Springsteen's music in the context of contemporary American society, and his other albums during the period of my analysis contain plenty of material for this research. I will, however, critically refer to Kähkönen's analysis to give a brief overview about the American Dream on Springsteen's records before 1995 and to show how Springsteen's views have developed.

Also Nevakare (1990) has written about the artist. She analyses Springsteen the man on the basis of his lyrics. She draws conclusions about his personality and life from the songs without making any distinction between the singer and the characters. To me an analysis of Springsteen's personal life on the basis of his lyrics might be quite speculative unless one knows the man personally. Nevertheless, the albums might reflect his personal opinions and where he is at in life at that particular moment. But in my view he tells stories and creates characters that reflect the America of their time.

Pirttijärvi's (2005) thesis is *"I believe in the promised land": the teachings of the Bible and Christian values in the song lyrics of Bruce Springsteen*. She shows the biblical roots of some lyrics. Her paper helps us to understand Springsteen's songs better, especially if one does not know the Bible well.

Pirttijärvi's analysis helped me see how sin and the inherited "ties that bind" are present in Springsteen's lyrics. Also I have a chapter about religion, but my approach is different from Pirttijärvi's. She analyses Springsteen's songs from the beginning of his career in relation to the Bible, whereas I will only focus on his latest albums and my findings are more spiritual than biblical.

In addition to these publications, there are several books written about the singer, most of them biographies. Springsteen's main biographer is Dave Marsh, who has released three books about the artist (1979, 1987, 2003). Also Sandford (1999), Humpries and Hunt (1986) and Alterman (2001) have written Springsteen biographies. All authors cover basic facts about Springsteen's life, but bring in their own point of views. However, these authors focus mainly on Springsteen's life, instead of analysing his lyrics.

Sawyers (2006), on the other hand, has published the book *Tougher Than The Rest: 100 Best Bruce Springsteen Songs*. As the title suggests, it includes 100 songs that the author considers as Springsteen's best. Sawyers often traces the background stories and inspirations behind the lyrics. She also knows about New Jersey and describes the places where some songs are set. What is more, she finds there are connections to country music (especially Hank Williams) in Springsteen's work, especially in songs about highways and cars. Sawyers' book is quite a comprehensive overview of Springsteen's musical career.

Also Jim Cullen (1997) writes about Springsteen's music but his approach is very different. In *Born in the U.S.A. Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*, Cullen connects the singer with important individuals of American history, one of them is Mark Twain's fictional character Huckleberry Finn. He even sees Springsteen as an heir to Martin Luther King. Cullen touches the same issues as Kähkönen (1995) and me, as he writes about some American values, such as work and freedom, which are in fact components of the American Dream. However, he does not analyse all the lyrics, rather he chooses a few songs and places them in the context of American history and contemporary society. Even though his book is

released almost at the same time as Kähkönen's thesis, both studies still have something new to offer: Kähkönen shows in more detail how Springsteen's lyrics reflect the American Dream to 1995, whereas Cullen's book is an insightful look at Springsteen as a significant figure in American society.

Cullen (2003) has also released the book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. In the introduction he states that there is no one American Dream but many American Dreams. As the Dream has many components, it depends on the person what the concept actually means. Cullen discusses its six different elements: Puritans (he analyses the religious dream and vision they had), The Declaration of Independence, Upward mobility, Equality, House Ownership, and The Coast (the latter is about life in the California area). Kähkönen (1995) has five core chapters: Work, Success And Wealth, Religion And Family, Freedom and Opportunity, and the Promised Land. I will discuss Work, Religion, Promised Land and Manifest Destiny. I have chosen these four themes because in the period of my analysis those are Springsteen's main themes.

Even though there are many publications about Springsteen, I have not found a recent study that would focus on the analysis of the American Dream in his lyrics. Thus I will give a fresh update on the topic. I will start my paper with a brief history of rock and folk as those are Springsteen's main music genres. Then I will present his life and music, and discuss definitions of the American Dream.

In the core analysis my main sources are Springsteen's lyrics and speeches. He is often seen as a working-class hero, and in his songs he tells about the working-class or under-class people. I will show how his songs reflect the traditional American views on work.

When writing songs, Springsteen draws a lot from religion and religious imagery lingers through all of his albums. At times he encourages his listeners to "come on up for the rising", but sometimes "faith just ain't enough". In the chapter "Promised Land" I will discuss the immigrant dream, and the meaning of the West in his songs. The chapter "Manifest Destiny" is a



political one. I will show Springsteen's view on America's role in the world and his political stands on the situation within the country.

I went to my first Bruce Springsteen concert on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009. The concert was in Tampere, in Ratina Stadium that holds 30,000 people. "The Boss" and the E Street Band played for three hours, 28 songs. It was important to Springsteen to gain a connection with his Finnish audience. He delivered his music with power and life. Some of his songs got new meanings in that particular situation. For instance, "The Ghost Of Tom Joad", released acoustically in 1995, became a raging rock song about the current recession that is also in Finland. Springsteen also played some songs that were not his but he chose them to make a stand. He introduced "Hard Times Come Again No More" (Stephen Foster, 1854) by talking about the unemployment people have faced during recent months. With the song he connected the contemporary economic hardships with the struggles of the past.

The concert made me see the importance of different situations where the songs are performed and the meanings they can have at different times. I also realized the power of music and that it can change the meaning of songs. For example a rock version of a song can have a different function than a folk version. When writing about music one can analyse lyrics separately from the music, or one can include the music in the analysis. My main focus lies on the lyrics. However, I will at times take into account different situations where Springsteen has performed his songs, because in recent years he has taken public stands. Thus I might also make brief references to songs that are not written by Springsteen, but which he has used for his stands. I will also refer to music when I find it relevant. Thus I view Springsteen's songs as an inseparable part of the contemporary world as I seek to present what they convey about the American Dream.

## 2. AMERICAN MUSIC

In this chapter I will give a brief overview of the history of music in North America. I will focus on two genres: folk music and rock'n'roll, as these are relevant to Bruce Springsteen's music. I will also point out some aspects of the music business.

### 2.1. History

Starr and Waterman (2007) discuss in detail various developments in American popular music. Their work indicates how complex the history of pop music really is: there were various genres that influenced each other, and new music styles are still emerging. However, the roots of American music are in the pre-colonial era. As Columbus "discovered" the country in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, his descriptions of the new continent started to entice immigrants to travel overseas. As people moved to the New World, they brought their music with them. This music started to develop and have new meanings and contexts. Surprisingly native american music did not seem to have much influence on these musical streams.

The immigrants arrived from all parts of Europe importing their own musical traditions. Starr and Waterman identify three main music streams that arrived in America: European American music, African American music, and Latin American music (2007: 10). However, these streams are broad generalizations. Nevertheless, from these streams new music styles began to develop, some of which are a mixture of various elements.

Some genres have long traditions, such as broadside ballads. They stem from the Middle Ages and they were printed on sheets. They had contemporary topics about society. Broadside ballads were mainly Scottish and Irish. These influenced folk singers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also, in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century new music streams are developing. As this is an era of technology, new digital and computerized music is being produced.

Because there are hundreds, or thousands of music styles, it is worth focusing on two genres that are relevant to the music of Bruce Springsteen: rock'n'roll and folk music.

## 2.2. Folk music

The roots of modern American folk music are in the colonial era. The settlers brought their oral traditions and ballads to the New World. The earliest folk music that arrived in America was mainly based on English, Scottish and Irish traditional music (Cripps 1988: 31). This music was not written down; it was passed down from generation to generation (Cripps 1988: 31). Thus the music changed and evolved as each generation made its own versions of the songs.

In the course *Ballads and Oral Tradition* (Smith, 2007) we read traditional ballads and looked at their typical features and themes. The ballads were mostly British, such as "Sir Patrick Spence", "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet", "Hynd Horn", and "The Wife of Usher's Well", to give a few examples. From the collection of ballads we read during the course, we found they have some basic elements. Ballads tell dramatic stories that are often based on real events, although the original story often faded as each generation made its own interpretation of old tunes. Ballads are the first folk songs; they side with the lower classes and depict the higher classes and kings as foolish, and thus criticize society. Ballads often have a moral, and they were used to educate and warn people.

Traditional ballads continued to have influence also in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1940s folk songs based on old ballads became popular (Cripps 1988: 33). Woody Guthrie was an important American folk singer. Many of Guthrie's lyrics are about workers struggling in America. For example, *Dust-*

*Bowl Ballads* (1940) is a collection of tunes about the great dust storm that caused severe damages to farms in the 1930s. Some of Guthrie's songs are still sung in America. One of his most famous songs is "This Land Is Your Land", which also Bruce Springsteen has been playing. In the inaugural concert of President Barack Obama he introduced it as "probably the greatest song ever written about our home" (broadcast on Finnish TV, February 2009). Guthrie wrote it in 1940. Since then several artists have made versions of the song. "This Land Is Your Land" was especially famous in the 1960s among the folk movement. Bruce Springsteen released a version of it in 1986 on his album *Live 1975-85*.

According to Starr and Waterman in the 1950s folk was complicated to define: it was inspired by rural folk yet performed by urban singers. What is more, it was not clear whether the music was folk, country and western, or novelty music (2004: 165). If folk was not a clearly defined music genre in the 1950s, it is not easy to define it clearly today either. Smith admits this. He finds the question of what makes one a folk singer today difficult to define. One reason for this could be that the role of folk singers is not as visible and clear as it was in the past (personal communication, fall 2007).

The 1960s was a revolutionary era: there were protest movements, the Civil Rights movement and the Counterculture. The younger generations were breaking free from the supposedly conservative 1950s into more liberal times. Folk music had an important role. Artists such as Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Peter, Paul and Mary sang at events to take a stand against social injustices. In the 1950s and the early '60s it was important to play acoustic guitar. Rock'n'roll and commercialism of the music business was looked down upon.

But as the times they were a-changin' one had to start swimmin' or sink like a stone. And so at the 1965 Newport music festival Bob Dylan made a radical move: he "went electric". This means he did not perform with traditional acoustic accompaniment as he had done before, but started to play electric guitar and rock'n'roll. Dylan was booed off the stage. The reason why

Dylan's decision was appalling to many, was that he was seen as a key figure in the folk movement. As Starr and Waterman (2007: 289) point out, in relation to rock'n'roll folk music was

topical, political, socially conscious music... that carried with it a subtext of political identification - with labor, with the poor, ... with... peoples seen as oppressed... while rock'n'roll was seen as a "fun" music... whose lyric content was... light, amusing... virtually never serious.

Thus it seemed that Dylan sided with the very things folkies stood against: commercialized casual entertainment. Rock was not seen as a way to make a serious stand. Nevertheless, Dylan made his move and had a crucial role in the transition from folk to the electric era. Also Starr and Waterman acknowledge the importance of Dylan: "The individual most responsible for this shift was... [Bob Dylan] who, virtually single-handedly, dragged urban folk music... into the modern era of rock" (2007: 284). With this move Dylan created a new music style: folk rock.

What is more, if one compares acoustic folk music with electrically amplified rock, the lyrical content of folk songs comes through more clearly than that of rock songs. With an acoustic accompaniment the emphasis lies on the lyrics, whereas the words might get lost in music that has several instruments and pounding beats. Music changes the meaning of songs and gives them different functions. Bruce Springsteen calls the role of music as an "unspoken subtext" that "informs the music with so much extra information" (*Storytellers DVD*, 2005).

One good example of this is Bruce Springsteen's "Born In The U.S.A" (*Born In The U.S.A.*, 1984). The lyrics are not patriotic, nor glorious. Springsteen's chorus is in fact a bitter statement about the hard fate one faces when one is "born in the U.S.A.". The song criticizes the Vietnam War. When Springsteen plays it as a rock version, people sing the chorus "born in the U.S.A./ I was born in the U.S.A." waving American flags, and the title has become a "cool" slogan. The power of rock'n'roll gives the song strength and determination. The acoustic version of the song, however, has a very different mood: Springsteen hits sharp guitar notes and sings the chorus with less

power than other verses. Then it functions as a protest folk song that criticizes America (Springsteen released an acoustic version of the song on *Tracks*, 1998, but recordings of acoustic performances can be found on the internet as well, for example [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBqbmZjfdzY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBqbmZjfdzY)).

However, in the 1960s rock music in general was not “serious” music in the way that folk was. As Cripps points out, for example, “the Beatles were releasing albums like *Help* which were still basically about love, boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back” (1988: 60). But as Dylan went from acoustic folk to electric music, his lyrics did not turn into simple rock lyrics. Also rock music can contain criticism of society: it can tell real stories and criticize society. As Dylan created a new music style combining his folk background with rock’n’roll, he had both folk and rock elements in his music. For example his rock song “Hurricane” (*Desire* 1976) tells a story of the false imprisonment of the boxer Rubin Carter and criticizes the corruption of the American justice system.

In the 1960s Bob Dylan had a very intense lyrical strength in his folk music. In the course *Ballads and Oral Tradition* (Smith, 2007) I presented four songs from Dylan’s album *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (1964). The instructor, Roger Noël Smith, found Dylan’s lyrics very powerful and impressive. On this album Dylan also has many similar elements and techniques as traditional balladeers. To me Dylan was at his best in the 1960s when he released acoustic records. Some of his songs are astonishingly powerful cutting reflections of injustices in America. To me his other albums have not reached the same intensity. This is not to say he has not released impressive music since.

### 2.3. Rock'n' Roll

Rock'n'roll emerged in America in the 1950s. "The country that gave us rock'n'roll can't be all bad", says Michael Coleman (personal communication, June 2009). For six decades, people have gotten a chance to experience its power. In the beginning it was "a total shock, an explosion of power, an outrage" (Cripps 1988: 38). Rock'n'roll is a mixture of different styles. Cripps (1988) traces its roots to the 1940s. Western swing bands then started to use boogie-woogie rhythm and later in the 1950s country singers were using those rhythms as well. (Western swing is dance music with country and rural elements. Boogie-woogie is blues played on piano). Keightley goes further: he sees urban blues of the 1930s having up-tempo that is similar to rock'n'roll (in Frith, et al, 2001: 114). He sees these blues bands and boogie woogie pianists as "most obvious antecedents of an up-tempo fifties rock'n'roll style" (in Frith, et al, 2001:114).

One form of early rock'n'roll was country-style rockabilly. Singers such as Johnny Cash and Roy Orbison sang it. Also Elvis Presley began as a rockabilly singer. (Rockabilly is rock'n'roll with country influences). Keightley also identifies doo wop as an essential part of 1950s rock'n'roll (in Frith, et al, 2001:115). (Doo wop is rhythm and blues music, played by African Americans). However, he also points out that it is very difficult to identify one core style of the 1950s rock and that then rock'n'roll was viewed as just another passing dance craze (in Frith, et al, 2001:115).

In 1964 "The British Invasion" influenced American rock'n'roll. The Beatles became very popular. However, the meaning of the "invasion" is exaggerated. As Keightley points out, "the sound of the British beat bands was not radically different from US groups like the Beach Boys" (in Frith, et al, 2001:118). Thus there was musical movement between the continents: British music influenced American as well as the other way round. Also folk influenced rock. Keightley sees Dylan's influences in Beatles songs: according to him, for instance in "You've Got To Hide Your Love Away" John Lennon

imitates Dylan (in Frith, et al, 2001: 119). Thus rock had many influences, as Keightley aptly says: “rock emerged out of the overlapping of several musical cultures, none of which on its own would be considered rock” (in Frith, et al, 2001:119). Surf bands, garage bands, jazz, folk, blues and country, all played a role in the development of rock’n’roll.

The term “pop” seems to refer to anything that is popular. It covers practically all music genres. As Frith points out “anything can... be popped” (Frith, et al, 2001: 97). According to him even classical music has been popped. Frith finds pop music “a slippery concept” since it is “so easily used” (Frith, et al, 2001: 94). However, he defines pop music as “music produced commercially, for profit, as a matter of enterprise not art” (Frith, et al, 2001: 94). This suggests that the only goal of pop is to make money, to record what sells. Frith also points out that pop is “easy listening, light entertainment” (Frith, et al, 2001: 96). He finds that most of the mass culture is “safe”, so that it pretends and shows that things are alright (Frith 1988: 65). Thus pop music is different from folk and protest songs, whose main goal was to make a stand and show the injustices of society. However, one should not make too rigid generalizations. There can also be songs, generally considered as pop, that have socially significant lyrics.

There are different views on whether or not rock is pop. Frith (1988) sees rock merely as commercially produced mass music. He views it as a part of mass media and claims that it is the reason why rock cannot be considered as folk or art. He admits, though, that the most successful rock music may reflect and express the concerns of its audience (Frith 1988: 65). As Dylan’s move shows, even though folk and rock are very different in style, the elements can also intertwine. At least in the case of Dylan, rock did stem from folk. Dylan had played only acoustic music, and when he went electric his acoustic background influenced his new folk rock style.

Keightley on the other hand finds that the idea of rock involved

a rejection of... aspects of mass-distributed music which are... things which may be dismissed as worthless ‘pop’- the very opposite of rock. Instead, the styles, genres and performers that are thought to merit the name ‘rock’ must be seen as serious, significant and legitimate in some way (in Frith, et al, 2001:109).



Thus to him, rock is not mass music but separate from it. Keightley emphasizes that a crucial feature of rock since its emergence has been to take music seriously, and that rock was to be seen as something “more” than mere entertainment (in Frith, et al, 2001: 110). Whereas Frith rejects the connection between folk and rock, Keightley finds folk to be an important influence to rock. According to him rock adapted folk ideology. Folk culture separated itself from the masses and popular music. Thus when Bob Dylan moved from acoustic instruments into electric guitars, it was despised by folk purists who saw folk as authentic but found electric instruments artificial. Keightley points out one reason for the success of rock music: it “was born *within* the popular mainstream as an *exclusively* youth-oriented music” (in Frith, et al, 2001: 122). Rock was a commercial success: it had a teenage audience throughout America and the world.

Thus rock, which had adapted folk ideology, became what the ideology stood against: mass music. But at the same time, according to Keightley, “the massive youth audience... saw itself.. as opposed to the mass mainstream and all that it stood for” (in Frith, et al, 2001: 122). In the early decades of rock, this might have meant liberation from the older generations, since rock was a teenage phenomenon in the beginning. The situation today is different however. The rock generations of the 1960s and ‘70s are not teenagers anymore, and thus rock is not exclusively youth music these days.

Nevertheless, rock cannot be seen as completely separate from pop music and commercial markets. Also rock can be light entertainment and produced for commercial profits. It is expected that artists produce at least one big hit single which is then used to promote the album.

## 2.4. The Music Business

Starr and Waterman (2007) explain the major changes that took place in the development of the music industry. The phonograph was invented as early as 1877, and in the 1890s the first jukeboxes were set up in public places. Two companies controlled the American market in phonograph discs. One was Columbia Records which was formed in 1887. In the 1920s, important developments shaped American popular culture. Phonographs, radio, films, and newspapers began to unify the country. By 1927, there were over one thousand radio stations in America. Radio also became the most important medium for promoting songs.

After the Second World War, tape recorders began replacing the phonograph discs. Also discs were improved, and vinyl LPs were developed. Televisions began to spread and by the 1950s millions of Americans had TV sets. In the 1970s and '80s came cable TV, portable tape players, digital recordings and compact discs.

All these developments, pointed out by Starr and Waterman, have had a huge influence on music industry. Today the development has gone even further. Now we can find and listen to music on the internet. The World Wide Web has made music available at all times without the need to actually buy the latest CDs. People can also buy music from netstores. One easy way to find music on the internet is "Youtube" where anyone can put clips and recordings. It is a good way to find, for example, snippets from live concerts. There are also various videos of Bruce Springsteen. That is how I have been able to follow Springsteen's campaign across America when he rallied for presidential candidate Barack Obama. Americans who were in the events recorded him and then made them available to everyone. There are also some clips from Springsteen's concert in Tampere in 2009. On Youtube one can also find older live performances or DVD extracts.

Thus today the internet has an important role in the music business. Also Bruce Springsteen has an official netpage: [www.brucespringsteen.net](http://www.brucespringsteen.net).

The page includes information on his latest news, albums, lyrics, and there is also a net store. There are albums, fan items, posters, badges, T-shirts, coffee cups etc. on sale.

Mass markets and commercialism are obviously connected with the music business. Today with the globalization and the internet the markets have become even wider. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, technology was connected to the music business as new inventions widened music markets. Licensing and copyright agencies were set up to control the profits and the broadcasting of popular music (Starr and Waterman, 2007). Thus people became aware of the copyright laws. As record companies were formed, music became an industry and commercialization intensified. Columbia Records (CR) thus started out as a phonograph company but then became a record company. The main goal of the companies is to make profit. Thus artists might face problems when they make contracts, and may not always get to record the kind of music they wish.

In this chapter, I have discussed the history of folk and rock and offered some definitions to the terms. I have also shown the influence of record companies in the music business. Next I will talk about Bruce Springsteen's life.

### 3. BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

In this chapter I will give a brief overview of Springsteen's life and present his music.

#### 3.1. Life

There are different views on how personal Springsteen's songs are. Some claim that his music is autobiographical. Nevakare (1990) goes so far that she makes no distinction between Springsteen the man and the characters of the songs and views the lyrics as mini-autobiographies. She claims that Springsteen "is very subjective" and that "his songs are what he is" (1990: 10). She thus finds it justifiable to analyse his personal life without knowing the man personally. She states, for instance, that "Bruce Springsteen wants to be a saviour of all women" (1990: 90) because he sings from a point of view of a man who observes a single parent and says to her: "Raising two kids alone in this mixed up world/ Must be a lonely life for a working girl/ Little girl I wanna marry you" ("I Wanna Marry You", *The River*, 1980). Using songs to probe Springsteen's personal life might lead to speculation. The lyrics can contain lots of fiction too, instead of merely personal facts of his own life.

On *Storytellers* DVD (2005), an audience member says to Springsteen that listening to his music, he feels as if he knows the man and asks does he. Without hesitation Springsteen replies no. He does not find the songs that personal, but admits that he brings something from himself to the stories. It is clear that also the background, values and experiences of artists can affect their work. One might see some reflections between Springsteen's life and his music. He mentions this on *The Making Of Born To Run* DVD (2005):

... [*Born To Run*] mirrors a lot of my own life...the things that I was kinda goin through at the time. That's why everybody on *BTR* is out, tryin' to get out. I gotta get out. I'm tryin' to break free... Everythin' is filled with that tension of somebody strugglin', tryin' to find some other place.

The album *mirrors* his life. This does not mean that the things that happen in the songs are real life accounts. This becomes even clearer on his albums after *BTR*. But Springsteen still finds that you have to stay true to yourself and the things you believe in. He says “you have to constantly be writin’ from your own inner core in some fashion, I find y’know...that has to be the place in every song or the song dies” (*Devils&Dust bonus DVD, 2005*). The source of inspiration lies in his own central core. He has always stayed true to himself and had faith in his music. But he still makes a distinction between himself and the characters he sings about:

The point is that your own voice is supposed to, if you’re doin’ it correctly, it’s supposed to disappear into the voice of the person you’re singin’ about and who’s tellin’ ya the story y’know, what would they do, what wouldn’t they do, how would they behave in the circumstance. (*Devils&Dust bonus DVD, 2005*)

Springsteen is a storyteller. He creates characters who often reflect the America of their time.

Thus there is a difference in acknowledging the background of the artist and claiming that the voice of the characters is the voice of Springsteen. Knowing something about his life can actually help to understand his songs. Springsteen is American. He has lived in America all his life. This gives a certain point of view to his songs, different from, say, someone writing songs about America without ever having been there. Thus, it is relevant to know certain things about his life.

Dave Marsh is Springsteen’s main biographer. He is also his fan and friend. His book *Two Hearts* (2004) has actually three books in one. Marsh released two Springsteen biographies before it, in 1979 and 1987. And the latest release is an updated biography. The following is based on Marsh’s book.

Bruce Springsteen was born on September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1949 in Freehold, New Jersey. His father Douglas was Irish and mother Adele Italian. Douglas worked in various working class professions, for example as a bus driver. His mother was a secretary. The Springsteens lived in a small house. Bruce did not have a

close relationship with his father. He saw the working life draining his father mentally. Douglas would sit in the dark waiting for his son to come home and then scold him because he wanted Bruce to study and get a real profession instead of playing guitar.

When Bruce was nine years old, he saw Elvis on TV and decided he wanted to be like him. He got a guitar when he was thirteen and started to learn how to play. It was rock'n'roll and the guitar that made him feel alive: "I was dead until I was thirteen". Until he got the guitar: "It was a magic scene. There it is: The Guitar. It was real and it stood for something... I had found a way to do everything I wanted to do" (in Marsh, 2004: 27).

Young Bruce did not fit into the tight-minded small town of Freehold. Neither did he fit into the Catholic school, St. Rose of Lima parochial school: "I was there eight years... I still remember a lot of things about it. But I don't remember anything nice about it... It has nothing to do with me... I'm here to play music..." (in Marsh, 2004: 23). In the ninth grade he went to Freehold Regional High School and did not fit in there either. After graduating, he went to Ocean County College but dropped out.

Springsteen got into a band to play guitar. His first band was the Castiles. They played in clubs along the Jersey shore. Bruce did not even consider doing anything other than music. As his band members and friends were getting married and getting jobs, he remained devoted to nothing but rock'n'roll music. By 1971, he had gotten together the Bruce Springsteen Band which was the core of the future E-Street Band: the guitarist "Miami" Steve Van Zandt, "Big Man" Clarence Clemons, and organ player "Phantom" Danny Federici (he passed away in 2008 and Springsteen dedicated "Terry's Song" from *Magic* to him). Later drummer "Mighty" Max Weinberg and keyboardist "Professor" Roy Bittan joined the band. Officially the band was named The E Street Band in 1974. (E Street is a street in Belmar, New Jersey). They played in New Jersey and Springsteen began to gain a reputation with his unique shows. He used to tell stories on stage and play for hours until he had given all he had got. And he does that even today.

Springsteen's dream was to make music. He got to audition for a manager, Mike Appel, who recalls that Springsteen sang "as his life depended on it... on stage in that leather jacket... like Elvis" (in Marsh 2004: 52). In 1972, Appel became Springsteen's manager. He arranged an audition with John Hammond, and this led to a record deal with Columbia Records. CBS wanted to mold Springsteen into a new Bob Dylan. The young artist, however, had been playing in rock'n'roll bands. Appel's goal was to make a record that "would fit the commercial mainstream" (Marsh 2004: 56). Thus problems emerged when Springsteen was making his first album: he wanted to have a band and play electric guitar whereas Appel insisted on making a folk record. "I was signed as a guy with an acoustic guitar, when I was 22, that's how I was signed in my record deal", Springsteen recalls (*Devils&Dust bonus DVD*, 2005). The deal with Appel came to an end because Springsteen sued him and then regained his rights to his music. After that, Jon Landau became Springsteen's manager. Springsteen managed to take control of his production and has been able to release the kind of records he wants, whether they are rock or folk.

In 1985, Springsteen married Julianne Philips, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1989. I suspect that the age difference and the different backgrounds were some reasons for the break-up. He then married Patti Scialfa in 1991 and they have three children. They are of the same age and both have musical careers. In fact, Scialfa is a member of the E Street Band. She sings background vocals or plays some instruments, for example guitar or percussion.

Springsteen stayed true to the one thing that made him feel alive: the guitar. With dedication and determination he managed to fulfill his dream. Even though he has made it big, he still has a need to "prove it all night". I saw this in Tampere on 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2009. Springsteen played relentlessly for three hours. When he is on stage, he is a man who is where he wants to be.

### 3.2. Albums

There is a list of Springsteen's releases in the appendix. A list of albums can be found on Bruce Springsteen's official webpage [www.brucespringsteen.net](http://www.brucespringsteen.net). The list includes all the albums he has released, but there might be some DVD releases missing. For example, for some reason *The Storytellers* DVD (2005), and *Born To Run: 30th Anniversary 3-Disc Set (CD/2DVD)*, *Live In New York* DVD, *MTV Unplugged* DVD, and *Live In Dublin* DVD are not on the webpage. But I have added these on the appendix. (However there might be one or two DVDs missing on the list, but I have included all the releases I know).

Springsteen's first album is *Greetings from Asbury Park N.J.* (1973). The title refers to Springsteen's home state, New Jersey, and also his band members were from the area. They used to play on the Jersey shore. Even though the record company wanted the album resemble Dylan's style, the outcome is not similar to that. Springsteen had already formed his own music style that had influences from various artists from the 1960s and '70s.

Springsteen's second album *The Wild, the Innocent And The E-Street Shuffle* (1973) was, like the first one, made with low cost, and it also has a similar setting. Both albums depict street life in Asbury Park with references to real places and people. For instance "4<sup>th</sup> Of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)", as the title suggests, is set in New Jersey. Sawyers points out that the fortune-telling booth of Madam Marie's, mentioned in the song, still stands along the boardwalk (2006: 14).

These two releases were not very successful commercially, although many songs on the records were later acknowledged as Springsteen's classics. When Springsteen started to work on his third album, *Born To Run*, the pressure was on to really make it. Thirty years later a documentary of the making of this record was released. *Wings For Wheels: The Making of Born to Run* (2005) is a DVD that tells about the intense work in the studio and Springsteen's relentless dedication. It also includes snippets from the 1970s when he and the band were in the studio recording the album trying to get it



just right. The hard work paid off and *BTR* (1975) became a huge success. Springsteen was on the covers of both *Time* and *Newsweek*. It really was his breakthrough as a musician.

It is an important album in many ways to Springsteen: "It was an essential record for me, it set out my aspirations y'know... what I wanted to accomplish, what I wanted to be about, the kinda music I wanted to write" (WFW, 2005). He also says that *BTR* features characters whose lives he would trace during the next thirty years (WFW, 2005). His characters grow with him. His first two records describe teenagers' street life, whereas on *BTR* he has a more mature approach on the quest of his characters: "*Born To Run* was the album where I left behind my adolescent definitions of love and freedom. It was the dividing line" (WFW, 2005). *BTR* is a transition from adolescence to adulthood. From this album onwards, his characters would continue to grow and face different kind of struggles in life.

Whereas on *BTR* "everybody is tryin' to get out, to break loose" (WFW, 2005), on *Darkness On The Edge Of Town* (1978) and on *The River* (1980) the characters are already struggling with working life and commitments. They are no longer free to chase the heaven that's waitin' on down the tracks, for they now have "ties that bind". They have to work to make a living. The everyday life drains some people: "Some guys they just give up livin' / And start dyin' little by little piece by piece / Some guys come home from work and wash up / And go racin' in the street" ("Racin' In The Street", *DOT*). Springsteen depicts the desperation people can face in their daily life. Work can be exhausting, and relationships fall apart for no obvious reasons. Yet there is always hope if one does not give up living. After all, "it ain't no sin to be glad you're alive" ("Badlands", *DOT*).

After these five rock records, Springsteen made a surprising move by releasing an acoustic folk album, *Nebraska* (1982). It is a collection of bleak ballads and tragic tales. With this album Springsteen connects himself with the American folk tradition. The emphasis lies directly on the lyrics and on Springsteen's storytelling. The basic theme that lingers through the album is

the blurred line between right and wrong, and good and bad. As Sawyers aptly states: "In the Springsteen universe, there is no black and white, just layer after layer of moral uncertainty" (2006: 128). This holds true for all Springsteen albums. Times are tough, people face inner struggles and pain that living brings.

On the album, Springsteen even gives voice to a serial killer, Charles Starkweather, who killed ten people in 1958 in Lincoln Nebraska. The atmosphere is very ordinary and casual, Springsteen sings the song without any judgment. As Sawyers states "it is sung in the modal starkness redolent of traditional Appalachian music" (2006: 70). In the course *Ballads And Oral Tradition* (Smith 2007), we found that traditional ballads were often sung bluntly and flatly without any sentiment and that gave power to the stories. Now Springsteen too has the same style and it gives power to his acoustic performances.

The characters on the album often end up doing something desperate. Some face economic hardships because they "got debts no honest man could pay" ("Atlantic City"), or cannot find work ("Johnny 99"). The characters are on the move, driving across the wide open spaces of Midwest, hoping to find some way out. At the end of the record Springsteen leaves his listeners to wonder how come "at the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to believe". It seems that sometimes people refuse to accept the bad things that have happened and keep deluding themselves that things will be okay. Maybe that prevents them from falling into desperate deeds, but yet there is something sad in that too.

After *Nebraska*, Springsteen went back to rock'n'roll and released his most famous album: *Born In The U.S.A* (1984). Even though it is musically very different from *Nebraska*, Springsteen's lyrics did not change radically. However, now the characters are not as desperate as in the previous album and crossing the line to illegal ways is no longer present. The characters are working-class people who deal with unemployment and different experiences in their everyday lives.

In the title track, a Vietnam War Veteran returns from war and finds that his job at the refinery is gone. The man in "Downbound Train" loses his job at the lumber yard and ends up working in the car wash. The jobs are disappearing also in "My Hometown" in which the narrator observes his dying hometown. Two buddies are unemployed and drive to Darlington County to find work ("Darlington County"). In "Workin' On The Highway" the narrator tells that "all day I hold a red flag and watch the traffic pass me by". This album really reinforces Springsteen's working-class image. On the album cover there is Springsteen's back against the red white stripes of the American flag. He is wearing a white T-shirt, blue worn-out Levi's jeans with a baseball cap hanging on the back pocket.

Springsteen also always refers to his own work as his job (for example on *Storytellers* DVD, 2005). Sawyers also notices this. She says how Springsteen in "interview after interview... refers to what he does as a 'job' - something that is required of him, something that he has to do" (2006: 45). Thus Springsteen's working-class appearance is more than just a made-up image. He seems to have a humble attitude towards his craft. The power of his music can be heard especially on his live performances, and after *BITUSA*, he released *Live 1975-1985* (1986) which includes four discs of songs recorded live in concert.

When releasing albums, Springsteen has always been surprising. Again instead of sticking to the pounding rock he had played in *BITUSA*, he shifted to other themes. *Tunnel Of Love* (1987) features Springsteen without the E Street Band and as a result the atmosphere is softer and less rocking than on his previous rock records. On this album the characters are struggling with relationships. Springsteen does not romanticize love. He had indeed left behind his adolescent views on love and freedom.

In "Tougher Than The Rest" the protagonist is in a bar on a Saturday night. He observes a woman and states with confidence: "so somebody run out left somebody's heart in a mess/ if you're lookin' for love honey I'm tougher than the rest". He seems to suggest that not everyone is man enough

to be in a relationship, but vows that he has what it takes. He makes a difference between man and boys: "Maybe your other boyfriends wouldn't pass the test" he says, and continues to state his toughness over the rest. He does not offer romantic visions of love, instead he is ready to face the reality and hard life.

It seems that both men and women on the album cannot bear the realities of life and then run out from their relationships. In "Spare Parts" a couple is supposed to get married but the man "got scared and he ran away" leaving the woman alone with their baby. In "When You're Alone" the woman leaves her man because "times were tough love was not enough". Commitments bring doubt and fear. Bill Horton from "Cautious Man" has the word "love" tattooed on his one knuckle and "fear" on the other. One does not go without the other. Some characters do not trust themselves and have "two faces".

Springsteen continued with somewhat same sentiments as five years later he released two albums, *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* (both in 1992). Musically the albums are closer to *TOL* than *BITUSA* or *BTR*. One reason for this is that The E Street Band is still absent. On *HT* the characters are not as desperate as on the previous record but the sense of realism still prevails. The male protagonists are now more confident in matters of love. There is a difference between men and boys. One has to be a real man to make it in a relationship for it is "a man's job" to take care of a woman.

One has to be a man to bear a loss too. In "I Wish I Were Blind" the narrator sees his lost love with another man. It is spring and sun shines very brightly, everything is filled with light. The man wishes he was blind when he sees the woman walking along a strand with another man. But yet the song does not make one pity the man, there is not a sense of tragedy. The man is not doing desperate deeds but has the courage to feel and admit his pain.

In *Lucky Town* Springsteen has developed this theme further. Now the characters have in fact found "better days". Someone has even

found a real relationship with “a woman [he] can call [his] friend”. One character becomes a father and celebrates the birth of his son as “Living Proof” of God’s mercy. The songs about relationships have now turned into celebration. Also the music is joyous. However, there are also reminders of the hard realities of life. In “Souls Departed” a father tucks his son to bed and thinks about a seven year old boy, who had been shot, realizing it might have been his son instead. The song is “a prayer for the souls departed”.

*In Concert MTV Plugged* (1993) was released right after these albums. It is a collection of live recordings. Also a DVD of the concert has been released. The illumination is blue and at times a bit smokey. There is a small audience which gives the concert a private feeling. What followed was *The Greatest Hits* (1995), a collection of Springsteen hits with five new songs, “Streets Of Philadelphia”, “Secret Garden”, “Murder Incorporated”, “Blood Brothers”, and “This Hard Land”.

In 1995 Springsteen released *The Ghost of Tom Joad* which is his second acoustic folk album. Also Woody Guthrie has made a song about Tom Joad, a fictional character in John Steinbeck’s novel *Grapes of Wrath*. The events take place during the Great Depression and it deals with economic difficulties the farmers in the Southwest faced. In his song, Guthrie summarizes the plot and the song is very long. Springsteen has obviously been inspired by the old story but makes a contemporary stand with it. His version is very compressed and reflects the depression of the 1990s. Also Springsteen’s song is set in the southwest. Today there are lots of poor people and immigrants in that area. The other songs in the album are reflections on the conditions of the American underclass. Springsteen gives voice to the homeless, immigrants and even criminals. The tunes are folk songs that reflect the contemporary times, just like broadsides and traditional ballads and folk songs of the 1960s.

Marsh, however, does not consider Springsteen’s songs as meaningful reflections of America of their time. In his book *Two Hearts* he celebrates Springsteen the rock’n’roll hero and his book is loaded with energy. He does

manage to convey some of the astonishing power of Springsteen's rock and live performances. I did not know the meaning of rock'n'roll until I went to Springsteen concert on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009. So I find Marsh's emphasis on rock'n'roll understandable and justified.

However, the singer has another side that should not be diminished. Marsh claims that both *Nebraska* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad* are "about personal turmoil in the guise of social commentary" (2004: 663). This does not do justice to Springsteen as a songwriter. The songs are reflections on the poor conditions of the American underclass. Sawyers traces the origins of some songs on *GTJ*. She tells how the portraits of dying steel towns and contemporary boxcar hoboes inspired Springsteen to write "Youngstown" and "The New Timer" (2006: 140). What is more, she describes how Springsteen did research on Mexican farmworkers who "cook" methamphetamine for "Sinaloa Cowboys", which is a tune about two Mexican immigrants, who end up in drug business. Thus the songs on the album have their roots in the social issues of the 1990s.

Marsh does not seem to appreciate Springsteen's acoustic side. He does not find *GTJ* a good record because "it relies too much on words" and "Springsteen's interest in music seemed to have become secondary" (2004: 662). Even though this acoustic album is musically simpler than Springsteen's rock records does not mean that Springsteen would not have cared about the melodic arrangements. Acoustic folk albums are different from melodic rock releases. When songs are sung with acoustic accompaniment, the emphasis lies on the lyrics. Springsteen has nevertheless composed melodies that create a certain atmosphere to every tale he tells. It is important that Springsteen has chosen to play not only rock'n'roll but also folk.

In 1998, Springsteen released *Tracks*, and the following year *18 Tracks*. Both albums are collections of Springsteen's older songs, some of which had not been published before. There are also songs that have not been included on his previous albums. One of the classics is "The Promise" (18

*Tracks*) which he originally wrote for the *DOT*. Also *Live In New York City* (2001) is a collection of his old material now played live in concert. There are two new songs however, “41 Shots” and “Land Of Hope And Dreams”, both very important parts of Springsteen’s work. He also released these songs on *The Essential* (2003) which is yet another greatest hits collection. Also this album includes previously unreleased songs on one CD. The two other discs on *The Essential* feature Springsteen’s songs chronologically from the beginning of his career to *The Rising* (2002).

*The Rising* was released a year before *The Essential*, soon after the 9-11-2001 terror attacks. It reflects the sentiments after the tragedy. On September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 Muslim terrorists hijacked four air planes. They crashed two planes into The World Trade Center in New York. The twin towers collapsed leaving the skyline empty. The album is about loss, death, life, and faith in people’s everyday life. The power of the album is in the depictions of the ordinary. Life goes on here on earth but yet things are not the same when people have lost their loved ones.

The title track is a very significant song in many ways. According to Springsteen it is a spiritual journey in life after death (*Storytellers* DVD 2005). But it also reads as a reflection on destruction and finding a way to rise from the ruins. What is more, when Springsteen played it in the inaugural concert of President Barack Obama (February, 2009), the song reflected new times for Americans to “come on up for the rising” along with their new president. Springsteen has not been pleased with President Bush’s government. He says it is “a thoughtless, reckless, and morally adrift administration” (November, 2008, Cleveland Vote For Change Rally [www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index\\_archive.html](http://www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index_archive.html)).

Marsh, however, diminishes Springsteen as a songwriter by commenting that on *The Rising* it is music that is important, not the lyrics. He claims the songs “aren’t even best heard as statements about 9-11 and what came next” (Marsh, 2004: 673). Even the title *The Rising*, refers to the aftermath of a tragedy. It has both spiritual meaning and courage to

overcome hardships here on earth. Springsteen's lyrics should not be ignored because together with the music they form stories that reflect the America of their time.

It is true however that musically the album is one of Springsteen's best. It is the first studio album with the E Street Band since *BITUSA* (1984). The music flows effortlessly along with the stories, and each song has its own distinct feeling. The album received a Grammy Award for The Best Rock Album of the year. Springsteen then launched *The Rising Tour* with the E Street Band. *Live In Barcelona* DVD captures their concert in Spain, almost three hours of music. The Spanish audience sings actively along and cheers on Springsteen.

After *The Rising* Springsteen again dismissed his band and released *Devils&Dust* (2005), an acoustic folk album. In many songs there are other instruments besides harmonica and guitar or piano, such as horns and violin but the electric guitar is absent. The album is not similar to *GTJ* and *Nebraska*. The stories are not as bleak. But it is set in the West, and it has a rough feeling of a frontier life. Springsteen sets the characters against the wide landscapes of the West where they try to survive. One of the most fascinating songs by Springsteen is "Black Cowboys", a story of Rainey Williams, a young black boy, who inspired by the Western movies travels West to find a better life. As in *TOL*, some characters are still hanging out in bars and looking for relief for the loss of love. Some even visit a bordello. The title track is an intriguing depiction of an inner struggle. There's a "dirty wind blowin' devils and dust" as the character finds he has to make a choice between ideals and survival.

Springsteen continued with folk music as he then released his most surprising album: *We Shall Over Come: The Seeger Sessions* (2006). The record includes traditional folk songs which Springsteen has turned into an up-tempo carnival music. In the past, folk songs were usually delivered with simple acoustic accompaniment. Springsteen plays the songs with a big band: there are, for instance, guitars, banjos, tubas, trumpets, horns, violins. During the *Seeger Sessions* tour, Springsteen performed his own songs with the *Seeger*



*Sessions* band, and made new versions of them. For example, "Blinded By The Light" (*GFA*), originally an up-tempo rock song, turns into a neworleansian carnival tune with a horn section pacing the rhythm. The atmosphere is very different from the original. "Further On Up The Road" (*The Rising*), a basic rocker similar to "Lucky Town" (*LT*), turns into a beautiful song with flutes and the band members take turns in singing. On *The Seeger Sessions Tour* Springsteen rearranged melodies and turned his old songs into something completely different. He released *Live in Dublin* (2007) which has also some of his old songs as Seeger Sessions versions.

The studio album, however, is a collection of old folk songs. In most of them Springsteen kept the original lyrics basically the same. He made only minor changes, but in some songs he changed some verses or added new ones, or replaced some words to make them reflect modern times. He changed, for example, the words of "How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live" to be about Hurricane Katrina. Also, "Bring'Em Home" became a stand against the Iraq war. He has successfully brought traditional songs to this day and made a contemporary stand with them. On the album only one song, "American Land", is written by Springsteen.

He then continued with rock with the E Street Band as he released *Magic* (2007). Musically it is not as impressive as *The Rising*, but the songs still have their own atmospheres and rocking melodies. Many songs are reflections on war. The war in the songs is obviously a reference to Iraq as it is the war America is waging at the moment. As many times before, Springsteen again refers to Vietnam and suggests that the Iraq war is a mistake, just like Vietnam was.

The songs are set in American small towns: there are bars and barber shops, veterans' halls and court houses, and the American flag waves on the pole. There are ordinary people in their everyday life, for example bartender Theresa and diner owner Frankie. Yet there is something ominous and twisted. There are "faces of the dead at five" and "bodies hangin' in the trees", sun is "dirty" and the horizon is "bloody red". The characters are

leading their lives without even realizing the signs around them. The album has an eerie feeling of a horror movie: terrible things are happening while people just go on living as usual.

*Working On a Dream* (2009) is kind of a continuation to *Magic*. Springsteen says on his netpage: “Excited by the sounds we made on *Magic* I found there was more than enough fuel for the fire to keep going” (<http://www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index.html>). Musically there is not a great difference to *Magic*, but the themes and sentiments are different. The atmosphere is no longer menacing. The title track reflects new times in the U.S.A, that with their new president the citizens would work together on the American Dream. Most songs on the album are quite light. Whereas on *The River* and *TOL* relationships bring misery, Springsteen now has a more neutral approach on the matter. It seems that as people grow old, love does not bring insecurity like it did when the characters were young. The album has a bonus track “The Wrestler” which is the soundtrack for the movie by the same name. Springsteen won a Golden Globe for it. In his speech he said: “this is the only time I’m gonna be in competition with Clint Eastwood, felt pretty good too” (January 2009, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTAeq-GuChw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTAeq-GuChw)).

Springsteen’s discography is impressive. He has produced a wide variety of music. There are powerful rock’n’roll records like *BTR* and *BITUSA*, but also acoustic folk albums (*Nebraska*, *GTJ*). Springsteen has also released albums that are not quite rock but are musically softer (*TOL*). With *The Seeger Sessions* he released probably his most impressive collection of music. Throughout his career, Springsteen has constantly renewed his work, making different but yet equally good versions of his songs, turning acoustic folk songs into pounding rock or vice versa.

In this chapter I have written about Springsteen’s life and given a brief overview on his music. In the next chapter I will present the origins of the American Dream and discuss its different definitions.

## 4. THE AMERICAN DREAM

In this chapter I will first show the development of the American Dream, how it emerged in colonial times and still exists today. Then I will discuss different definitions of the concept.

### 4.1. The Historical Origins of the Dream

The origins of the American Dream are in the pre-colonial era. Columbus “discovered” America in 1492. The “discovery” of the new continent seemed miraculous to the Europeans of the time and thus many myths started to emerge about the land across the oceans. These early visions are the foundation of the American Dream, and the mythology associated to the country has persisted to this day.

One of the first images that inspired myths was the pure nature of the continent. At the time of the “discovery” Europe was Christianized and urbanization was starting to take place. The New World on the other hand was inhabited by American Indians and their cultures were different from Europeans’. Christianity had not reached them and many technological inventions had not spread there. Thus the land remained free from urban waste.

As Columbus made sea voyages to the New World, he described the wonders of the continent:

There are palm trees of six or eight kinds... therein are marvellous pine groves, and extensive Champaign country; and there is honey, and there are many mines of metals, and the population is innumerable. ... and the lands are so beautiful and fat for planting and sowing, and for livestock of every sort... (Letter of Columbus, quoted by Morrison 1959: 8-9.)

These are paradise-like depictions of the new continent. Columbus describes the nature and the wealth and prosperity it has to offer. Everything blooms in America. There is wealth just waiting to be gathered. Since agriculture was important in the 1500s, Europeans viewed the pure landscapes as ideal for

farming. Parks describes how the life in the West was seen as “blissful husbandry, the virtuous, enlightened simplicity of tilling the soil, the pastoral image of perfect union of land and farmer, in peace with God and humanity” (1982:11).

The landscapes were a symbol for freedom and prospects to the early settlers. The American Dream is associated not only with movement to the country, but also movement within the land to find a better place. Bernard DeVoto associates the Dream with movement to the West:

Implicit in the westward surge, both a product and a condition of it, was the sentiment that has been called, none too accurately, "the American Dream". It is a complex sentiment not too easily to be phrased. The plain evidence of the frontier movement, from the falls line on, indicated that there could be no limit but the sky to what the Americans might do (Quoted by Wilbur 1973:70).

Even today the West and its wide open spaces and plains symbolize freedom. The West is a mythological place that reflects American history and also the American Dream. Parks finds that Western movies present some American values:

... the Western depicts certain symbolic elements of American life - the self-made man, the Edenic dream, the clever Yankee, the ultimate success of the work ethic, the triumph of physical prowess and personal energy, independence and freedom of movement (1982: 29).

The plains are important part of Westerns and they present freedom, and today also highways and cars are symbols for liberty. Movement and endless possibilities are associated with the mythical scenery as well.

Columbus' depictions also have religious implications. They resemble in fact a biblical paradise of the Promised Land which God vowed to give to his nation: “Ye shall inherit their land, and I will give it unto you to possess it, a land that floweth with milk and honey: I [am] the LORD your God, which have separated you from [other] people” ([www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/search.php?word=milk+and+honey](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/search.php?word=milk+and+honey)). The new continent that was found seemed to be a paradise, a God-given land where milk and honey flows amongst the groves and valleys. Thus the religious myths were associated with America and it was seen as the Promised Land given by God to His people.

Some of the first immigrants really believed they were the chosen people on their way to the Promised Land. In his book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (2003), Cullen tells about Puritans and their dream. He also describes how they made the dream into reality, and the impact they had on the formation of American culture. Cullen states that “the Pilgrims who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1620 really did believe themselves to be literal and figurative descendants of the tribes who wandered in the desert for forty years after leaving Egypt and founded the nation of Israel” (2003: 17). The faith in biblical promises of an earthly paradise seemed to come to reality to these people as this miraculous new continent was “discovered”. They had faith. They had a vision. Also Scheurer (1991) states the religious vision of the Pilgrims: they were “seeking to establish a New Eden, a New Jerusalem” (1991: 16). He analyzes *Bay Psalm Book* which was first printed in 1641. He finds that the book demonstrates strongly the providential role of God in the history of America. Thus the first versions of the American Dream had often religious associations. Cullen describes how the Puritans’ dream was to establish a new world and that they did succeed: “America became their home – the only one they ever knew. The dream had once been the creation of a new world. Now the task was to sustain and extend it” (2003: 23).

The first “mission” the pilgrims had was towards the natives whom they viewed as “savages”. The puritans were very strict in their faith, and did not accept other religions. What made things difficult was that there was a language barrier that made communication difficult. Had the whites and the Indians shared a language, things might have turned a bit differently, or at least maybe less violently. But as years rolled on, immigrants moved further West pushing Indians away from their lands.

A religious justification for the expansion of Americans soon emerged. Manifest Destiny refers to America’s special role in the world. *Collins English Dictionary* defines the concept as “the belief that U.S. was a chosen land that had been allotted the entire North American continent by

God" (1998: 945). This belief existed already when the first immigrants went across the oceans to the New World. In the 1700s, this idea developed even further: the nation had "to play a role in the world beyond [American] shores" (Scheurer 1991: 45). America as a special nation had a right and duty to intervene in foreign matters. Even today America's special role in the world can be seen as a continuation to Manifest Destiny. As Scheurer points out, Americans

are invested with a providential role in world affairs and that role is as peacemakers. If it takes a war to bring a peace, so be it. If indeed our history has been willed by God, then two things are validated: first, that democracy is the chosen form of government, and, second, that it must be spread throughout the world (1991: 103).

Even though the concept Manifest Destiny is not in common use today, the fight against communism, the Vietnam war, and even War on terror can be seen as an extension to this ideology. Americans have also often fought their wars, saying it is their duty to bring freedom to people. Also these aspects of the American Dream have religious implications.

As time went on, other ideals started to emerge. What is also connected with the Dream is a sense of equality: that "everyone could have a voice, everyone could have a share of the land, everyone could have a share of the power and the wealth" (Scheurer 1991: 50). America presented a land of possibilities and prospects where people could go to lead a better life. It was a New World where democracy would prevail. There were no oppressive rulers there. People were subjects to God only.

However, already in the past there was a conflict between freedom and reality: until the end of the Civil War the blacks were slaves. America was divided in two: "Northerners saw themselves carrying on the tradition of the Pilgrim forebears of beating a path for freedom through the wilderness" (Scheurer 1991: 75). Southerners, on the other hand, had plantations and wanted to have blacks as workforce. The northerners thought that "when one strikes a blow for liberty, one simultaneously strikes a blow for God" (Scheurer 1991: 76). Again religious connotations arise. Liberty was seen as a God-given gift that Americans had to protect. The North won the war and the

blacks were freed. But the problems did not end there. As late as 1950s, people were segregated on the basis of their skin color. There were separate sections for blacks and whites. Even today blacks can face racism in America. About fifty years ago, the idea of a black president of the United States seemed probably unbelievable. Today, however, the country has a black president. Barack Obama symbolizes racial equality and offers hope that one day people would no longer be judged on the basis of their skin color.

Also the work ethic is seen as an important value in the United States. Duncan and Goddard find that "the Puritan work ethic is essential to American individualism" (2005: 9). This basically means that idleness is sinful. Puritans had influence on the development of this value. But also the conditions in America promoted this. As immigrants made their way to the country, they had to build cities, railroads, and houses. This was hard work but with it they fulfilled their dreams. What is more, people were in charge of their own destiny. One could go to America to dig gold, for instance, and thus earn money to make a living. People had to work. And according to myths, there were many treasures and prospects in this Promised Land. Thus from these conditions arose the faith in work. Even today, there is a myth that anything is possible as long as you work hard enough. People can even judge poverty or unemployment as self-inflicted. If someone is poor, Americans can shrug and think the person did not work hard enough.

It must be noted though, that even though these are American ideals, not all Americans necessarily believe in them or agree with them. It is not possible to generalize and claim that all the citizens share the same views. This becomes evident for instance in the case of the Vietnam war. The traditional view of Manifest Destiny and the divine providence was criticized in the 1960s. As Scheurer states: "God's role... the war in Vietnam... came to symbolize the hypocrisy of both God's providential role and the concept of manifest destiny" (1991: 175).

## 4.2. Definitions

As Cullen aptly states: “There is no *one* American Dream. Instead, there are many American *Dreams*” (2003: 7). As the concept has many components and associations, its meaning depends on the viewer. It can have various meanings at specific times. It can mean something very different to non-Americans than to Americans. A person’s race, social class, religious beliefs, or age can influence their views. As mentioned above, one cannot assume that everyone shares the same vision on the meaning of the American Dream. Some people might even claim the Dream has turned into a nightmare. However, it is possible to draw out some basic elements that are generally associated with the concept. These are ideals, visions, and beliefs associated with America. This does not mean that these are reality in the United States. Rather, they are symbols that the country represents. Yet it is possible that to some people the American Dream is real, and it is possible that some make no distinction between the Dream and reality, and thus believe that the ideals are facts.

I got the chance to ask about this from an everyday American who was in Finland a short while. According to his definition, the American Dream means “the ability of people to come to America with nothin’ and to be able to express themselves openly and freely, and to build a life for themselves” (Devan Smith, West-Virginia, personal communication, fall 2008). It is quite interesting that an American associates the traditional immigrant dream with his country, and finds it still relevant today. In the past, immigrants did leave everything behind in order to start over in the New World.

Smith finds that this immigrant dream is still real, but not so much in Europe. He sees there has been a shift: “The American Dream doesn’t exist in Europe anymore ‘cos Europe is successful now, but there are poor countries and people from those lands flow to America” (personal communication, fall 2008). He says there are many immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Central and



South America in the United States. He believes that it is possible for immigrants to actually fulfill the American Dream: "Usually one family member goes legally to America to work, and then sends money back home to his family". However, he points out that it is very difficult to get to the U.S.A. as a legal immigrant. Thus even though the traditional view of America as a land that welcomes immigrants exists, in reality it is not easy to get to the country. The image of America as an immigrant land has deep historical origins as the modern U.S.A. was built by the immigrants who travelled there.

Smith continues his definition by emphasizing freedom as the most important element of the Dream:

... freedom to do what you want, freedom to choose your destiny, freedom leads to everythin' else, freedom to choose your career leads to how well you succeed, freedom to choose your religion leads to how you devote your pastime (personal communication, fall 2008).

This seems to reflect the ideal reality of everyday Americans who live in the United States. To them (or at least to some of them) freedom and individuality is very important. In America government does not have much influence on peoples' lives. For instance, most services, such as health care, are private corporations instead of government institutions. Also Duncan and Goddard associate this with the American Dream:

[The ]American Dream... is formulated upon the belief that government will not limit individual ambitions, either by restrictive laws or by using transfer income to gain an equality of outcome for others. Americans have consistently and overwhelmingly resisted any equality other than the equality of opportunity to achieve merit, and, thereafter, the rewards that merit brings (2005: 4).

Freedom stems from individuality and means that people can choose their own destinies. People can freely try to get rich and the wealth they gather is justifiably theirs.

The belief in hard work is strongly present in the United States. Work continues to be an important part of the Dream. Smith believes in the "rags to riches story": "it's very true, it takes determination, and it's possible" (personal communication, fall 2008). He finds that people who are poor or living in the streets are that by choice. He thinks that if one really worked

hard enough, one would be successful. And that not everyone wants to bother, so they are living in poverty. The belief that anything is possible as long as you work hard enough is one part of the promise of the American Dream.

*The Collins English Dictionary* finds economic success as the fulfilment of the Dream. It defines the American Dream as “the notion that the American social, economic, and political system makes success possible for every individual” (1998: 47). According to this view, it is not only the individual’s responsibility to become a self-made man: American institutions should provide conditions for people to become successful.

To sum up, the elements associated with the meaning of the American Dream are economic success, work, freedom, liberty, individuality, and equality. From the historical point of view, also religion, the immigrant dream, and Manifest Destiny are important parts of the concept. In my analysis, I have chosen four themes that I will analyse in Springsteen’s lyrics. Work, religion, Promised Land, and Manifest Destiny. Work has been Springsteen’s theme from the beginning, which is why also Kähkönen (1995) analyses this aspect in the songs. She discusses religion as well. Religious imagery can be found on all Springsteen albums. After the 9-11-2001 terror attacks, the issue became more noticeable than before. Also Kähkönen has a chapter called “The Promised Land”. She discusses the general situation of life in the U.S.A. whereas I, even though I have the same title, will discuss the immigrant dream, and the West and highways as symbols of freedom that keep the immigrant dream alive. My final chapter is Manifest Destiny. I will divide the chapter in two parts: first I will discuss America’s role in the world, and then I will talk about Springsteen’s social and political commentary on contemporary events that have taken place in the country. Even though the second part is not directly connected to Manifest Destiny, this being a political chapter, I find it relevant to discuss Springsteen’s stands in domestic politics here.

Springsteen's lyrics are a very important part of his work. The songs are deeply rooted in the American tradition, and are set in various American places from local bars to wide open plains. What is more, the lyrics contain lots of material for the analysis of the American Dream. Springsteen himself talks about his work:

I've spent 35 years writing about America and its people. What does it mean to be an American? What are our duties, our responsibilities, our reasonable expectations when we live in a free society? I saw myself less as a partisan for any particular political party, than as an advocate for a set of ideas. Economic and social justice, America as a positive influence around the world. Truth, transparency and integrity in government. The right of every American to a job, a living wage, to be educated in a decent school, to a life filled with the dignity of work, promise, and the sanctity of home. These are the things that make a life, that build and define a society. These are the things we think of on the deepest level, when we refer to our freedoms. (November 2008, Cleveland Vote For Change Rally [www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index\\_archive.html](http://www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index_archive.html))

Springsteen sees his lyrics as a reflection of Americanness and things associated with the country. With his music, he makes people think about their lives and the society they live in. As Cullen aptly states: "When I listen to Bruce Springsteen, I remember how to be an American" (1997: 202). Springsteen speaks for the ideals the U.S.A. represents, and hopes that Americans would work together in order to achieve a better country. He can be seen as an advocate for the American Dream, as he says about his career: "I spent most of my life as a musician measuring the distance between the American dream and American reality" (November 2008, Cleveland Vote For Change Rally [www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index\\_archive.html](http://www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index_archive.html)).

In the following chapters, I will show how Bruce Springsteen's songs reflect some of the traditional components of the American Dream. I have four core chapters: Work, Religion, The Promised Land, and Manifest Destiny. As Bruce Springsteen is often seen as a working-class hero, I will begin my analysis with work.

## 5. WORK

“The only thing worse than work is not havin’ it” (Coleman, 2009).

### 5.1. Workin’ That Hard Line – Work on Earlier Albums

Bruce Springsteen is seen as a working-class hero. As Kähkönen aptly states, “he has enforced his image of a worker by his workmanlike appearance of ragged jeans and sweaty-looking T-shirts” (1995: 52). This appearance gives credibility to his music, and connects him with ordinary people. Also in his concert in Tampere 2009, Springsteen wore blue jeans, a black T-shirt and a black vest. At the end of the concert his back was wet with sweat. As Smith states, Springsteen “considers his ‘job’ nothing less than hard work” (2002: 152). When Springsteen delivers his music in his concerts, he makes every moment count.

Kähkönen gives a broad overview on work in Springsteen’s lyrics before 1995. She tells briefly about some songs and how they deal with work. Her analysis clearly shows that in his lyrics it is not “self-evident that anyone can work their way to wealth and happiness” (1995: 52). She also concludes that work in Springsteen’s America is “a necessary evil after which one can have fun and really live” (1995: 60).

I must add, though, that there is a huge difference between those who have work and those who do not. Some characters have poorly-paid jobs or take dangerous measures to earn money, and for them the situation is not much better than for the unemployed. But the characters who have decent honest working-class jobs (even though the work would be hard), manage to go on quite well, precisely because they earn the money that is needed. It must be emphasized that work is a way to a decent life, and without it life often loses its meaning. This happens in many songs.

When a man loses his job, usually everything else goes with it. Lack of work is one thing that sends wives and girlfriends packing their bags.

“Downbound Train” (*BITUSA*, 1984) opens with the character’s description of the life he used to lead: “I had a job, I had a girl”. The two things are paralleled. However, as we can already guess, things have changed for him. He goes on stating “I got laid off down the lumber yard/ Our love went bad, times got hard”. Again work and the relationship are paralalled. Work is mentioned first. When something happens in the working life, it has direct consequences on love life. The narrator’s girlfriend packs her bags and leaves.

Also in “The River” (*The River*, 1980) times get tough without work. The young couple has to get married because the girl gets pregnant. They start their lives together but even the wedding seems more like a funeral than a happy beginning: “We went down to the court house/ and the judge put it all to rest”, the man recalls. He gets a job “working construction for Johnstown Company”. But then depression hits and he loses his job. Without work everything seems to lose its meaning: “all them things that seemed so important... they vanished right into the air”. And the relationship suffers “Mary acts like she don’t care” while the man acts like he does not remember. The river, which is a symbol of good times, dries out. Once full of life, it is now a sandy trail in the ground, haunted by the visions of the past.

When Springsteen describes unemployment in these two songs for instance, he does not suggest that it is self-inflicted. Jobs disappear and people are left on their own to struggle. The concerns of the workers have been important to him and in his concerts he often talks about unemployment. For example in Los Angeles in 1985, Springsteen played the song “This Land Is Your Land”, and introduced it by saying:

Liked to do a song for ya, that I guess is about..the greatest song ever written about America. It’s by Woody Guthrie. Now what’s so great about is it gets, it gets right to the heart of the promise of what our country was supposed to be about and I guess I don’t know, if you talk to some of the unemployed steel workers of East LA or Pittsburgh or Gary, there’s lotta people out there whose jobs are disappearin’. I don’t know if they feel this song is true anymore and uh I’m not sure that it is but I know that it oughta be so uh liked to do this for ya to remind ya that with countries just like with people, it’s easy to let the best of yourselves slip away ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yuc4BI5NWU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yuc4BI5NWU)).

Decent work, which is one part of the promise of the American Dream, is not real to all the citizens. Kähkönen has an excellent point that seems to reflect

well Springsteen's view: "[He] calls for a sense of community and the old working class culture, which are disappearing in the postmodern society" (1995: 62). This kind of sentiment does seem to come through, even though Springsteen does not demand direct action.

Over twenty years later, in 2009 in Tampere, Springsteen still talked about unemployment:

we've been sufferin' some of the hardest times since the Great Depression y'know uh... millions of people have lost their jobs over the past several years and hundreds of thousands in the recent months. Don't know when it's gonna get better. This is a song written by Stephen Foster it's called "Hard Times Come Again No More".

After the introduction he sang the song and delivered it with determination that was full of promise of better times. It is interesting to note how Springsteen connects past events with current situations. He refers to the economic struggles of the 1920s as similar difficulties people are facing today. He also makes a musical connection to the past. By performing old songs that have had different functions throughout the years, he reminds us of history and traditions. The American Dream has historical origins, and especially in the 1900s work has been a central issue in the United States. As Scheurer describes it, the people of the folk protest movement of the 1960s and '70s emphasized the importance of the worker (1991:151).

Springsteen's characters are often alienated individuals who do not get their share of the American promise. The power of his songs is in the depiction of people's everyday life. To Springsteen individual people and their fate are important. He does not blame the characters for their failure, nor does he not suggest that they did not work hard enough. Rather, America cannot provide success for everyone.

## **5.2. No Home, No Job, No Peace, No Rest**

In this section I will discuss Springsteen's releases from 1995 onwards. On his most recent albums, work has not been as prominent a theme as it was before.

Of the albums 1995 and after, *The Ghost Of Tom Joad* (1995) deals with work more than other records. However, on other albums as well, there is still working-class imagery.

*GTJ* is Springsteen's second folk album. It has the same bleakness as his first folk release *Nebraska* (1982). Now the characters are not ordinary working-class people. The work they end up doing is dangerous or poorly-paid, or illegal even. Lack of work and poor conditions lead to desperation and entices people to go into criminal ways. The album is set in the southwest, mostly in California, near the Mexican border. The area is very poor, and the album reflects the sentiments of the 1990s. At that time poor people were really struggling in the country, especially in the southwest. As Duncan and Goddard describe:

The disparity between rich and poor has widened dramatically since the 1990s as the economic boom helped the richest group get astonishingly richer, the middle class get a little richer, and the poor get significantly poorer.... The poor are concentrated into inner-city neighborhoods, mobile home parks throughout the South and West, Indian reservations, rented farm-houses across the Midwest, or wander from here to there – homeless and unwanted. Most of them struggle quietly to make ends meet, keep families together, and live their lives to the fullest degree possible in sometimes desperate circumstances (2005: 134) .

This description fits well the *GTJ* album too. Springsteen writes about people who live at the margins of society. He gives voice to the homeless, to immigrant workers and to former prisoners who are struggling to stay on the right side of the law. Work, which is an essential element of the dream, is either unavailable or the jobs are dangerous. People do not get enough pay and criminal ways entice them. Springsteen has similar style as folk singer's such as Woody Guthrie and young Bob Dylan. He tells the tales with the accompaniment of an acoustic guitar and harmonica. With this album, (like with *Nebraska*) Springsteen continues the American folk tradition. *GTJ* is a very important album that reflects contemporary sentiments. Musically the album is very different from Springsteen's rock albums. It shows another side to Springsteen's talents as a musician. The power of these songs is not in the pounding rock, but in the directness of Springsteen's storytelling.

On the title track, Springsteen gives an eerie image of the life in the southwest. In the acoustic version of the song, already the beginning is haunting. Springsteen opens with harmonica and acoustic guitar. What follows is the first verse:

Men walkin' 'long the railroad tracks  
 Goin' someplace there's no goin' back  
 Highway patrol choppers comin' up over the ridge  
 Hot soup on a campfire under the bridge  
 Shelter line stretchin' 'round the corner  
 Welcome to the new world order  
 Families sleepin' in their cars in the southwest  
 No home no job no peace no rest

There are homeless people wandering with nowhere to go. Police helicopters are arriving on the scene. Some people have to sleep in their cars. There are fires for the homeless to keep warm. There is also some kind of help for them as there is a shelter line. These people are living in terrible conditions both physically and mentally. They do not have a roof over their heads nor solid income. Living in this kind of uncertainty is tough and it is hard to find any peace of mind. "The new world order" is a reference to the boom that widened the gulf between rich and poor.

Tom Joad is a character in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes Of Wrath* (1939). There is also a movie about it made by John Ford (1940). The story is set in time of the Great Depression and the Joad family is forced to leave their home because of economic hardships. They are on the move looking for work. Woody Guthrie made a song about this in 1960. It is a very long song that summarizes the story. The last verse is:

Wherever little children are hungry and cry,  
 Wherever people ain't free.  
 Wherever men are fightin' for their rights,  
 That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma.  
 That's where I'm a-gonna be.

Springsteen's version is more compressed but has a similar ending. Again he brings an old story to this day. Just like people during the Great Depression



in the 1930s faced hard times, Springsteen shows how in the 1990s there are poor people in America who are struggling in the Southwest. In the 1990s there are similar hardships to those of the past. Tom Joad promised to always fight for the oppressed, as Guthrie's verse shows. The narrator of Springsteen's song sits by the campfire light and waits for the ghost of Tom Joad to keep his promise. At the end of the song he is there:

The highway is alive tonight  
 But nobody's kiddin' nobody about where it goes  
 I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light  
 With the ghost of old Tom Joad.

The album version is a haunting folk song, but in his concert in Tampere 2009, Springsteen performed it electrified. The song was a heavy rocker and the mood was very different from the acoustic version. There was more anger and rage now. Springsteen ended the song shouting "With the ghost of old Tom Joad! With the ghost of old Tom Joad!". With a current depression, the song gets new meanings that can also reflect modern times.

Springsteen continues the social commentary on *GTJ* by showing how the extreme poverty that jobless people face can lead to criminal actions. As people do not have enough money, they try to find other ways to survive. Springsteen tells about this desperation on his other records as well. On "Atlantic City" (*DOT*, 1978) the narrator has "debts no honest man can pay", so his only option is to do something dishonest: "so honey I met this guy and I'm gonna do a little favour for him". Since the debts he has are too big, he has no choice but to go outside the law to earn money.

Also on *GTJ* the danger of slipping into the wrong side of the line is constantly present. In "Straight Time", there is a family man who has done his time in jail and has now a job at the rendering plant. (A factory where the waste from slaughter houses end up and is recycled). It is not a pleasant job and it is very poorly-paid. The man says "it ain't gonna make me rich". His uncle has a successful business, he "makes his living runnin' hot cars". And the criminal ways are enticing the man as well: "I got a cold mind to go trippin' across that thin line/ I'm sick of doin' straight time". This person is

not happy with the poor life he is leading. He wants to risk it all by starting to make money in illegal ways.

Also the shoe salesman in "Highway 29", does not earn much. His shop is in the middle of nowhere, by the highway 29 instead of some town center. What is more, his shop is just a little roadhouse, and it is not likely that many people stop by to buy shoes there. He then turns to criminal ways and robs a bank with a woman who happened to drop by in his shop. He states the reason for it: "... it was somethin' in me / Somethin' had been comin' for a long long time". Thus, it can be the poverty that had been eating at him and he had a hunger and desperation for something better. Springsteen does not show contempt for the fall of his characters, nor does he put direct blame on the government. Rather he shows the humanity of people, and things desperation can lead to.

With "Youngstown", Springsteen continues to criticize the employment situation of war veterans. ("Born In The U.S.A." (*BITUSA* 1984) is another song from a point of view of a war veteran). Sawyers (2006) depicts the historical origins of "Youngstown" and tells about the research Springsteen did for it. The song is based on real life events. The narrator lives in an old steel town, Youngstown, Ohio. His father was also a war veteran, he fought in the Second World War, and then worked in the blast furnace, "kept'em hotter than hell". The narrator himself fought in Vietnam, and he too then worked in the factory. However the place closes down, "Now the yards just scrap and rubble", and the man is left jobless. His father observes: "Them big boys did what Hitler couldn't do". The market economy changed. As Sawyers points out, "in a symbolic blow to the already devastated community, Youngstown Sheet and Tube shut down the 500-ton Jeanette furnace in 1977" (2006: 141). Springsteen's song reflects this powerfully. Without work, the narrator is left "sinkin' down... in Youngstown".

On the album, Springsteen also describes the situation of immigrants. He depicts some poor jobs they have to do. Even though the reason some people migrate to America is the hope for a better life, the conditions in the

country may not be glorious. Some end up working illegally, or they do some criminal things to survive. Again Springsteen's songs reflect these issues.

Sawyers traces the origins of "Sinaloa Cowboys". She tells that "from bases in Sinaloa and elsewhere throughout Mexico, Mexican drug families operate a vast network of contacts... which allows them to produce methamphetamine" (2006: 143). According to her, Springsteen wrote the song inspired by a newspaper article on the topic, and even did some research and interviews for the song (2006: 143).

There are two Mexican brothers who cross the border to earn money. They get a job in the orchards, "doin' the work the hueros wouldn't do". Huero is a Spanish slang term for light-skinned Mexican or Whiteboy ([www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=huero](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=huero)). This is hard, poorly paid work and the brothers want to earn more. They then hear that "some men in from Sinaloa were lookin' for some hands" and end up in Fresno county (California). They then decide to work in the drug business, and they start cooking methamphetamine, which is an illegal drug. They do make more money this way: "You could spend a year in the orchards/Or make half as much in one ten hour shift". It is also very dangerous work, but the need for money is so big they are willing to take the chance. They have "a small tin shack on the edge of a ravine" where they prepare the drug. They come to a tragic end as the shack explodes and the younger brother dies in the explosion. The older brother carries and buries him in a eucalyptus grove. He digs their savings from the ground: ten thousand dollars, and the place becomes his brother's grave. Their father's warning had come true: "My sons one thing you will learn, for everything the north gives, it exacts a price in return." They paid a hard price for their enterprise.

According to Sawyers, another song on the album inspired by a newspaper article is "Balboa Park" (2006: 150). Balboa is a part of San Diego, California. She again traces the origins of the song and its real life setting: "Wealthy men driving BMWs circle the area... seeking out children and looking for easy drugs... The illegal youths... sleep in blankets under freeway

bridges" (2006: 150). Springsteen's song is from the point of view of one such youngster. In the first verse, Springsteen sums up the situation of his character:

He lay his blanket underneath the freeway  
 As the evening sky grew dark  
 Took a sniff of toncho from his coke can  
 And headed through Balboa Park  
 Where the men in their Mercedes  
 Come nightly to employ  
 In the cool San Diego evening  
 The services of the border boys

This seems to be quite a precise reflection of the real situation that many young immigrants face in Balboa. It is tragic life. This poor boy's home is in an underpass. Toncho is a dangerous substance, but he takes it when he heads to Balboa to earn some money by prostitution: He simply "did what he had for the money". Usually immigrants go to America so that they could send some of the money they earn home to their families. This boy is no exception: "sometimes he sent home what he could spare". However, he also spends money on drugs and clothes. Also this character comes to a tragic end as he gets hit by a car that then speeds away. The boy crawls under his blanket and slowly withers away.

In Springsteen's America the work immigrants have to do is often dangerous and they come to tragic ends. But lack of work and poor jobs force also other characters to take desperate measures in order to survive. But they are out of luck. The songs are not heroic survival stories of the fulfillment of the American Dream. The characters do not rise from rags to riches. Springsteen's songs are intriguing because he depicts people whose lives are on the line, who have to make desperate decisions to go on and who may not make it after all. He does not offer easy listening and romanticized visions, life is hard and it has the same rough frontier life feeling as Western movies. Especially *GTJ* is a very significant album in this respect. It is a true folk album with meaningful reflections on the America of its time.

The albums after *GTJ* are not as tragic but the same working-class and under-class elements are present. Throughout his career, Springsteen has been quite consistent on this theme (with the exception of a couple of songs in 1987-1992 in which he describes the unsatisfactory life of the rich). Also on *Devils&Dust* (2005), which is set in the West, the characters are in low professions. However, they are not always the main characters of the songs. For instance in "Reno" the lead character is a man who longs for his lost love. To ease his pain he visits a bordello and pays for the services of a prostitute. However, unlike the boy in "Balboa Park", this prostitute is a woman who does not make one pity her. She acts seductively and seems to have fun: "She poured me another whisky/ Said 'Here's to the best you ever had.'/ We laughed and made a toast". The song resembles a Western movie, because in them bordellos are quite a normal part of the scenery. (Because of this song there was a parental advisory sticker on the album).

Also a drug dealer has a minor role on the record. In "Black Cowboys" the main character is Rainey Williams, a small black boy who lives with his mother. Home is Rainey's safety haven in the dangerous neighborhood: "Rainey always had his mother's smile to depend on". However, things turn for the worse as a drug dealer, the boyfriend of the mother, moves to live with them: "The smile Rainey depended on dusted away". He then leaves his home in search of a better life. Drug trader destroys a happy home but at least nobody dies.

In recent years, work has not been as prominent a theme for Springsteen as it used to be. Political concerns, war, and religion have become more noticeable. However, also on *The Rising* (2002) Springsteen refers to working-class people, this time heroically. "Into The Fire" is a tribute to firemen who did not survive the 9/11 terror attacks. Springsteen tells a moving story about a fireman who rescues someone from the collapsing World Trade Center:

It was dark, too dark to see, you held me in the light you gave  
 You lay your hand on me  
 Then walked into the darkness of your smoky grave.

The fireman helped someone, and then simply walked back and never returned. The chorus is a tribute to his strength and faith: "May your strength give us strength/May your faith give us faith". With the song Springsteen reflects contemporary sentiments of the national tragedy of 9-11-2001 and the role of working class heroes.

On his most recent album *Workin' On A Dream*, work is not a main theme even though the title might suggest so. The name of the title track is a pun that refers to the American Dream. But it can also refer to people's own dreams, and that everyone can work to make them come true. Springsteen emphasizes the workman-like style of the song by whistling casually in the chorus like working men would do while doing their jobs. He also relates the song with working-class people by singing: "Rain pourin' down I swing my hammer/ My hands are rough from workin' on a dream". This also goes with Springsteen's own workman-like appearance.

This is the song Springsteen often performed in his rallies when he supported Barack Obama for president. The song reflects the hopeful national sentiments of the time. Even though times are tough, "The cards I've drawn's a rough hand darlin", the singer still has faith and determination: "I straighten my back and I'm working on a dream I'm working on a dream". Here Springsteen directly connects work with the Dream, and finds that Americans should work to make it real. He hopes that with Obama new times will arrive. Springsteen has openly criticized George W. Bush's government and has not been pleased with the things that have been going on in his land.

On the album, there is also "The Wrestler", the song Springsteen wrote for the movie of the same name. The song is quite similar to "The Hitter" from *D&D*. "The Hitter" is about a boxer who was a child when his mother sent him away because the police were after him. It is not said why. The son tells his story to his mother on her doorstep. He is no longer a child, he has been around and got beaten up badly. His better days are behind him, he will not fight any more in the ring, but does not turn down a fight outside

of it: “in the work fields and alleys I take all who'll come” he states. He justifies his profession: “Understand, in the end, Ma, every man plays the game/ If you know me one different then speak out his name”. He is like all the others. Everyone does what they have to do he suggests. Just like Springsteen’s many other characters, the hitter has ended up making a living the hard way.

Also “The Wrestler” (*WOD*) is a man who has done lots of fighting. He is an old man who does not know how to do anything other than his profession: it is his life. It seems like he has become a prisoner of his work. This is true for many other characters as well. They earn their money and the lifestyle goes into their blood. “Have you ever seen a one legged man tryin' to dance his way free” the wrestler asks because “If you've ever seen a one legged man then you've seen me”. He is now only half a man but he still keeps going on, he still keeps trying because it is all he has got: “My only faith is in the broken bones and bruises I display”.

All references to work in Springsteen’s lyrics are about working-class or under-class characters. He does not sing about those who are well off. He shows how not everyone has gotten their share of the American Promise, without judging those who do not make it. The songs do not reflect individualism as a typical American value at all. As Duncan and Goddard (2005: 183) point out

Americans detest the idea of a dependency culture and therefore expect individuals to take care of themselves within the market economy. There is a clear understanding of who makes up the deserving or undeserving poor.

Springsteen goes against this view by depicting the struggles and desperation that poverty and unemployment can lead to. He seems to suggest that government or Americans themselves should have more responsibility to help out those who are struggling. His songs demonstrate that in spite of the American ideals, the U.S.A. is not the land of prospects where people can control their own destinies. This is a strong statement, coming from a man who himself has, with faith and determination, managed to “make it big” in the United States.

Yet Springsteen's songs are not depressing gloomy stories. As he points out, in his songs music is "the unspoken subtext that the lyrics rest on... it informs the lyric with so much extra information, so much extra information" (*Storytellers* DVD, 2005). This is why, for instance, the rock anthem "Born In The U.S.A." is celebrated by fans around the world. Even though the lyrics describe the tough luck of being born in America, the music, rock'n'roll, is full of strength and determination. The narrator is not weak, and he keeps going on. Springsteen's melodies are very rarely melancholic. This of course depends on the listener as well. Everyone hears the songs differently. But to me, even in his acoustic songs, the melody is not sad. In fact there is a tension between the lyrics and the music. This contrast makes his music intriguing and gives it many dimensions.

In this chapter I have discussed work in Springsteen's lyrics. Work is important to him and he thinks that all the citizens should have a decent job. When people lose their jobs, things take a turn for the worse. Also immigrants are struggling to find work in his songs. Springsteen depicts the hard reality of the working life and unemployment, rather than the ideals associated with the American Dream.

Another essential theme in Springsteen's songs is religious imagery. On the next chapter I will analyze that.



## 6. RELIGION

Christianity is a big part of the American Dream and especially its origins. As Cullen states “the most powerful, long-standing source of inherited identity in American life is religion. This has been true from the very beginning” (1997: 165). This is not surprising since the country has its origins on the religious myths of the Promised Land. The importance of religion and the belief that the country has “God on its side” has persisted to this day. As Duncan and Goddard point out “Americans still believe the US is God’s nation” (2005: 9). In this chapter I will show how religious imagery is present in Springsteen’s lyrics.

### 6.1. All That Heaven Will Allow - Religion Before 1995

In this section I will give a brief overview on religious themes on the albums released before 1995. Both Kähkönen (1995) and Pirttijärvi (2005) have researched the topic. Kähkönen has one chapter in her thesis, whereas Pirttijärvi’s whole thesis, *“I believe in the promised land” the teachings of the Bible and Christian values in the song lyrics of Bruce Springsteen* is about religion. She covers Springsteen’s career from the beginning to 2005. Her paper is an indepth analysis of selected song lyrics from each decade from 1970s to 2000s. What drew her into liking Springsteen was the way he “very often makes that message of faith and hope sound possible and every day, instead of it being mere rhetoric” (2005: 2). She also states in the conclusion how when writing about religious issues “it is very easy to either glorify or criticize religious matters too much” (2005: 71). And thus she says that she has consciously tried not to let her views affect her writing and has concentrated on giving a fair assessment of what Springsteen has tried to say with his songs (2005: 71). Pirttijärvi manages to do that very well. Springsteen does not glorify nor criticize religious matters too much either.

Pirttijärvi analyzes religious imagery by choosing a couple of songs from each decade, songs that she finds most representative of his view on religion in that particular era. She states that “Christian values are the foundation of his music and do not deserve to be left in the shadow of politics” (2005: 4). She explains the biblical background of some songs and her work really helps us to understand and appreciate Springsteen’s songs more. Having read Pirttijärvi’s paper I now see some links that Springsteen sometimes makes by bringing biblical stories and references to this day.

Her main findings in Springsteen’s early work c.1969-1971 are that the lyrics have religious references that contain mockery towards Catholic doctrines, but not towards God: “Springsteen never insults God directly; he merely deals blows... at people who are acting in the name of God” (2005: 28). Yet she admits that if one asked “a hard-line Christian fundamentalist for an opinion regarding Springsteen’s early work.... he would probably accuse [him] of being blasphemous” (2005: 28). Kähkönen has a similar view: “Springsteen criticizes Catholicism and questions the values connected to it” (1995: 73). In his early career, Springsteen does not depict the Catholic religious institutions as a positive part of America. In this respect he does not present the Christian foundations of America and doctrinal values of the Catholic Church as idealistic.

This is the case on his first albums. Then there is a shift, as Kähkönen notices as well: in the following decade on *Tunnel of Love* (1987)

Springsteen’s characters have grown into adults, and along with a more mature approach to life their attitude towards religion changes as well. The songs no longer feature the same kind of light-hearted irony. People face new kind of uncertainty about themselves and their feelings, and search help from God (1995: 73).

As the characters mature, they struggle with relationships and marital life. Thus in her analysis of the American Dream in Springsteen’s lyrics, Kähkönen in fact relates religion to family. She finds that Springsteen’s “lyrics that contain religious images deal with family apart from a few exceptions” (1995: 70). She thus writes about both religion and family in the same chapter. On *HT* and *LT*, she finds that “the family and woman nearly achieve a godly

position” and that “the narrator seems to have found his God on earth, and treats his woman as his source of faith and salvation” (1995: 79). This seems somewhat overstated, especially considering Springsteen’s realistic style, although in three songs, “Real World” (*HT*), “Leap Of Faith”, and “Living Proof” (*LT*), religious images are connected with love on earth.

In 2005 on Devils And Dust Tour in Detroit, Springsteen talked about the birth of his own child when he introduced “Long Time Comin’ ”:

I remember my first son was born, it was like Jesus has arrived. Stop everythin’. ‘member I went outside and couldn’t believe people were still shoppin’, stop that shoppin! don’t you know Jesus has arrived? and um about fourteen years later “Jesus” kinda looks at you like you’re a tolerable idiot however... it’s bad enough when I see my kids actin’ like me, when I see ‘em actin’ like my dad it’s really bad. That’s when you know you’ve really screwed up... I kinda set this in the West, there’s a sense of rebirth rebirth of spirit, this is called “Long Time Comin’ ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUaxEdv-Jss](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUaxEdv-Jss))

The quote is not to be taken too seriously, because he meant some of the things to be humorous and he and the audience laughed. It actually fits better as an introduction to “Livin’ Proof” (*LT*), in which a father is moved by the birth of his son, and finds it living proof of God’s mercy. (In the “Long Time Comin’ ” there are not overtly religious connections with family). Nevertheless the quote reflects Kähkönen’s ideas about the connection of religion and family in a couple of Springsteen’s songs.

Kähkönen sums up her analysis of religion by stating that the characters “do not find their comfort and salvation from prayers to God; the source of their happiness is in the family and love” (1995: 80). Pirttijärvi on the other hand finds that on *Lucky Town* “Springsteen wrote of matrimony, children and family... as things that are sacred and gifts of grace that strengthen one’s belief in God” (2005: 62). Thus family and love itself may not be the way to happiness as Kähkönen suggests, but the connection to God the characters have found through family.

Both views fit on some Springsteen songs. Pirttijärvi aptly refers only to *LT* with her comment, whereas Kähkönen’s generalization seems too broad to cover all Springsteen’s lyrics from 1971 to 1995. The characters do not always find salvation in their prayers to God, but nor are their relationships

heavenly. *TOL* (1987) is about pain and misery rather than sacred visions of love and family. The characters are troubled. Love and fear are inseparable: "On his right hand Billy tattooed the word love and on his left hand was the word fear" ("Cautious Man"). It does not reflect the idea from the Bible, according to which real love takes away all fears "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment" (Online Bible, King James' version 1 John 4:18 [www.christnotes.org/bible.php?q=love++fear&ver=kjv](http://www.christnotes.org/bible.php?q=love++fear&ver=kjv)). This might however refer to the love of God, because people are not perfect.

What is more, the relationships in the songs do not seem to last. Something seems to go wrong. As discussed in the previous chapter, unemployment destroys some relationships. At times the characters just leave with no obvious reason. Then they might end up in bars looking for someone who has been hurt too. Some are not even divorced when they are looking for romance. Thus the characters do not lead ideal Christian, let alone Catholic, lives. The characters have premarital relationships, and can divorce. Thus the songs are above all about the realities of life rather than doctrinal or moralizing. From the albums from 1995 onwards, however, there are new themes on religious issues. Next I will talk about those.

## 6.2. Come On Up For The Risin'!

There are still some connections between religious imagery and family on Springsteen's albums from 1995 onwards. In "New Timer" (*GTJ*), the narrator is on the road during the Great Depression to find work. He leaves his family behind. He rambles the country doing various odd jobs. He sleeps in a tent by a campfire. When his partner is killed, he starts to seek vengeance. On his way he then sees "a vision": "A small house sittin' trackside / With the glow of the Saviour's beautiful light". He sees a family in the house: "A woman stood cookin' in the kitchen/ Kid sat at the table with his old man". It can be a

reflection of the Holy Family of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus as well. But it is also a very ordinary scene. There is warmth and food and safety inside the house, all the things the man is lacking. That is why to him this view is a heavenly vision and it reminds him of his home: "Now I wonder does my son miss me/ Does he wonder where I am". Thus again work, or lack of it, has divided a family.

There are also other songs about broken relationships, although not as many as on previous albums. The narrator in "All The Way Home" (*D&D*, 2005) could well be the same man from "Tougher Than The Rest" (*TOL*, 1987), only now twenty years older. In both songs the man hangs out in bars. Whereas earlier he was confident: he was "tougher than the rest", he now has failed and "come crashin' like a drunk on a bar room floor", he knows that he no longer is a woman's "first choice" but he does not even care anymore. He is looking for a cheap romance and is practically begging a woman in a bar to let him walk her "all the way home". Again bars and one night stands do not reflect Christian ideals of a decent life. And neither does "Reno" (*D&D*) in which a man visits a prostitute.

"I'll Work For Your Love" (*Magic*, 2007), on the other hand, toys with Catholic imagery as a man praises a woman, Theresa. Even the name has religious connotations as there are many Catholic saints of that name. Her profession however is very mundane, she is a bartender. The narrator sits on a stool and watches Theresa work. He describes the woman in religious terms. The bones in her back are "like stations of the cross", around her hair "the sun lifts a halo", at her "lips a crown of thorns", in her eyes there lie open "the pages of Revelation", and her tears "fill the rosary". The religious imagery is so overtly stated that the song seems more like a joke than a serious plea for love. Even the mundane setting of a bar adds to this irony. The song seems to bear a connection to some of Springsteen's first songs with its use of religious imagery in an unusual context.

On *WOD* (2009) Springsteen's characters have grown and matured. From teenage street life to struggles of commitment, the characters have now

found consolation in their companionships. Work, which used to be connected with success in relationships, is now absent. It seems the characters might have retired and are more relaxed in their worldviews. They are older now and to them love is more reliable than it was when they were young and moody.

The connections to religion are mostly references to after life and to faith that love goes on after death: "This life, this life and then the next/ with you I have been blessed" ("This Life"). Also in "What Love Can Do" the narrator acknowledges the realities of life and finds that love matters. He describes the world in Old Testamental terms: "Here where it's blood for blood and an eye for an eye/Let me show you what love can do". This refers to the justice system of the Old Testament where crimes and offenses were to be punished in "an eye for an eye" principle. But to him love is important in this vengeful world where people keep on fighting without forgiveness.

The narrator also refers to original sin: "Here we bear the mark of Cain/ We'll let the light shine through". We have ties that bind, we have all been marked by the sin of the past, the narrator suggests, but again he finds there is a way out towards something better. Light is often associated with God and angels. The light that shines through can then refer to love that overcomes sins and evilness of the world and even the mark of Cain. He also acknowledges the toll of time:

When the bed you lie on is nails and rust  
 And the love you've given's turned to ashes and dust  
 When the hope you've gathered's drifted to the wind  
 And it's you and I my friend  
 You and I now friend

The narrator finds that he and his friend would still be united in the afterlife. But he also sees that they should be together already now before death takes its toll.

Thus there still seems to be a connection between religious imagery and family, although differently than in his earlier work. The theme has

evolved into a new direction as the characters have matured and found comfort in their relationships.

In recent years Springsteen has actually made some gospel songs and songs that are very spiritual. This is not to say Springsteen now supports Christian values. Religious imagery is not doctrinal in his lyrics. There are no ideal Christian ways how to lead a life. Whether it comes to religion or other matters, Springsteen does not judge his characters and he does not moralize. Nor does he preach or judge those who do not have faith or give it up. Just the opposite. And he is not trying to convert people or cast judgments upon "sinners". But at no point do the characters deny or even question the existence of God. Springsteen himself does not come out as a Christian preacher. But he speaks for those who are troubled. By his non-judgemental attitude and siding with the poor he sees the realities of life and emphasizes the faith of the downtrodden, as in "Land Of Hopes And Dreams" (*The Essential Bruce Springsteen*, 2003).

The song does not judge people on the basis of their actions for it is faith that "will be rewarded". In a way the song is very Christian as it shows the equality of people and how it is faith that counts. Pirttijärvi even states that "the narrator is paraphrasing Jesus Christ and calling everybody to join him on a ride to 'the land of hopes and dreams' " (2005: 73). The song kind of reflects Springsteen's other tunes because the people onboard of the train are people he sings about. But now there are also successful people onboard, and Springsteen's struggling low class characters are on the same level with them:

This train  
Carries saints and sinners  
This train  
Carries losers and winners  
This Train  
Carries whores and gamblers  
This Train  
Carries lost souls...  
This Train  
Carries broken-hearted  
This Train  
Thieves and sweet souls departed

This Train  
 Carries fools and kings  
 This Train  
 All aboard

Pirttijärvi finds that the song is based on an old spiritual "This Train" and finds that Springsteen has an opposite message as that of the original:

["This Train"] will only accept "the righteous and the holy" aboard: there is absolutely no room on it for people who have sinned. Springsteen's "Land Of Hope And Dreams"... there is no exclusion whatsoever on the train heading for the land of hope and dreams...(2005: 63).

There does seem to be a sort of a connection between the songs. However, I find "The Land Of Hope And Dreams" is actually more similar to "People Get Ready" (1964, Curtis Mayfield). Both songs emphasize faith as the only thing that is needed. In his concert in Tampere 2009 Springsteen actually ended the song with a line from "People Get Ready" by singing in slow motion: "People get ready there's a train a-comin', you don't need no ticket, you just get onboard". The line is a direct reference to Mayfield's song:

People get ready, there's a train a-comin'  
 You don't need no baggage, you just get on board  
 All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'  
 Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.

Springsteen's song also has a strong sense of unity and connection. That is why I expected to hear it in his concert in Tampere 2009. It did create intense atmosphere, and got the audience more involved. Springsteen's songs have many dimensions and can have different meanings in different times and situations. Also rock'n'roll itself can be spiritual. Finnish magazines wrote about the concert using religious terms. For instance Hakola describes the concert as a "rock mass" where the preacher and the congregation were all one (*Vekkari*, June 4<sup>th</sup> 2009). Yet this does not mean the event was a religious gathering, rather it implies the power of rock'n'roll and the life and strength Springsteen delivers in his concerts.

When it comes to religion, I do not know if Springsteen has faith in God. Sometimes he wears a cross on his chest. But people can wear crosses



without making religious stands with them. In his songs, however, people express faith in God, sometimes quite casually, and they never doubt or deny His existence. In this sense also the religious part of the American Dream as a central part of American culture is present in his songs. As Duncan and Goddard point out, “Perhaps the greatest gap between US and other nations of the industrialized world is over American faith in an active God” (2005: 164). The fact that religious imagery seems to be a part of characters’ everyday life and God drifts somewhere in the songs, reflects the importance of Christian values and ideals that have long traditions in America, and that still continue to influence today.

Springsteen has a Catholic background and he often mentions it. In 2005 in Madison, Wisconsin, he introduced the song “Jesus Was An Only Son” (*D&D*) by saying:

grew up surrounded with the catholic faith... and uh, it was a faith that was filled with beauty and poetry and absurdity and terror y’know, so uh anyway, y’know, these are the hand these are the cards we’re dealt with. I’ve written a lot of songs filled with a lot of catholic imagery. When I was writin’ songs about parents and children my twisted mind of course would drift back and try to think what it would be like if it had Jesus as someone’s son. ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJjLrtRixME](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJjLrtRixME))

Springsteen seems to have both positive and negative experiences about Catholicism. In his youth he did not fit in and had some bad experiences (Marsh, 2004). Maybe he has gotten some distance to those things and he can now draw from the beauty and poetry of Catholicism and use that imagery in his work. He even jokes about his Catholic upbringing: “it’s uh once you’re a Catholic there’s no way out, that’s all there is to it, it keeps comin’ up”, he says laughing (*Storytellers DVD*, 2005).

In “Jesus Was An Only Son” Springsteen sings from the point of view of Mary, Jesus’ mother. He approaches the core events of Christian religion in very ordinary terms. The story does not have dramatic elements nor does it mention the deep reasons for Jesus’ death. He too had a mother and she might have grieved for the loss of her child. Springsteen shows this side of the story. In the song the relationship between Jesus and Mary is very close. Just like any mother, Mary looks after her son and they spend time

together. Jesus reads the Psalms of David at his mother's feet, Springsteen describes.

But Jesus has to leave this world and so he "prayed for the life he'd never live". To Mary his death is "a loss that can never be replaced". She will always miss her son. Jesus consoles his mother: "Mother, still your tears/ For remember the soul of the universe/ Willed a world and it appeared". This suggests that there are bigger things in life, things that we do not always understand. And that Mary should not be sad because in the end it is all in God's hands.

The song is not really that much different from Springsteen's other work. Just like some other songs, it too has a tragic story and characters who have to deal with loss and the consequences of their choices. Springsteen always tells his stories in ordinary terms, and the power is often in the understatement. Dramatic events are expressed with no emotion or commentary and music often creates a contrast with the lyrics. In this sense Springsteen has a similar way to tell his stories as traditional balladeers and folk singers.

With the *SS* album (2006) Springsteen really connects himself to the American folk tradition and thus reinforces his image as a folk singer. He has included three traditional gospel songs on the album: "Oh Mary Won't You Weep", "Jacob's Ladder", and "Eyes On The Prize". Even though none of these are written by Springsteen, the fact that he has chosen to include these on *SS* reflects where he is at and what he wants to convey with his music.

For instance, with "Jacob's Ladder", Springsteen brings a story from the Bible to the present. He treats Jacob as a character we can all relate to, just like he universalizes his own characters. In one of his concerts he presents the song. (The date and place of the concert are not available, but as Springsteen performs this with the Seeger Sessions Band, it must be from 2006) He says:

This is uh a song called "Jacob's Ladder", ah its figure, it's Jacob, read up on him the other night and he was sorta somebody that was always doin' it wrong in God's eyes and uh God kept givin' him things to do to work his way back into grace and uh step by step and he'd screw up again and step by step by step until finally I guess he got there he got there

sorta close but uh. so this is sorta uh we are all climbin' Jacob's ladder round by round by round. You can ask my wife. ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYbmJSfGGpY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYbmJSfGGpY))

Even here, the keyword is struggle. That is what practically all Springsteen's characters face at some point of their lives. In the song, Jacob is like the rest of us. No one leads a perfect life. Everybody screws up sometimes. And whether it is about people working their way back to God or trying to get their lives back together, in a way we all "are climbing Jacob's ladder", Springsteen suggests.

"Keep Your Eyes On The Prize" is about staying strong in faith when facing struggles on earth, because a reward awaits. The old gospel song "Oh Mary Don't You Weep" is also a story inspired by the Old Testament. It is about God drowning Pharaoh's army so that Moses and the nation of Israel could make their way to the Promised Land. This is a biblical story from which the traditional images of America originate.

Springsteen's other songs are not as clearly gospel as these. However, with *The Rising*, he emphasizes faith perhaps more than on any other album. The importance of faith does come through in some songs before this album. For example in "Promised Land" (*DOT*), there is a twister coming that will "blow everything down/ That ain't got the faith to stand its ground". The narrator exclaims "mister I ain't a boy, no I'm a man/ And I believe in a promised land". Springsteen played it in Tampere (2009), and to me it was the most convincing performance of the concert. Springsteen played furiously on his harmonica and the audience got to shout "blow away!" to all the things the twister was going to take away.

Springsteen released *The Rising* after the terror attacks of 9-11-2001. It reflects the smokey, fiery images and the sense of loss and emptiness that the incident brought. Religious imagery, faith, prayers and God are strongly present on the album. They are part of people's everyday life after a tragedy. The album offers hope and consolation to Americans, and gives a sense of national unity in times of hardship. With this album Springsteen encourages the listeners to "come on up for the risin' ".

The album reflects contemporary sentiments. As Duncan and Goddard point out “since 11 September and with the war in Iraq, religion has become more noticeable” (2005: 158). Because the terrorists were Muslims, both Christianity and Islam have gotten more attention, and prejudices towards Muslims have also increased. Springsteen does not make racist comments with his songs. In fact on the contrary. “Worlds Apart” is a love story between an American man and a Muslim woman who are torn between two worlds: “Down from the mountain road where the highway rolls to dark /'Neath Allah's blessed rain we remain worlds apart”. The narrator thinks that the truth might be “too much in times like this” and finds that only love matters. As times are hard he states: “May the living let us in before the dead tear us apart”. This might refer to the dead of the terror attacks and the troubled times that will follow. With this story Springsteen shows how there are ordinary people whose lives the attacks affect, and that both Americans and Muslims are humans who can interact with each other. The same idea comes up in “Born In The U.S.A.” when the Vietnam war veteran recalls that his American comrade in arms had “a woman he loved in Saigon”.

The title track, “The Rising” is a significant song, Springsteen even played it in President Obama’s inaugural concert. He tells about the tune on the *Storytellers* DVD (2005). The song begins with “Can’t see nothin’ in front of me, can’t see nothin’ comin’ up behind”. Springsteen explains the lines: “Well that’s you uh I start the song in the Netherworld that’s uh someplace you’ve never been, it’s but it’s *your* world y’know but it’s been transformed by this into this unknown unknown and unknowable place”. All this darkness can also be seen as a reflection of the dark times after the terror attacks or dark times in general. But it can also refer to a belief in a spiritual world in a religious sense as Springsteen himself suggests.

In the afterlife the departed souls are not dead but alive: “Spirits above and behind me faces gone black eyes burnin’ bright/ May their precious blood bind me, Lord as I stand before your fiery light”. Springsteen explains the lines: “Alright, spirits above and behind me, you pray to be

guided by those who have gone before you, you pray them to guide you and to give you courage when you're goin' to need it." (*Storytellers* DVD, 2005). Springsteen thus finds that those who already are in this netherworld will be there to welcome those who arrive. This is a very spiritual place. However, the song again reads as a reflection of the terror attacks. "Faces gone black" can refer to the smoke and fire that consumed people on that day of horror. The narrator then seeks help from God and prays that the lost lives will not be forgotten. The fact that also God's light is fiery suggests that in the end all lives are in God's hands, also those who were lost in the attacks.

Thus the song reflects the loss of 9-11 terror attacks, and it then consoles those who have lost their loved ones, whom they will meet again. It can also reflect American history, the patriots and American heroes who died for their country have passed away but their sacrifice and memory is still alive and respected. There is also a clear connection with the loss that the country faced on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, but this can refer to any chaos as well: "Left the house this mornin', bells ringin' fill the air". Springsteen explains this image: "So what bells? Now there's sirens, church bells, the tolling bell uh there's bells of chaos, bells of transformation." All these bells are strong sounds with their associations. Sirens - the chaos and destruction. Tolling bell - funeral. Bells of transformation - afterlife.

In 2008-2009 the song conveyed a sense of national unity and rising up into new era, when Springsteen performed all over America to support Barack Obama for president. This was also seen in Obama's inaugural concert, (Finnish TV, February 2009) when Springsteen opened the event with "The Rising". He walked to the stage with his acoustic guitar, behind him he had a full gospel choir that sang the chorus. The song reflected new times and hope for Americans to "roll up [their] sleeves and come on up for the rising" (Bruce Springsteen, November 2, 2008, Cleveland's Vote For Change Rally [www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index\\_archive.html](http://www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index_archive.html)).

Religious images of the American Dream are very traditional. As Cullen states:

the heart of the Puritans' American Dream was what they called their "covenant", an implicit pact with God that he would provide for them spiritually if they formed a community to honor him according to his precepts as they understood them. This American Dream was a religious dream, as were many subsequent versions of the Dream (1997: 53).

The nation was, at least from a certain point of view, based on Christianity and the faith that the nation had God on its side. As the terror attacks brought chaos to New York, Springsteen shows that it is possible to rise from the "city of ruins" with the help of God. He describes the destruction in "My City Of Ruins" (*The Rising*):

The boarded up windows  
 The empty streets  
 While my brother's down on his knees  
 My city of ruins  
 My city of ruins

The homes are abandoned. There is no one around. Someone is left in the deserted town. He is devastated and probably praying. The narrator observes the scene and wonders how to go on: "My soul is lost, my friend/Tell me how do I begin again?". The song then turns to gospel and prayer:

Now with these hands  
 With these hands  
 I pray Lord  
 With these hands  
 With these hands  
 I pray for the strength, Lord...  
 We pray for your love, Lord  
 We pray for the lost, Lord  
 We pray for this world, Lord  
 We pray for the strength, Lord.

These may well be also the words of the brother from the first verse. The music is uplifting and thus gives a sense reaching towards God and overcoming difficult times. The song ends with Springsteen exclaiming "Come on rise up" "Come on rise up!" as an encouragement for Americans to survive hard times.

On *Live in Barcelona* DVD (2003) there is a moving rendition of the song. Springsteen opens by playing piano while the band hums in the

background. The music is light and inviting. As the song moves into prayer the E-street band starts playing and Springsteen steps away from the piano to lead. The song ends with Springsteen demanding his listeners to “rise up”.

“Nothing Man”, on the other hand, (*The Rising*) is about heroism. It could well be from a point of view of one of the men involved in the 9-11 rescue operations and who is then considered a hero because of that. The narrator is a bit puzzled about this change in his life:

I never thought I'd live  
To read about myself  
In my hometown paper  
How my brave young life  
Was forever changed  
In a misty cloud of pink vapor.

He does not think highly of himself. He is surprised how all of a sudden his life has changed in a smokey situation. Again this might be the dust and smoke of the 9/11 terror attacks, or some other event where he became a hero and then got into his hometown paper. Yet he constantly says that he is “the nothing man”. And when people come to talk to him he simply says: “You can call me Joe/ Buy me a drink and shake my hand”. Joe is a very typical name in America. People can say “Joe everybody” when referring to someone who is very ordinary. In the song the statement “you can call me Joe” suggests that there is nothing special about this man. He says to these people who find him courageous: “You want courage/I'll show you courage you can understand”, he says, “Pearl and silver / Restin' on my night table / It's just me Lord, pray I'm able”. This can refer to a cross or to a rosary and so to him true courage is to turn to God. Sometimes people consider soldiers or fire fighters as heroes. Joe could well be a fire fighter who did his duty on the tragic day of 9/11. However these “heroes” rarely consider themselves as heroic. They might be very humble and may not feel that what they have done is so courageous. Maybe God is Joe's strength and courage.

What comes through in Pirttijärvi's (2005) analysis is that some Springsteen's songs have their roots in the Old Testament. One such thing is

the concept of original sin that seems to be a fundamental part of the characters' lives. From the song "Adam Raised a Cain" (*DOT*) onwards, Springsteen shows how people are connected to the legacy of Cain and to the inherited sin. There seems to be a cycle: Adam, who had sinned, passed the legacy of sin to his son Cain, who had "same hot blood runnin' in his veins" and then killed his brother. In "Long Time Comin' " the narrator is a father who wishes: "if I had one wish in this godforsaken world, kids/It'd be that... your sins would be your own" (*D&D*). In the Old Testament, the children had to pay for the deeds of their fathers. Here the father wishes that his kids would not have to pay for the sins that he has committed. Yet the legacy of the Old Testament cannot be avoided because "here we bear the mark of Cain" ("What Love Can Do", *WOD*).

What Springsteen also draws from the Old Testament is the justice system. In Exodus 21:24 it says "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot," ([www.online-literature.com/bible/bible\\_search.php](http://www.online-literature.com/bible/bible_search.php) King James's online version). These lines mean that all bad things must be punished equally. If someone breaks someone's hand, then he shall lose his too. Springsteen uses this image and idea of revenge to describe the world we live in, and links the contemporary world with its Old Testamental origins.

On *The Rising* there are two songs that reflect this view. In "Lonesome Day" there is an ominous atmosphere:

Hell's brewin' dark sun's on the rise  
 This storm'll blow through by and by  
 House is on fire, Viper's in the grass  
 A little revenge and this too shall pass  
 This too shall pass, I'm gonna pray

Viper is a metaphor for sin and evil, as it was the snake that lured Eve to act against God's will. Something ominous is about to happen and sun which brings light is now dark. These are not good omens. What is more, the narrator tries to seek revenge. In a sense this atmosphere reflects sentiments of the 9/11, because it is likely that Americans wanted justice, maybe even revenge, for the attacks. There is a warning in the song as well: "Better ask



questions before you shoot/ Deceit and betrayal's bitter fruit/It's hard to swallow, come time to pay". Again, as Kähkönen aptly points out, "everything... in Springsteen's songs, seems to involve paying a price" (1995: 83). Nevertheless, even though the narrator in "Lonesome Day" is surrounded with bad omens, he is determined to pull through and resorts to prayer.

The biblical imagery from the Old Testament is present also in "Empty Sky". The character has lost his loved one and is now in pain: "I want a kiss from your lips/ I want an eye for an eye/ I woke up this mornin' to the empty sky". "Eye for an eye" is a clear reference to the Old Testament as the man yearns for justice for his loss. Also the setting of the song is very biblical:

On the plains of Jordan  
I cut my bow from the wood  
Of this tree of evil  
Of this tree of good  
I want a kiss from your lips  
I want an eye for an eye  
I woke up this mornin' to an empty sky.

He finds himself making a bow out of the tree of good and evil which was the Tree of Knowledge from which Adam and Eve were not allowed to eat. Taking a fruit from this tree was the very thing from which the cycle of sin started in the first place. The fact that Springsteen's character is taking material for his revenge from the same tree gives an eerie image of the human nature and past errors.

### 6.3. Faith Just Ain't Enough

Even though the characters never question the existence of God, faith simply is not always enough to keep them going. Pirttijärvi finds there are two types of songs dealing with what she calls "loss of faith" in Springsteen's work:

songs in which vengeance... becomes more important for the character than the faith in God, and songs, in which the character loses his faith because he feels like his own actions or society's have failed him so badly that there is no reason to even look forward to receiving God's salvation (2005: 43).

These type of songs do seem to be present in Springsteen's work. Even though some make a choice that is not a desirable one by Christian standards, it does not mean that they no longer have faith in God. Sometimes life is so hard that the characters get so depressed they are not looking for anything better, not in this world nor in the next. Pirttijärvi (2005) finds that when they lose their faith they give up on God and go to hell. She tells that

Springsteen has two songs that deal with revenge and people choosing revenge instead of their faith: "The New Timer" and "Empty Sky". What makes taking revenge into one's own hands (and hurting somebody in the process) a sign of faithlessness in Christian faith is that when one does not trust the idea that God is the only one who can pass judgment and take revenge (2005: 44).

However, it is not obvious in "The New Timer" (*GTJ*) that the character actually loses his faith, he merely states that it is not enough: "My Jesus your gracious love and mercy/ Tonight I'm sorry could not fill my heart/ Like one good rifle And the name of who I ought to kill". He is lusting for vengeance for the senseless murder of his friend and is willing to execute his plan. The pain has taken over and he finds no consolation in God's love. All he yearns for is justice. It seems that the narrator's partner could have been killed by the serial killer of "Nebraska": "Nothin' taken, nothin' stolen / Somebody killed him just to kill". This kind of evilness of the world drives the narrator into despair.

Also the singer in "Youngstown" (*GTJ*) is struggling and the song has religious images. The narrator is a victim of injustices of society. He is a Vietnam war veteran who works on a factory producing military equipment. Pirttijärvi thinks this person is proud of his work and sees it "as a God-given

gift" because he says about his workplace: "Them smokestacks reachin' like the arms of God into a beautiful sky of soot and clay" (2005: 51). There is an odd contrast, however, because the man finds that his job as a scarfer, (which is a hard job in metallurgy), is the kind of job "that'd suit the devil as well" and the furnaces are "hotter than hell". Also one does not normally consider a sky that is filled with soot and clay as beautiful. The image of "arms of God" coming out from the hellish underground furnaces is rather disturbing.

It might even be a symbol of people who run the company. They get rich because of the hard-working men by the furnaces. When the narrator loses his job he says "Now sir you tell me the world's changed / Once I made you rich enough/ Rich enough to forget my name". As Sawyers states "The workers made the Carnegies and Fricks of the world rich, but now they don't even have the decency - or vision - sings Springsteen, to keep the mills open" (2006: 142).

The image of hell connected with the narrator's workplace creates a fiery atmosphere. At the end of the song the narrator, a tired man disappointed in the way the world works, makes his final prayer: "When I die I don't want no part of heaven/ I would not do heaven's work well/ I pray that devil comes and takes me to stand in the fiery furnaces of Hell". It is a very powerful ending. He used to work the furnaces in the factory and now he wants to work for the Devil himself. At least he has the job experience. It is as if he has become a part of the flames and heat. He keeps saying "My sweet Jenny I'm sinkin' down " (Jenny being the blast furnace). He is going down towards Hell until he finally wishes to be a part of it.

Somewhat similar spiritual imagery comes up in "Devils n Dust" (*D&D*). Springsteen says it is "a story 'bout bein' placed into a situation where your choices are unattainable and the price of that inflicts in blood and in spirit" (*Storytellers DVD*). The song focuses on an inner conflict one faces in this kind of situation. Sawyers suggests it is "from a soldier's point of view and set during the Iraq war" (2005: 175). It is easy to view Springsteen's songs in relation to the contemporary America because they reflect the times when

they are written. However, "Devils n Dust" has many dimensions and it can reflect the choices that people make in different situations.

The character is "a long long way from home". He is not on familiar ground and that makes him even more unsettled. He feels "a dirty wind blowin', devils 'n' dust". There is no comfort, there are evil things in the air. He has his finger on the trigger, but he does not know whom to trust. This can mean literally that he has a gun in his hand, the power of life and death in the small twist of finger. However, one can also see "finger on the trigger" as a symbol of situations where people are about to make choices. What is right? What is wrong? How to know what to do? The narrator is trying to figure out how far one can go in order to survive: "what if what you do to survive kills the things you love" he wonders. Which one is more important survival or ideals? Would he be willing to die for his values? If he chooses to survive he would have to live with the consequences and pay the price.

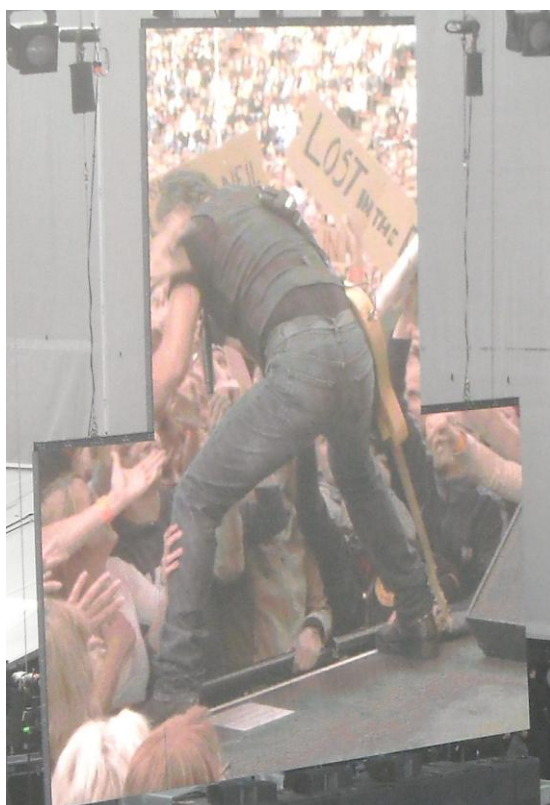
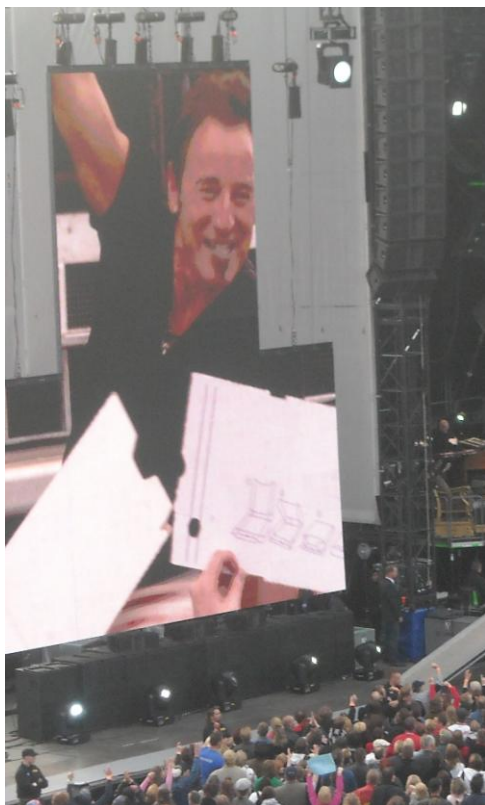
The narrator believes in God, in fact he even thinks he has "got God on [his] side". But will his faith be enough? Dirty wind blows and his judgement begins to cloud because fear starts to take over. "Fear's a powerful thing" he says, "it'll turn your heart black you can trust/ it'll take your God-filled soul/ Fill it with devils 'n' dust". In the Bible God says many times "Fear not" (e.g. Luke 1:13 King James' Online Bible, [www.online-literature.com/bible/bible\\_view.php/Luke?term=fear not](http://www.online-literature.com/bible/bible_view.php/Luke?term=fear%20not)). Fear blocks the narrator's connection to God and his way of knowing what is right and wrong. Devils and dust can fill one's mind and drive people to desperate deeds. In his heart he still wants to do what is right: "every woman and every man/ They wanna take a righteous stand / Find the love that God wills/ And the faith that He commands". He battles with fear and faith, struggling to make a decision while the circumstances are menacing. But the wind that blows, fills his mind with devils and dust until he finds that "tonight faith just ain't enough/ When I look inside my heart/ There's just devils 'n' dust".

With this song, Springsteen manages to depict an intriguing situation of a person who is struggling, who feels the things emotionally and

tries to rationalize to make the right choice. The fact that he comes to a tragic end, depicts the harsh realities of life and humanity of people. The power of the song would not be the same had he overcome the situation. It also functions as a reminder of dangers of fear, and how people might end up with hearts filled with “devils ‘n’ dust”. The struggles of life in Springsteen’s songs are fascinating, and he is very convincing in depicting these.

In this chapter I have discussed religious issues in Springsteen’s lyrics. The songs do not reflect the traditional Christian values that immigrants were eager to spread as they first came to the New World with a civilizing mission. Religious doctrines or ideal ways to lead one’s life are not there either. However, God, the Devil, faith, and the afterlife are present on a real life level. Sometimes the characters find “living proof” and answers to their prayers. Some end up stating that their “faith just ain’t enough”.

In the next chapter I will discuss the immigrant dream of America, and the meaning of the West in Springsteen’s songs.



Bruce Springsteen in Tampere, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009. (Pictures by Mika Kyyhkynen).



In 2008 Springsteen rallied across America supporting Obama for president.

(Picture:<http://media.photobucket.com/image/bruce%20springsteen%20obama/icebergslim1047/september%2028/philadelphiabrucepringsteenvoteforc.jpg>)

Springsteen in the press conference of National Football League. He played in halftime of Superbowl 2009. Super Bowl is the championship game of the NFL.

(Picture:<http://blogs.mercurynews.com/aei/wpcontent/uploads/2009/01/theboss halftime4.jpg>)



In February 2009, Springsteen opened President Obama's inauguration concert with an acoustic version of "The Rising".

(Picture: <http://cache.daylife.com/imageserve/05SIgc23aM4iE/610x.jpg>)



At the end of the concert, Springsteen sang "This Land Is Your Land" along with Pete Seeger and Seeger's grandson Tao Rodriguez-Seeger (left).

(Picture: [http://outfoxingkarlrove.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/article-1121423-0319a7f2000005dc-118\\_634x487.jpg](http://outfoxingkarlrove.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/article-1121423-0319a7f2000005dc-118_634x487.jpg))

## 7. PROMISED LAND

When America was “discovered”, it was seen as a God-given paradise that waited cross the oceans. Immigrants then started to travel to the New World in hope of a better life. The concept “Promised Land” has religious implications as it originates from the Bible. Pirttijärvi finds Springsteen has two types of songs that mention the concept: “songs that speak of the Promised Land as a spiritual holy place...and songs that have America as the Promised Land” (2005: 65). She writes about the spiritual place. I, on the other hand, will show the traditional immigrant dream of America and how the setting of the West and highways symbolize the American Dream in his lyrics.

### 7.1 American Land

Kähkönen (1995) does not find that Springsteen’s lyrics have positive images of America. On his releases before 1995, Springsteen focuses on depicting the hard life in the United States. But even those songs have some references to the elements of the American Dream and its symbols, such as highways, cars, and movement. Yet Springsteen does not glorify his land.

However, in recent years, there is a shift on this. Springsteen has made a few songs that give a romanticized vision of America. But they are always from the viewpoint of immigrants who have not yet reached the country. When people are in the U.S.A., times are usually tough. This is the case in real America as well: the American Promise is not real for all the citizens. With the immigrant songs “Across The Border” (*GTJ*, 1995), “Matamoros Banks” (*DnD*, 2005), and “American Land” (*SS*, 2006) he depicts the hopes and dreams of people who view the United States as a place to lead a better life. With these Springsteen reminds his listeners of the American ideals and the values the country represents.



The U.S.A. has always enticed immigrants. The whole nation is based on an immigrant movement. Europeans travelled to the New World to discover the wonders of the new continent. When gold was discovered, more and more people flowed to America in the hope of getting rich. These associations inspired many myths that have persisted to this day. Even today there is an immigrant movement to the U.S.A. when people from poor countries wish to seek a better life there. In the past many arrived from Europe, but today there are people from poorer countries going to America, especially from Mexico. The immigrants in Springsteen's songs are often Mexicans or Latinos.

Springsteen knows the values America still presents to his audiences. He tells:

in my job, I travel around the world, and occasionally play in big stadiums... I continue to find everywhere I go that America remains a repository for people's hopes and desires. That despite the terrible erosion of our standing around the world, for many we remain a house of dreams. (November, 2008 Obama rally  
[www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index\\_archive.html](http://www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index_archive.html))

America continues to be the symbol for ideals and better life all around the world. In his speech Springsteen also talks about building a house that would be big enough to contain the dreams of all Americans. He spoke about this also in Tampere in 2009 when he performed "Working On a Dream". He wanted to build a house from music and encouraged the audience to sing along the chorus.

Springsteen also performed "American Land" (SS) which got the Finnish crowd to clap their hands to bruises. It is a rhythmic joyous song with folk influences. The song fits well on *The Seeger Sessions* album which is a collection of traditional folk songs. It is a true immigrant song with 19<sup>th</sup> century feeling (written by Springsteen himself). The narrator is a young man who dreams of going to America "while [he's] still young". He wants to go there because people tell him that it is a wonderful place:

Over there all the women wear silk and satin to their knees  
 And children dear, the sweets, I hear, are growing on the trees  
 Gold comes rushing out the rivers straight into your hands  
 When you make your home in the American Land

This reflects the traditional image of the U.S.A. as a paradise-like place. There is something for everyone: women can wear beautiful silk clothes, children get treats, and there is gold for the men. This is not a modern immigrant dream, the narrator is probably going to America during the gold rush in the 1860s. But similar ideas are still associated with the country.

The narrator tells with pride how the immigrants built the nation: they “made the steel that built the cities with our sweat and two hands/ And we made our home in the American land”. The Western worldview had not reached America until the whites went there and started to colonize and build their culture. The Indians did not have technological culture like the whites did. Thus the plains and nature were, and still are, pure. The immigrants brought their worldviews with them, and built railroads, farming methods, factories. This was hard work. Springsteen shows the role of patriots, the legacy of those who came to America and made it what it is today. Even here the image of ordinary hard-working men comes through.

Work is in fact mentioned throughout the song. The immigrants had to work to make their American Dream come true: “There’s treasure for the taking, for any hard-working man”. In the past, the situation was different from today. Then homesteaders moved to the West and built houses for themselves. People could get rich if they found gold. But life was not easy, and work was hard and many died: “They died building the railroads worked to bones and skin/ They died in the fields and factories, names scattered in the wind”. Some of these people sacrificed their lives for the country and also for themselves.

Yet the people were willing to go to the New World and there was a real immigrant movement:

The McNicholas, the Posalskis, the Smiths, Zerillis, too  
 The Blacks, the Irish, Italians, the Germans and the Jews  
 Come across the water a thousand miles from home  
 With nothin’ in their bellies but the fire down below

In his concert in Tampere (June, 2009) Springsteen sang “The blacks, the Irish, Italians, the Finnish! and the Jews”, with emphasis on the Finnish nationality. At least in the beginning when America was loosely governed, people from all nationalities, regardless of their ethnic background or religion could go there. Even today, this freedom and equality is one part of the American Dream, even though the reality does not always match with it. But people were and still are willing to risk their lives in order to make it to the Promised land: “They died to get here a hundred years ago they're still dyin' now”. Today people are going to the U.S.A. from poor countries. Springsteen tells about this as an introduction to “Matamoros Banks” in the record sleeve of *D&D*:

Each year many die crossing the deserts, mountains, and rivers of our southern border in search of a better life. Here I follow the journey backwards, from the body at the river bottom, to the man walking across the desert towards the banks of the Rio Grande.

Thus immigrants risk their lives in search of a better life. The song is a story of a Mexican who tries to cross the border but does not succeed. In America there are border patrols that try to prevent the immigrants from crossing the line illegally. This is probably why the immigrant in the song dies. He sees the lights of Brownsville across the river, this is his destination for a better life, but then “a shout rings out” and he tries to hide by diving into the “silky red river” but never comes up.

This is the setting in “Across The Border” (*GTJ*) as well. Two immigrants are dreaming about going to the U.S.A. by crossing Rio Bravo. Whether they get there or not is not revealed in the song. They are not happy in their homeland. The narrator says: “We'll leave behind my dear/ The pain and sadness we found here”. They view the United States as a place where everything is well. This again creates a stark contrast between the American Dream and reality, because most songs on the *GTJ* album depict the hard times immigrants and other poor people face in the “Promised Land”. But then again the song also shows why immigrants still go there. And that is because the American Dream still exists in people's minds.

The immigrants have a very romantic vision of the land that waits just “across the border”. They find that there even “pain and memory have been stilled”. They hope to leave the sad things behind and start afresh in this Promised Land. The narrator says he will “build a house / High up on a grassy hill”. Building a house in the pure nature is a very traditional immigrant dream. The open spaces enticed homesteaders to go to America and get a piece of land.

Also the depiction of nature is paradise-like: “And sweet blossoms fills the air/ Pastures of gold and green/ Roll down into cool clear waters”. This is also a religious vision in a way. The immigrants count on God to take them safely across the border: “And may the saints' blessing and grace/ Carry me safely into your arms/ There across the border”. Again the traditional part of the American Dream is reflected on the song. This makes it almost ambiguous: it could be about a real life Promised Land or about a spiritual place after death. The narrator also states:

For what we are  
Without hope in our hearts  
That one day we'll drink from God's blessed waters  
And eat fruit from the wine

The song has a similar feeling to “Land Of Hopes And Dreams” where the train “rolls through fields where sunlight streams” and the passengers “leave behind [their] sorrows”. When they reach their destination “there'll be sunshine and all this darkness past”. In both songs there is hope of a better life.

Even though “Across The Border” seems a bit ambiguous, it is understandable since the religious mythology of the Promised Land is also associated with the United States. These immigrants have this sacred vision of the land of the free. Springsteen reflects the old myths of America that still live on in people's minds.

As I showed in chapter 5, the immigrants who have made it to the U.S.A., are not leading luxurious lives. On *GTJ*, they do not make enough money and often slip into criminal ways. Yet the traditional romanticized

visions of the country still exist in the minds of the people who wish to seek the Promised Land. That is one way Springsteen shows the distance between the American Dream and the American reality.

## 7.2. The West

Kähkönen's chapter about the Promised Land includes analysis of the settings in Springsteen's songs. She also takes this into account on her chapter "Freedom and Opportunities". Where the songs are set is relevant in the analysis of freedom and opportunities, because traditionally the West, the plains, and nature were seen as symbols for liberty and prospects. Even today nature continues to symbolize freedom. As Springsteen himself states:

Everyone wakes up... one of those mornings when you just want to walk away and start brand new. The West always obviously symbolized that possibility for a long time here... probably still symbolizes the illusion of that possibility today. (Mojo magazine, January 1999, <http://home.theboots.net/theboots/articles/mojo98.html>)

Especially since 1995 the Western mythology is strongly present in Springsteen's work. On his earlier work, however, freedom is connected with cars and highways. Kähkönen finds that on Springsteen's first albums

The American city is anything but shiny, and life can only be found elsewhere in the vast land. The characters are like modern frontier men and women setting out to the highway to find freedom and opportunity. They do not have any responsibilities to restrict them, and the promise of endless freedom seems real (1995: 82).

There is movement and hope for a better place in these albums. Highways and cars are important. But the setting is urban. With *River* and *BITUSA* albums, Kähkönen finds a shift on the significance of highways:

When earlier the highway was a means to escape from the city, "the suicide rap", it now leads to death. The highway is like a tunnel from which one cannot escape. In this sense, it has lost its connection to freedom. (1995: 84)

Especially on *BTR* (1975), movement and highways symbolize freedom. In "Thunder Road", which is perhaps Springsteen's greatest song, the narrator entices a girl, Mary, to come with him. He admits that he is no hero and that "all the redemption I can offer, girl/ Is beneath this dirty hood". Having said to Mary that she can "waste [her] summer praying in vain/ For a savior to

rise from these streets”, he then shows that only salvation that he has is the car. The car is the vehicle to freedom: “Heaven’s waiting on down the tracks”. The man is determined to leave and the song ends with him exclaiming “it’s the town full of losers/ And I’m pulling out of here to win!”

On *The River* cars and highways continue to be symbols of freedom. For instance “Cadillac Ranch” is a tribute to a Cadillac “tearing up the highway like a big old dinosaur”. In “Sherry Darling” “the highway’s free” and in “Stolen Car” there is a man whose marriage ends and he then drives a stolen car at night hoping to disappear in the darkness. It does not seem that already on *The River* highways would not be connected with freedom. But on *BITUSA* the highway has become a trap for some characters. On the title track the man ends up “ten years burning down the road/ Nowhere to run... nowhere to go”. In “Working On The Highway” the narrator ends up in jail and “swinging on the Charlotte County road gang”.

Kähkönen tells how on his records before 1995, “Springsteen’s America is mainly a land of factories and cities connected by highways. He pictures an industrial landscape” (1995: 93). On these records, the songs are mostly set in cities and on the streets. Highways are ways to freedom and movement is central. However there is a clear shift on this from 1995 onwards. Highways and cars are no longer prominent. What has come to replace them as a symbol for freedom and prospects is the West.

The West is a mythological place. Ever since the “discovery” of the New World, its nature has been the source of many myths about the country. In the past, America was an opposite to Europe where technological developments and cities were flourishing. The country came to symbolize freedom, a place where immigrants could go and get a piece of land and build a life. As immigrants started to inhabit the New World and take over lands from the American Indians, also the Western mythology began to emerge. First Western dime novels and then Western movies depicted stories from the so-called Wild West. The plains and the pure nature of the country were associated with freedom and possibilities and they symbolize those

even today. They are a reminder of the country's origins as well as of the origins of the American Dream.

*GTJ* (1995) is set in Southwest, on the Mexican border, on city borders, small towns, or in the nature. Even though the area is very poor and the characters often end up in criminal ways, and work does not pay, as shown in chapter 5, the area still lures immigrants.

The album features characters who make their way across the border in hope of leading a better life than they did on the other side. The Mexican border is also a typical setting in Westerns, especially on Italo-westerns, for example *A Fistful Of Dollars* (1964), *For A Few Dollars More* (1965), *The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly* (1966). Thus when Springsteen writes about this place, the setting gives new meanings to old myths associated with this particular area. In "Sinaloa Cowboys", as the title suggests, the setting is the West. There are no cities, no streets. There is desert, creek, valley, eucalyptys grove, deserted chicken ranch. The setting is like the old frontier life.

Also *D&D* (2005) has Western scenes. Springsteen says "I did on *Devils&Dust* as I've done on few of my other records, is that they are set in the West, I set people against this big landscape that could swallow you up" (*Devils&Dust bonus DVD*, 2005). The scenery is very cinematic and it resembles Sergio Leone's movies, with wide shots of open spaces where man is just a tiny spot in the desert landscape. Springsteen's struggling characters are, "like modern frontiersmen and women" (Kähkönen 1995: 82). Also life in the West was full of struggles. It was about survival. Springsteen brings that same feeling into his songs.

On *D&D*, the characters have their own inner demons to face. As Springsteen says, "people that are interestin' are people who have somethin' eatin' at'em" (*Devils&Dust bonus DVD*). In "Further On Up The Road" (*Rising*) and in "Maria's Bed" (*D&D*), the narrator seems to be the same man. In both cases he "wears a dead man suit and a smilin' skull ring" and he has "been out in the desert, doin' [his] time" and he has also been "lookin' for a sign" in the dust. Whereas in the first song the man wonders "if there's a light

up ahead well brother I don't know", he now gets an answer: "Holy man said, hold on brother there's a light up ahead". This man seems to be a Western drifter who wanders across the desert "siftin' fool's gold" and then he runs into a preacher who says there will be light up ahead. But the only light for this man is "the light [that] shines... from Maria's bed". It is not clear who this woman is. But the man wants to stop by "the barbed wire highway" and spend a night in her bed.

The man in "Reno" (*D&D*) visits a prostitute, but this time to ease the pain of losing his love. The whole song is like a scene from a movie. Springsteen is a vivid storyteller and his songs are very cinematic. While the prostitute is working, the narrator drifts back and thinks about his life (Amatitlan is Central Mexican River, Valle de dos Rios is Valley of Two Rivers and vaqueros mean cowboys).

I felt my stomach tighten. The sun bloodied the sky  
 And sliced through the hotel blinds. I closed my eyes.  
 Sunlight on the Amatitlan, sunlight streaming thru your hair  
 In the Valle de dos Rios, smell of mock orange filled the air  
 We rode with the vaqueros, down into cool rivers of green.  
 I was sure the work and that smile coming out 'neath your hat  
 Was all I'd ever need.  
 Somehow all you ever need's, never really quite enough you know.  
 You and I, Maria, we learned it's so.

The setting is again Western. Maria and the man were in Mexico riding with cowboys. But then things fell apart and the cowboy visits a prostitute, which is a typical profession in Westerns.

The Western mythology comes up in a fascinating way in "Black Cowboys". Rainey Williams is a little boy whose "playground was the Mott Haven streets". And there "he ran past the melted candles and flower wreaths names and photos of young black faces, whose death and blood consecrated these places". This is a dangerous neighborhood in the state of New York where black people live... and die. Young blacks have died on these streets and the places of death have become memorials. Maybe there are gang fights in the streets. Young Rainey lives on this area with his mother



and “along a street of stray bullets he made his way, to the warmth of her arms at the end of each day”. This is not a good area for a child to grow up but Rainey has a home there.

Springsteen refers to the place where Rainey lives as “Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones”. In the Bible this is a vision by Ezekiel, who guided by God, ends up in a valley full of bones. Then God shows Ezekiel how the bones come to life (King James’ online Bible Ezekiel 37:1-14 [www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezekiel%2037:1-14%20&version=31](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezekiel%2037:1-14%20&version=31)). In Rainey’s neighborhood many black people have been killed and thus Springsteen’s reference to it as “Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones” is a powerful metaphor.

Rainey’s mother is concerned for his son and wants him to “come home from school and stay inside”. After doing his homework, Rainey would watch TV, “there was a channel showed a western movie everyday”. And his mother brought him “books on the black cowboys of the Oklahoma range and the Seminole scouts that fought the tribes of the Great Plains”. Rainey spends his time learning about the history of the country from these books and movies. He learns about the history of the American Dream, and how people could make their way to the West and be free.

Westerns are myths about America. They tell stories about the origins of the country. In Western movies there are two aspects intertwined: “the historical West and imagined West” (White 1991:613). The historical West is the setting, and the myth, the imagined West, is the story that moviemakers create. Rainey Williams absorbs both historical books and mythical movies in his free time.

Times get tough as Rainey’s mother takes up with a drug dealer. The relationship with Rainey and his mother is no longer what it used to be. Her mother suffers, and the man brings misery to their lives. Rainey snatches money from the man’s stash and takes a train at night. He travels through Pennsylvania, through Indiana all the way to the “rutted hills of Oklahoma”. Rainey, who had spent so much time learning about the West decides to

follow the Dream it represents. He makes his way to West, probably hoping to lead a better life. As Parks (1982) says, the Westerns reflect freedom of movement and independence. Rainey follow these ideals to find a better life.

Springsteen continues to write about the West, as on *SS* (2006), he recorded the song "Jesse James", by Woody Guthrie. On *WOD* (2009), Springsteen sings about another outlaw and this time he wrote the story himself, it is called "Outlaw Pete". The song has many traditional myths that have kept up the Western mythology alive in people's minds. It is very cinematic as Springsteen covers the life of his outlaw in eight minutes. The song is like an italowestern. Harmonica wails and bells clang. The rhythm sounds like hooves which makes it even more visual. Also Springsteen's voice is very raspy and it suits well this Western song. He has always had the ability to change his voice to fit the stories. On *Devils&Dust* bonus DVD (2005) he talks about how he makes small shifts and tones to go with the voice of the character he is singing about and who is telling the story.

Many elements of the Westerns are in "Outlaw Pete". Pete is a legend, it seems like he was born as an outlaw: "At six months old he'd done three months in jail". Also in Western movies mysterious gunslingers seem to just have it in them to be gunfighters and often nothing is revealed about their childhood. At 25 Pete steals a mustang pony and cries "Father Jesus I'm an outlaw, killer and a thief". He turns into a wandering drifter and "where he went women wept and men died". The Western outlaws usually have very notorious reputations.

The song has a similar approach towards Indians as modern Westerns. In the historical West the land was a source of wealth, it was seen as something to conquer, to overcome. The Native Americans who inhabited the land were seen as a threat to white "civilization". However, today the land and Indians are romanticized. Western heroes are often associated with nature and Indians, whereas the American government and white "civilization" is depicted as corrupted. Thus it is more heroic to be like an Indian than a white man. Also Springsteen shows this. He connects Pete with

Indians. First, he describes: "He cut his trail of tears across the countryside". The Trail Of Tears refers to Indian history. In the 1830s Cherokees were forced out of their lands and they had to migrate to reservations. The Indians suffered and many died on the way (<http://ngeorgia.com/history/nghisttt.html>).

Pete's trail of tears means the struggles of life he has faced. What further emphasizes his connection with the Indians is that Pete sees "a vision of his own death". Dreams were important to Indians. When he awakes from this vision at night he "saddled his pony and rode out deep into the West/ Married a Navajo girl and settled down on the res." Our hero starts to live with the Indians. He has a daughter and he leads a peaceful life.

But as Pete is an outlaw, he is a wanted man and bounty hunters are after him. This is a very common profession in Westerns. In Springsteen's story as well a bounty hunter arrives on the scene:

Out of the East on an Irish stallion came bounty hunter Dan...  
 ...He found Pete peacefully fishing by the river  
 Pulled out his gun and got the drop  
 He said "Pete you think you've changed but you have not"

Again Springsteen universalizes his song so that there is something in his character people can relate to. Here the question is, can a person really change? In Westerns the gunslingers who have it in them to kill, usually do not change. For example, William Munny in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) is a perfect example of this. He too has a notorious reputation as "a killer of women and children". He has settled down and having lost his wife, is a single parent for two children. When he gets the chance to earn money as a bounty hunter, he constantly tries to convince himself "I ain't like that no more". But when it comes down to it, he has it in him to kill a man in cold blood. Maybe the movie has influenced Springsteen's writing.

Now Pete probably has not truly changed either, he still has his instincts and skills. But he has started to lead a different life style than he did before. The final shoot-out follows between Pete and Dan. Now music slows down, harmonica wails and Springsteen sings in slow motion:

He cocked his pistol pulled the trigger and shouted, "Let it start"  
 Pete drew a knife from his boot, threw it,  
 And pierced Dan through the heart  
 Dan smiled as he lay in his own blood dying in the sun  
 Whispered in Pete's ear "We cannot undo these things we've done"  
 You're Outlaw Pete, You're Outlaw Pete, can you hear me?  
 Can you hear me? Can you hear me?

Dan is dying under the scorching sun and at the moment of his death knows the price he too has to pay. Pete then disappears from the scene and his fate is a mystery. As often in Westerns that connect the hero with nature, also Pete vanishes in the wilderness. Usually mysterious gunslingers melt into the desert or into the mist at the end of films. Now Pete too has become a part of the scenery.

In his concert in Tampere (June, 2009) when performing the song Springsteen wore a cowboy hat, and then left it on the stage. It showed that that was all that is left of Pete. There were even Western landscapes on the screen behind Springsteen to set the scene for the story. He delivered it convincingly, and the audience sang along the chorus "I'm outlaw Pete/ Outlaw Pete/ Can you hear me".

With this Western song, Springsteen returns to the mythical place in American history. Springsteen also connects Pete with nature and Indians, and as he at the end of the song vanishes over "an icy mountaintop" he is a part of the wilderness. This enforces the symbol of nature and plains and the historical setting of the West as a symbol of freedom.

In this chapter, I have discussed the traditional immigrant dream as it is present in the songs "Across The Border", "Matamoros Banks" and "American Land". I have also shown how the West and the setting of the West are parts of the American Dream and how they are reflected in Springsteen's songs. Next I will discuss Manifest Destiny.

## 8. MANIFEST DESTINY

Manifest Destiny is closely related to the idea that America is a Promised Land given by God. *The Collins English Dictionary* defines the concept as “the belief that U.S. was a chosen land that had been allotted the entire North American continent by God” (1998: 945). Today the term is not in common use, but America’s “mission” to spread freedom and democracy in the world can be seen as a continuation to that. This is a political chapter. In the first part I will describe how the role of America in the world affairs is reflected in Springsteen’s songs. America has a role to play in its own affairs too. In the second part I will discuss Springsteen’s social and political commentary on contemporary events that have taken place in the country.

### 8.1. Who’ll Be The Last To Die

America has often taken military measures when spreading its ideologies of freedom and democracy. Scheurer says how the Americans “are invested with a providential role in world affairs and that role is as peacemakers” (1991: 103). Sometimes they find that war is required to achieve that goal. Politicians have often spoken of the duty of Americans to intervene and liberate people.

The Vietnam War was in 1959-1975. The war was fought between South Vietnam and the communist North Vietnam. The U.S.A. entered the war to prevent communists from taking over. President Lyndon Johnson supported American’s involvement in the war and sent troops to Vietnam. In 1968 he gave a speech and said:

Of those to whom much is given, much is asked. Yet I believe that now, no less than when the decade began, this "generation of Americans" is willing to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival, and the success, of liberty."<sup>1</sup> Since those words were spoken by John F. Kennedy, the people of America have kept that compact with mankind's noblest cause. And we shall continue to keep it. ([www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjvietnam.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjvietnam.htm))

His words suggest that America has a special duty to spread liberty and to fight for “mankind’s noblest cause”. However, in the 1960s and 70s there were many anti-war songs. The songwriters did not find that the war was justified. As Scheurer states: “the mytheme of God’s role... came to symbolize the hypocrisy of both God’s providential role and the concept of manifest destiny” (1991: 175). Many songs from the 1960s and ‘70s express this view, for example Bob Dylan’s “With God On Our Side” (*The Times They Are A-Changin’*, (1964), and “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ To Die Rag” by Country Joe And The Fish (*I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ To Die*, 1967).

Dylan’s “With God On Our Side” criticizes the whole history of the United States. The narrator comes from the Midwest where he was taught that America has God on its side. He then lists the wars Americans have fought, “with God on their side”: the Indian wars, Spanish-American war, Civil War, The First World War and The Second World War. Next he says how he was taught to hate Russians, and “if another war starts it’s them we must fight”. At the end he wonders if Judas Iscariot too had God on his side. The song does not reflect faith in God’s providential role in American history. Dylan depicts it as an excuse to fight.

Ten years after the Vietnam war, Springsteen wrote “Born In The U.S.A.” a song, that has negative views about the war. The narrator is a Vietnam War veteran, who tells:

Got in a little hometown jam  
So they put a rifle in my hand  
Sent me off to a foreign land  
To go and kill the yellow man

It does not seem that this man had a choice whether to go to war or not. “They” put a rifle in his hand, and sent him off far from home. He did not fight in his homeland for his country, but was taken to foreign soil to kill people from a different race. The narrator has returned to America and looks back on war: “I had a brother at Khe Sahn fighting off the Viet Cong/They’re

still there, he's all gone". Here "brother", does not mean a sibling. When in war, the soldiers become brothers. What they go through in war is something that no one else can truly understand, as the television war series "Band Of Brothers" shows. Khe Sahn is in Southern Vietnam. The communists attacked the city and there was a lot of fighting. The narrator's friend was fighting with him. He bitterly states the vanity of the war: it has made no difference to the situation since the Viet Congs are still there. He is left wondering what was the point of it all.

Thus, when it comes to the Vietnam War, the song offers a very different view on the matter than President Johnson's. Springsteen does not show that the war was America's duty to mankind. He does not glorify the cause these men died for, rather he shows the futility of it all.

Also in "Youngstown" (GTJ, 1995) there is a Vietnam war veteran. He works at a Youngstown factory that has been producing war equipment since "eighteen-o-three". He comments the wars:

These mills they built the tanks and bombs  
That won this country's wars  
We sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam  
Now we're wondering what they were dyin' for

Again the narrator conveys the futility of war. The Korean war was in 1950-53. Communist North Korea attacked non-communist South. The United States sent troops to beat the communists. China sent troops to support North Korea. The two countries have gone in different directions since the war: South Korea has democracy and wealth, where as North Korea has dictatorship and is poor. Harry Truman, the president of the United States at the time, justified the war in 1951:

men all over the world who want to remain free have been given new courage and new hope. They know now that the champions of freedom can stand up and fight and that they will stand up and fight. Our resolute stand in Korea is helping the forces of freedom now fighting in Indochina and other countries in that part of the world. It has already slowed down the timetable of conquest....

[www.faulkner.edu/academics/artsandsciences/socialandbehavioral/readings/hy/truman.as](http://www.faulkner.edu/academics/artsandsciences/socialandbehavioral/readings/hy/truman.as)

Again Springsteen does not bring the ideals of democracy and freedom into his songs about war. Instead he challenges these values by making comments about the waste of American lives in foreign wars. Americans sent their men to fight, and now again they are left wondering what were they really dying for. The presidents claim that the U.S.A. has a special role and duty in the world and that the cause for wars is noble. But just like the folk singers of the 1960s, Springsteen too continues to question these ideals. (An acoustic version of "Youngstown" is on *GTJ* album, but Springsteen has also a rock version of the song, see for instance [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s8B8FvffRA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s8B8FvffRA)).

Springsteen's anti-war attitude comes up in *SS* (2006) as well. He has included two songs about war on the album: "Mrs. McGrath", which is a traditional Irish folk song, and "Bring'Em Home" by Pete Seeger. Springsteen changed slightly both lyrics. With these songs, he makes a stand against the Iraq War. The United States entered Iraq in 2003. President George W. Bush states reasons for it

[The Iraq] regime pledged to reveal and destroy all its weapons of mass destruction Peaceful efforts to disarm the Iraqi regime have failed again and again This regime... has aided, trained and harbored terrorists, including operatives of al Qaeda... All the decades of deceit and cruelty have now reached an end. Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours... Many Iraqis can hear me tonight in a translated radio broadcast, and I have a message for them... We will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free. In a free Iraq, there will be no more wars of aggression against your neighbors, no more poison factories, no more executions of dissidents, no more torture chambers and rape rooms. The tyrant will soon be gone. The day of your liberation is near... Unlike Saddam Hussein, we believe the Iraqi people are deserving and capable of human liberty... The power and appeal of human liberty is felt in every life and every land.. Free nations have a duty to defend our people by uniting against the violent. And tonight, as we have done before, America and our allies accept that responsibility. ([www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/mar/18/usa.iraqguardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/mar/18/usa.iraqguardian.co.uk), Tuesday 18 March 2003).

Bush talks about liberating the oppressed Iraqis and makes promises of a better world. He finds that America has to intervene in world affairs and to bring liberty and democracy. He even suggests it is their duty to do so. Springsteen has been very negative towards Bush's government. He finds that his government has destroyed the country. He says it is "a thoughtless, reckless, and morally adrift administration" (November, 2008, Cleveland



Vote For Change Rally

[www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index\\_archive.html](http://www.brucespringsteen.net/news/index_archive.html)).

In the same speech, Springsteen comments also on God's role in America. The country's continuing role in world affairs is one reflection of the "missions" Americans have taken since colonial times. Springsteen finds that what really counts are people and respect: "Whatever grace God has deemed to impart to us resides in our connections with one another, in honoring the life, the hopes, the dreams, of the man or woman up the street, or across town". His songs also reflect this. Springsteen always shows things from the point of view of ordinary people who are struggling in life. To him, everybody is important and no one should be left behind. This also reflects the unity of Americans as opposed to individualism, which is a traditional American value. Instead, he finds that people should connect with each other and help out. Also government should take more responsibility. "That's where we make our small claim upon heaven", he continues, "in recent years that contract has been shredded and as we look around today, it is shredding before our eyes". He finds Bush's government has caused lots of damage to the nation and thus Springsteen made a stand to support Obama for president.

Springsteen is against Bush's Manifest Destiny, the Iraq War into which the country went under Bush. With his songs and speeches, he has made stands against the invasion. He would like America to have a positive influence in the world. On SS, Springsteen sings Pete Seeger's (1966) "Bring'Em Home". He has made some changes in the song to make a contemporary stand with it. Seeger's "Bring'Em Home" is a statement against the Vietnam war: Support our boys in Vietnam/ Bring them home, bring them home."

In the 1960s and '70s there were protests against the Vietnam war. Pete Seeger himself was a key figure in the folk movement at the time and he sang songs about contemporary issues. In Seeger's version, the narrator does not support wars fought outside America, but if his land was threatened he

would stand up and fight. "I'm not really a pacifist", he says, "if an army invaded this land of mine...You'd find me out on the firing line". He is willing to fight for his own land. Vietnam however, was not a direct military threat to the U.S.A, but yet American soldiers were sent there. The narrator repeatedly requires that the soldiers must be brought home. Thus Seeger does not support America's involvement in world affairs any more that Springsteen does.

In his version, Springsteen does not mention the Iraq war, but as that is the war the United States is engaged at the moment, and he has expressed his negative view towards the war, it is obvious that he is referring to that. Springsteen too is demanding the government to "bring'em home, bring'em home/Bring them back from overseas". Springsteen sings: "Now we'll give no more brave young lives... For the gleam in someone's eyes". This is a stark statement against Bush's government and here Springsteen comments how the war is fought for someone's lust for power. He also states the futility of war: young Americans are dying there. With the song, he again connects himself with the American folk tradition. Just like in the 1960s the song was as a protest song against war, now it too has a similar function.

"Mrs. McGrath" is also about war. It is a traditional Irish folk song. Springsteen made a few changes in it. A sergeant talks to a mother, Mrs. McGrath, and asks if she would like her son Ted to be a soldier "With a scarlet coat and a big cocked hat/ Mrs McGrath will you like that?" The sergeant offers to dress up Ted for glory. But the price of war is heavy. After seven years Ted returns without his legs. Her mother did not expect his son to return wounded. She is sad and shocked of the state her son. Finally Ted's mother declares in Springsteen's version:

All foreign wars I do proclaim  
Live on blood and a mother's pain  
I'd rather have my son as he used to be  
Than the King of America and his whole Navy

This is from a point of view of “a woman up the street or across the town”. This is very typical for Springsteen. He shows how wars affect ordinary people. It is their fate that is important to him.

In “Last To Die” (*Magic*) Springsteen continues to comment on war. He refers to John Kerry. Kerry fought in Vietnam, and in 1971 he gave a speech about his view on the war:

We watched the United States falsification of body counts, in fact the glorification of body counts....We fought using weapons against those people which I do not believe this country would dream of using were we fighting in the European theater... Each day to facilitate the process by which the United States washes her hands of Vietnam someone has to give up his life so that the United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we can't say that we have made a mistake... We are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?...  
[http://usliberals.about.com/od/extraordinaryspeeches/a/KerryVietnam\\_2.htm](http://usliberals.about.com/od/extraordinaryspeeches/a/KerryVietnam_2.htm)

Kerry’s speech suggests the Vietnam War was inhuman and horrible things were done there. He did not support the war and finds American soldiers were dying in vain. In 2004 presidential elections, Springsteen openly supported Kerry for president, but Kerry was not elected, Bush was. In “Last To Die” Springsteen repeats Kerry’s question. Now he finds that just like Vietnam, Iraq is a mistake:

We don't measure the blood we've drawn anymore  
 We just stack the bodies outside the door

Who'll be the last to die for a mistake  
 The last to die for a mistake  
 Whose blood will spill, whose heart will break  
 Who'll be the last to die for a mistake

The wise men were all fools, what to do

People are becoming numb to the loss of lives, they ignore the body counts that war brings. But whenever a life is lost, someone will suffer. And it is no consolation that people die for someone’s misjudgement. Reference to the Vietnam War is powerful because it shows how history repeats itself and that people do not seem to learn from the past errors.

American presidents have justified some wars as something noble. Springsteen does not find the cause just and thinks that American lives are

being wasted in foreign wars. He is against Manifest Destiny. His songs do not reflect the traditional values of America's role in the world. If anything that role should be seen in people's everyday lives as respect for one another.

## 8.2. American Skin

In the beginning of his career Springsteen was not overtly political. But at least during the past ten years or so, he has taken political stands, for instance in presidential elections and has openly expressed his opinions. But even before this his songs are about the plight of people and his songs reflect contemporary American issues. However, in recent years he has directly commented on some specific incidents that have taken place in his country. In this section I will discuss the shooting of Amadou Diallo, that inspired Springsteen to write a song based on the event, and the catastrophe in New Orleans that made Springsteen criticize Bush's government. I will also mention other comments Springsteen has made about the state of his country.

In 1999 four policemen shot Amadou Diallo, an African immigrant. They thought he was a wanted criminal, and when Diallo was reaching out for his wallet to prove his identity, the officers fired forty-one shots at him. The policemen were tried but found not guilty. This caused protests in America. Diallo was black, the policemen white. ([www.knowledgerush.com/kr/encyclopedia/Amadou Diallo \(shooting victim\)/](http://www.knowledgerush.com/kr/encyclopedia/Amadou_Diallo_(shooting_victim)/)).

Springsteen reacted by writing "41 Shots (American Skin)" (*The Essential*, 2003). The title leaves no doubt about what the song is referring to. Some policemen reacted very negatively. For example, Patrick Lynch, the president of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association in New York, "encouraged officers to neither attend nor work as moonlighting security guards at Springsteen's upcoming ten-show stand" ([www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics/a/americanskin.php](http://www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics/a/americanskin.php)). Some policemen

however, were more understanding towards Springsteen. The fact that the song caused such reactions proves its power.

Springsteen himself comments on the song:

I was just setting out to basically continue writing about things that I'd written about for a long period of time, which is, who we are? What's it mean to be an American? What's going on in this country we live in? It was asking some questions that were hanging very heavy in the air... And it was an extension of just a lot of my other work ([www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics/a/americanskin.php](http://www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics/a/americanskin.php))

Springsteen is surprised that his song got so much attention, because these are the themes he has been writing all along. And he has dealt with race in his songs before, although not as directly as in this one. However, it is not all that surprising that the song got so much publicity because it so overtly touches on the Diallo case. It also evokes lots of thoughts about how one's skin color can in fact be the reason for getting killed.

In one of his concerts in 2002, Springsteen introduced "41 Shots" and spoke about racism. He dedicated the song to the organizations who fight against racism:

Thanks. Before we uh, before we start the show tonight, I'd just like to say, you know, I don't know if you've read about it in the newspapers at all out here but we've uh, been contacted by several organizations here in the city who are trying to combat... They're trying to combat the segregation and the economic apartheid and the racism that exists not just here in Cincinnati but everywhere in our country. As a young man, as a young man, I saw it up close in my own hometown, and while there've been many improvements since then, the core fact of racism continues to this day at all levels of our society. Well, I wrote a song a couple years ago about what happens when we stop communicating with one another, and how that non-communication becomes systematic, when injustice becomes ingrained in institution... The consequences, the violence, the human cost, and life cut short, that comes with it. So I wanna open our show here tonight with a song uh, not just for Cincinnati but for the country we'd like to see our children brought up in... And we're gonna send it out tonight to the people, and the organizations here in the city that are working for a just Cincinnati and a just America. Thank you. ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCLhvHMPbIE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCLhvHMPbIE) Cincinnati, 2002).

Here Springsteen speaks for his country and he hopes that it would be a better place that would live up to its ideals and promises. He supports the organizations which try to improve America. Racism has very long roots in America. In the 1700s and in the 1800s it was not unusual for white people to have slaves. The blacks were seen as inferior. During the Civil War era this became into question. Blacks became free but not equal. As late as 1950s it

was legal to have separate areas for blacks and whites. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement fought for equality. But even today racism is an issue in America. As the Diallo case shows, it is very dangerous for blacks if the policemen have racial prejudices towards them that cloud their judgment. "41 Shots" is a direct reference to this.

The song begins with a gentle hum, each E Street Band member taking turns saying gently "41 shots", then Springsteen's raspy voice joins in.

41 shots...  
 and we'll take that ride  
 'cross this bloody river  
 to the other side  
 41 shots... cut through the night  
 You're kneeling over his body in the vestibule  
 Praying for his life

Springsteen says that this first verse is from the point of view of a police officer ([www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics/a/americanskin.php](http://www.springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics/a/americanskin.php)). Thus even though the policemen fired the shots, Springsteen suggests that at least one of them is in pain, praying for the survival of their target. This is very humane approach: he does not depict policemen as murderous. Thus the song is not really a stark criticism of American police forces, but the general situation in the country, where prejudice and fear might take over and lead to deadly situations. America is not a place of equality since racial prejudice still prevails.

In some of his other songs as well, Springsteen has dealt with race. In "My Hometown" (*BITUSA*) the narrator recalls his days in school: "In '69 tension was runnin' high in my high school/There was a lot of fights between the black and fight". There were also gun fights and so "troubled times had come" to his hometown. In "Black Cowboys" as well there are black people dying in a dangerous neighborhood. Springsteen has an ability to depict people's everyday life and to bring these sentiments into his songs. Just like in "Black Cowboys", also in "41 Shots" there is a mother concerned for her son. The sound of shots echoes throughout the song:

41 shots  
 Lena gets her son ready for school  
 She says "on these streets, Charles  
 You've got to understand the rules  
 If an officer stops you  
 Promise you'll always be polite,  
 that you'll never ever run away  
 Promise Mama you'll keep your hands in sight

This is a scene from people's everyday life. The police officers' task is to bring security to people. But in this case it is the policemen that are a threat to children's safety. The mother fears that if her son does not keep his hands in sight, or runs away, the police might shoot him. It is not said that Lena and her son are black, but from the context of the song, one gets this impression.

Just like in "Devils&Dust", "fear is a powerful thing". The policemen who fired the shots had their fingers on the triggers, and they had to make a choice what to do: "Is it a gun, is it a knife/ Is it a wallet, this is your life". One can imagine the situation, policemen squinting to make out what is happening, with their guns ready to fire that deadly shot. Everything is on the line at that moment. However, many police officers get killed too in the U.S.A. because they do not always know whom they are up against.

Diallo was fired at 41 times. The number of bullets is shocking. The sound of shots echoes throughout the song. This shows the madness of the shooting. Springsteen emphasizes the Americanness of the victim: "It ain't no secret...You can get killed just for living/ In your American skin". He makes no distinction between the black and white. To him every citizen is a real American regardless of the color of their skin. With this he points out the original idea of equality, but at the same time shows how the reality does not match the ideal.

Springsteen also brings spiritual dimensions into this song:

41 shots... and we'll take that ride  
 'Cross this bloody river  
 To the other side  
 41 shots... got my boots caked in this mud  
 We're baptized in these waters and in each other's blood

As in his other songs, crossing the river can mean crossing the line from life to death. The river is bloody, the waters are not clear. The baptism is supposed to be a holy event, but it takes place in the bloody waters. Springsteen refers to the original sin and the legacy of Cain: we are baptized not only in water, but also in each other's blood. Just as Cain shed the blood of his brother, people today kill each other and so the cycle of sin continues.

On *SS*, which is a collection of folk songs, Springsteen makes political stands. "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live" is dedicated to the people of New Orleans. In fall 2005 hurricane Katrina swept over the city and caused severe damages and floods. One of the reasons for floods was the failure of the federally-built levee system. Most of the population was evacuated, but some stayed in their homes and ended up trapped in their attics or on their rooftops. Springsteen cuttingly criticizes the Bush government when introducing the song in one of his concerts in 2006 in New Orleans:

We had a chance to travel around in... around New Orleans yesterday, from lake view to the ninth ward, and uh I think I saw sights I never thought I'd see in an American city... and um... the criminal inaptitude makes you furious and this is uh... this is uh.. this is what happens when political cronyism guts the very agencies that are suppose to serve American citizens in times of trial and hardship and this is what happens when people play political games with other people's lives. This is a song by a fellow named Blind Alfred Reed, um... recorded it a week after the stock market crash, it prestaged the Great Depression um...I kept the first verse and I wrote three more this is for New Orleans tonight, dedicated to the president bystander  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYsSVNl8xmE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYsSVNl8xmE)

After the speech he sang the song. Springsteen sings with rage and his voice is rough. There is a drum pounding that emphasizes anger and frustration. The verses written by Springsteen are cutting, just like Dylan's protest songs from the 1960s. Springsteen again is a folk singer, he sings straight to American people about the contemporary issues. He describes the destruction:

There's bodies floatin' on Canal Street and the levees gone to hell  
 Martha, get me my sixteen gauge and some dry shells  
 Them who's got, got out of town  
 And them who ain't got left to drown



Tell me, how can a poor man stand such times and live?

This is a devastating scene. People have died and left to float around. The levees are all gone. Those who were rich managed to escape the flood, but those who did not have anything were left there to drown. The character's only solution seems to be resorting to a gun. The times are too tough to bear: "How can a poor man stand such times and live?" Springsteen then makes an unusual move and casts a curse about the situation: "Gonna be a judgment that's a fact, a righteous train rollin' down this track". There will be justice one day and then the injustices will be settled. This has a similar prophetic tone (only much stronger) as in "The Ghost Of Tom Joad"'s "waitin' for when the last shall be first and the first shall be last".

In recent years Springsteen has criticized his country a lot. In 2007 he introduced "Livin' In The Future" by saying:

this is a song called "Livin' In The Future", but it's really about what's happenin' now!... at the past six years we've hadda add to the American picture rendition, illegal wiretappin', voter suppression, no habeas corpus, the neglect of our great city of New Orleans and its people, and attack on the Constitution. and the loss of our best young men and women in the tragic war. This is a song about things that shouldn't happen here are happenin' here. So right now we plan to do somethin' about it we plan to sing about it! ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wlgm7Fehaw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wlgm7Fehaw))

This is very strong social criticism. Most of the things Springsteen lists have to do with the aftermath of the 9-11-2001 terror attacks. After the attacks there was fear that something similar would happen and so the government started to monitor people, for example by wire tapping their phones. Also people who were possible terror suspects were taken away and some were arrested without right to a fair trial (habeas corpus). Springsteen states that some people's right to vote have been taken, and that even the Constitution has been violated.

In his song "Livin' In The Future" all these points do not come through however. He conveys the atmosphere of ignorance. Springsteen says the song is about what's happenin' now. The chorus "don't worry Darlin', now baby don't you fret/ We're livin' in the future and none of this has happened yet" is in fact an illusion. The narrator thinks his darlin' is living in

the future and that there is nothing to worry about, but terrible things are happening and bad omens are everywhere.

There is a reference to politics as well: "Woke up Election Day, skies gunpowder and shades of gray/ Beneath the dirty sun, I whistled my time away". The atmosphere of this day is ominous. The sky is full of gunpowder, a sign of war. This could refer to elections of 2000 and 2004 when George W. Bush was elected as a president and he led the country into war with Iraq. However, the narrator just whistles his time away on a gloomy Election Day and thinks everything is alright. This might refer to people's ignorance to what is really going on and shows that people should open their eyes to make a difference.

The singer continues: "my faith's been torn asunder, tell me is that rollin' thunder/ Or just a sinkin' sound of somethin' righteous goin' under?". The Operation Rolling Thunder was a bombing campaign against North Vietnam and American Air Force did the bombing ([www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/rolling\\_thunder.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/rolling_thunder.htm)). Thus again Springsteen uses the example of Vietnam war as a mistake America has made, and he suggests that now Iraq is similar to that. The narrator has lost his faith and finds that righteous things are disappearing in his land.

Also in "Long Walk Home" (*Magic*) the narrator finds his country drifting away from its values. His father said: "That you know flag flying over the courthouse/Means certain things are set in stone/Who we are, what we'll do and what we won't." This is a reference to basic American values. But when lots of negative things have been going on in the country, also these ideals have been violated. As Springsteen said in his introduction to "Livin' In The Future" "the things that shouldn't happen here are happenin' here".

With the election of Obama as the new president of the United States, Springsteen hopes that now better times would come to his country. His song "Working On A Dream" reflects that hope and that Americans would work together to regain the lost American values. Springsteen talks about building a house, "a house that is truer and big enough to contain the hopes and

dreams of all of our fellow citizens... I want that dream back, I want my America back, I want my country back” ([www.salon.com/opinion/walsh/election\\_2008/2008/10/06/springsteen\\_obama/](http://www.salon.com/opinion/walsh/election_2008/2008/10/06/springsteen_obama/), 2008).

In this chapter I have discussed Springsteen’s views on American foreign policy and the political and social commentary on things within the country. He does not support the idea that Americans should spread liberty and freedom with war. He shows the futility of war and the pains they bring to ordinary people. He is not pleased with the state of his country during Bush administration. To him many basic American values have been violated. He believes in the ideals that the country represents and encourages his fellow citizens to work on that dream to restore their land.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Bruce Springsteen is a man of many sides. On the one hand he is a rock'n'roll singer whose dedication to his craft really comes up in live shows. On the other hand he is a folk singer who delivers his music with strength and confidence and maybe wants to convey his lyrics better too. Even though Springsteen is a very powerful rock'n'roll singer, his folk side should not be diminished. In my study, I found the connections Springsteen has with the American folk tradition.

His lyrics are an important part of his work, and they tell about America of their time. In this paper I have discussed Springsteen's songs (1995-2009) by analysing how they reflect the American Dream. In his work, Springsteen shows the distance between the Dream and American reality. He knows the ideals and values the country represents, and finds that also abroad the American Dream continues to exist in people's minds.

Even though Springsteen believes in the ideals associated with his country, he does not glorify his land. The only romantic notions of the country are from the viewpoint of immigrants who have not yet reached America. Thus he reminds us of the things the United States represents to people. He also sets some of his songs in the West, which is a mythological place that symbolizes freedom and possibilities.

Springsteen's characters are ordinary working-class or under-class people who face different kind of struggles in life. Sometimes they get unemployed or do not earn enough money. Without work, life often loses its meaning. Lack of money drives some characters into despair and they turn to criminal ways. The situation of immigrants is not glorious either. They go to America, but find themselves in dreadful circumstances. Work is poorly-paid or unavailable, and drugs and street life are often the only solutions for them.

With his traditional immigrant songs, however, Springsteen depicts the hopes and dreams of people who wish to cross the border to the United States. These people have romantic dreams of a better life and prospects the

country has to offer. They risk their lives to get there, sometimes they do not make it, and when they do, life is hard. This shows the distance between the Dream and reality.

Springsteen also criticizes his country and its policies. He has taken stands, for instance, against racial prejudice, and the way president Bush handled the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. But above all he is against war. He does not support the wars the U.S.A. has fought, and has made cutting stands against the current Iraq war. He does not find the wars just even though sometimes Americans have been sent abroad to liberate people and the presidents have declared that it is the nation's duty to intervene in world affairs. Springsteen is against this Manifest Destiny which has often religious implications of America having a God-given duty to intervene in world affairs.

Religious imagery is nevertheless present in his albums. The songs are not doctrinal, judgemental nor moralizing. Rather, religious imagery is present in characters' everyday lives. Some of Springsteen's most fascinating songs are about people who find themselves in desperate situations and end up stating that "faith just ain't enough".

Springsteen also uses religious imagery so that the songs give people hope and courage. These tunes have many dimensions. On the one hand they read as gospel songs, but on the other hand they have a sense of connection and unity. They give a powerful sentiment, especially in live concerts, where Springsteen seeks a connection with his audience and delivers his music intensely. He has also been a keen supporter of President Barack Obama and some of his spiritual songs have a strong sense of national unity in the country that has its roots in Christian mythology.

Bruce Springsteen's songs are important reflections of the America of their time. Sometimes it is not easy to understand what his lyrics are about and sometimes people might hear just the music and not the words. I have shown how the songs have significant content that is deeply rooted in American culture. By knowing what the American Dream means, it is easier

to understand the country and its people, and thus also Springsteen's songs. I have analysed the concept and discussed how Springsteen deals with the Dream in his work. My paper gives people more information about his work and shows that his music is more than mere entertainment. Springsteen considers his vocation as his work, and it is truly a job well done.

Even though there are many books about Springsteen, there is not a recent publication about the analysis of the American Dream in his lyrics. Most of the books deal with Springsteen's life, instead of focusing on his songs. Thus my thesis offers a fresh update on Springsteen's recent lyrics and shows how they reflect the American Dream.

There is lots of material for further studies. This topic could be extended into a book, especially with all the lyrics. Springsteen has developed his themes and has lots of reflections on the American Dream and its distance from the reality.

When writing this paper, I absorbed myself into the world of his characters, and I can envision them living their lives somewhere in America. There are teenagers hanging out in summer nights. Their parents struggle with their marriages and try to offer their children better lives than they had. There are factories and mills where men walk like robots every morning. Young men fix their cars and race on the streets after work. In the ghettos blacks are fighting and police officers cannot bring peace. Springsteen's America is a vivid place with intriguing characters.

There are other possibilities for further studies as well. Since Christian imagery is present on all Springsteen albums, a more detailed analysis of biblical values would help to understand his songs better. Even though Pirttijärvi (2005) has already written about this, she has picked a few songs from each decade of Springsteen's career and thus her work gives a good overview on the topic. For a Pro Gradu one could choose an album or a decade and focus in detail on a more narrow area. Or one could choose a certain aspect of religion, for example Old Testamental references, and show how Springsteen uses those in his lyrics in a given period.

Another topic would be to analyse Springsteen's role as a folk singer by comparing traditional folk elements to his songs. One could also write about his connections with the 1960s and '70s folk protest singers, for instance with Bob Dylan or Pete Seeger. Another idea would be to compare the image of man in the lyrics of Bob Dylan and Springsteen. At least on the first listening it seems that the men in Dylan's songs are often very weak whereas Springsteen's songs have more masculine strength.

One could also write a political biography of Springsteen. Even though there are many biographies about him, I do not think there is one that focuses on his political stands. He supported John Kerry and Barack Obama for presidents. One could write about his songs in relation to his politics and the speeches and stands he has made. One could also focus on Springsteen's stands on work and his siding with the working-class people.

Another field of study could be the American Dream. In my research I was surprised about how practically all components of the Dream bear some connection to religion. One could study how religious the concept really is and how much this ideology has changed today. One could also focus on different aspects of the Dream and discuss how they have evolved throughout the years. Another interesting way to investigate this would be to interview a group of people, whether Americans or Europeans, and find out how the Dream lives in people's minds today.

Westerns are another significant area. One could analyse how they reflect American history or the American Dream. Or choose Westerns that depict the lives of real outlaws, such as Jesse James, and discuss how the myths and legends live on in movies. The images of American Indians have changed a lot from the colonial era to this day. One could also analyse their role in Westerns.

This paper has many American themes, from the "discovery" of America to the current situation in the country, political and social aspects, historical events, the development of folk and rock, the myths and values associated with America. I have connected these themes and discussed the

music of a significant American singer-songwriter. By writing this paper, I have indeed been workin' on a dream.



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### 10.3 Picture Credits

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## 11. ALBUMS



*Working On a Dream*, 2009



*Magic*, 2007

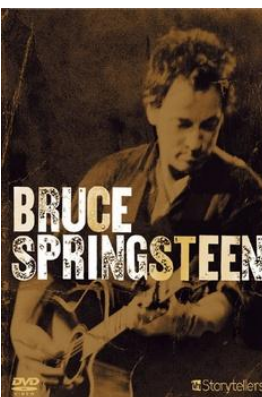


*Live In Dublin*, 2007

(This was also released as a DVD)



*We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*. 2006



*Storytellers* DVD, 2005



*Devils&Dust*, 2005 (The album release includes a bonus DVD)



*Live In Barcelona* DVD, 2003



*The Essential*, 2003



*The Rising*, 2002



*Live In New York City*, 2001 (This was also released as a DVD)





*18 Tracks, 1999*



*Tracks, 1998*



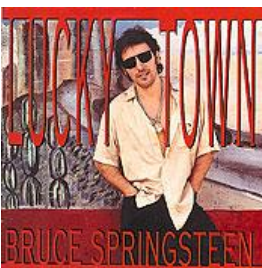
*The Ghost Of Tom Joad, 1995*



*Greatest Hits, 1995*



*In Concert MTV Plugged, 1993 (this was also released as a DVD)*



*Lucky Town, 1992*



*Human Touch*, 1992



*Chimes Of Freedom*, 1988



*Tunnel Of Love*, 1987



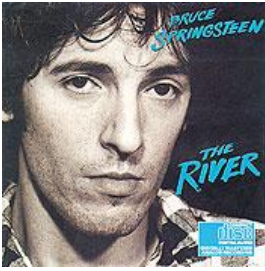
*Live 1975-1985*, 1986



*Born In The U.S.A.*, 1984



*Nebraska*, 1982



*The River, 1980*



*Darkness On The Edge Of Town, 1978*

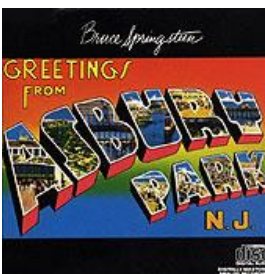


*Born To Run, 1975.*

(*Born To Run: 30th Anniversary 3-Disc Set* which includes the CD, *Wings For Wheels: The Making of Born To Run*, and *Live in London 1975* concert DVD was released in 2005)



*The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle, 1973*



*Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J. 1973*