

“You Take the Old, You Make it New:” Musical and Lyrical Repurposing
in Bruce Springsteen’s Songs

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In his keynote address at the South by Southwest (SXSW) Conference on March 15, 2012, Bruce Springsteen acknowledged that all of his songs’ themes derived from the Animals’ “We Gotta Get Out of This Place” **[PLAY CLIPS 01, 02]** and proceeded to play a few bars of the song. The most striking derivation that Bruce demonstrated is the riff in the Animals’ “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood” **[PLAY CLIP 03]** from which he segued into his own “Badlands,” **[PLAY CLIP 04]** commenting “this is how successful theft is accomplished.” Unlike George Harrison who claimed he inadvertently lifted the melody from the Chiffon’s “He’s So Fine” to make “My Sweet Lord,” rather than outright theft of an entire melody, Bruce Springsteen incorporates themes, images, musical riffs, and styles from doo wop to hip hop as part of the folk process to make the old new. Critic John Rockwell noted

that for the album *Born to Run*, Bruce recycled and reinterpreted older musical styles, the “bits and pieces from so many rock, pop, R&B and even Broadway artists of the past twenty years—from Elvis to Dylan to the Drifters to Van Morrison to Leonard Bernstein and his *West Side Story*.”¹ This paper will explore instances of Bruce’s musical and lyrical repurposing of his predecessors’ songs and how this fits into the folk process.

Scholars, publishers, authors, and librarians currently debate the issue of fair use when reproducing parts of a work. Copyright originally was designed to give authors sole rights to reap benefits from their work for a limited period of time—fourteen years with the option of a one-time renewal for another fourteen years, and then the work moved into the public domain where it was freely available for anyone else to use, adapt, or create a new work from it. This encouraged creativity. Since the revision of the Copyright Act in 1976 and several times again in subsequent years, for works created after January 1, 1978 copyright has been extended to life plus seventy years. Sound

recordings fixed before February 15, 1972, are protected until February 15, 2067.² The copyright law is very complex and I will not attempt to explain all of the intricacies here. With the lawyers and financial departments of publishing, along with the film studios and record companies, the law has locked down creativity into rights management so the slightest hint of adaptive reuse smacks of copyright infringement. Parodies are considered new works and are protected from infringement lawsuits. If an artist gives permission, such as when Bruce allowed 2 Live Crew to sample “Born in the U.S.A.” **[PLAY CLIP 05]** for their song “Banned in the U.S.A.,” **[PLAY CLIP 06]** that is allowed. It is the smaller pieces—musical and lyrical phrases—that can leave one wondering how much is allowed and when does a writer tip the balance?

In the case of Bruce Springsteen, a casual listener might not recognize the antecedents for some of his songs. Bruce has become so musically well-read that the listener would have to be familiar with folk, country, blues, doo wop, early 1960s Phil Spector-produced girl groups,

1960s and British invasion bands, to name a few, to pick out what influenced Bruce as a lyricist and composer. If you listen carefully, you'll hear snatches of earlier recordings.

Bruce has said many times that when he saw Elvis Presley on the Ed Sullivan Show on TV he knew that's what he wanted to be. But Elvis didn't write his own songs. It was the songwriters and the musical production that grabbed Bruce's attention when he began to write his own songs. As kids in central New Jersey we listened to Top 40 AM radio stations broadcasting from New York City—mostly WABC and WMCA—and just absorbed that music into our psyche. The songs hooked you. How many of us can hear that first chord and say, ah, The Beatles' "A Hard Day's Night?" **[PLAY CLIP 07]** One note, one chord, six notes, an arrangement, background vocal nonsense syllables—we can find them all among Bruce's songs.

The most obvious influence is Phil Spector's wall of sound and his work with the Ronettes. Listen to Ronnie's woh oh oh oh oh oh in "Be My Baby" **[PLAY CLIP 08]** and then play Bruce's "Out in the Street."

[PLAY CLIPS 09] In fact, Bruce admits to wanting the *Born to Run* album to sound like a Phil Spector production such as the Crystals' "Da Doo Ron Ron." **[PLAY CLIPS 10, 11]** Bruce and the E Street Band **[PLAY CLIPS 12, 13]** even copy Phil Spector's arrangement for the Crystals' version of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." **[PLAY CLIPS 14, 15]**

Other than Phil Spector, Bruce uses guitar licks and stylings of other musicians. We get Little Eva's "Locomotion" drum part **[PLAY CLIP 16]** reappearing in the drum roll in "Born to Run." **[PLAY CLIP 17]** In concert, Bruce often segues from Bo Diddley's "Mona" **[PLAY CLIP 18]** into his Diddley-beat "She's the One." **[PLAY CLIP 19]** "Gypsy Biker" **[PLAY CLIP 20]** incorporates the slide distorted guitar of Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game." **[PLAY CLIP 21]** The opening riff from Tommy Tutone's "Jenny/867-5309" **[PLAY CLIP 22]** turns up in "Radio Nowhere." **[PLAY CLIP 23]** Even Henry Mancini's "Theme from Peter Gunn" **[PLAY CLIP 24 – Clarence Clemons' version]** slowed down forms the underlying riff on "Pink Cadillac." **[PLAY CLIP 25]** Bruce has always expressed his admiration for Roy Orbison. He crafted "Breakaway"

[PLAY CLIP 26] after Orbison’s “It’s Over.” **[PLAY CLIP 27]** The Byrds’ jangly guitar from “Eight Miles High” **[PLAY CLIP 28]** appears in Bruce’s music as well in “Life Itself.” **[PLAY CLIPS 29, 30]**

Much has been said and written about Bruce’s love of soul music and not only did Stax, Motown, and Atlantic record companies’ artists greatly influence Bruce’s role as a band leader but their music finds expression in his songs.³ The Impressions’ “People Get Ready” **[PLAY CLIP 31]** inspired Bruce and many years later he incorporated it into “Land of Hope and Dreams.” **[PLAY CLIP 32]**

Sometimes Bruce borrows a lyrical phrase and works it into a song with a completely different meaning. While Bruce used part of the chorus from Sam Cooke’s “Meet Me at Mary’s Place” **[PLAY CLIP 33]** for his “Mary’s Place” **[PLAY CLIP 34]** on *The Rising*, the chords echo Major Lance’s “Monkey Time.” **[PLAY CLIP 35]** Bruce wrote in his book, *Songs*, that he based “The E Street Shuffle” **[PLAY CLIP 36]** on “Monkey Time as well.”⁴ In addition to lyrics, Bruce reuses song titles. Reaching back to 1960s pop, Bruce shortens the title and keeps the theme of Lou

Christie's "Two Faces Have I" [PLAY CLIP 37] for his "Two Faces" [PLAY CLIP 38] on *Tunnel of Love*. This album also contains "Walk Like a Man" [PLAY CLIP 39] whose title is the same as the Four Seasons' song. [PLAY CLIP 40] Both Lou Christie's and the Four Seasons' falsetto vocal stylings turn up in Bruce's "Sad Eyes" [PLAY CLIP 41] and "Lift Me Up." [PLAY CLIP 42] "Born in the U.S.A.'s" phrase, "nowhere to run, nowhere to hide" [PLAY CLIP 43] harkens back to Martha and the Vandellas's song, "Nowhere to Run." [PLAY CLIP 44] "Hey, baby" in "Dancing in the Dark," [PLAY CLIP 45] alludes to Bruce Channel's 1962 song. [PLAY CLIPS 46] With Bruce's affinity for Chuck Berry, it's only natural that he would incorporate the first line of Chuck's "Johnny Bye Bye" [PLAY CLIPS 47] into "Bye Bye Johnny." [PLAY CLIP 48]

In recent years, snippets and phrases have evolved into whole verses being incorporated into songs and for these Bruce acknowledges the songwriter(s) and shares credit. One of his most obscure songs, "A Night with the Jersey Devil," [PLAY CLIP 49] was released as a download-only single, accompanied by a video, on October 31, 2008, as

a "Halloween treat" on Bruce's Web site. The video is included in the deluxe edition DVD of his *Working on a Dream* album, which is currently the only official physical release of the song. It is a blues tune with bullet mic vocals, including portions of the Gene Vincent 1958 song "Baby Blue" **[PLAY CLIP 50]** (specifically, one verse—featured here as the last verse), and Bruce shares the song's writing credits with the two co-writers of "Baby Blue," Robert Jones and Gene Vincent. Since I'm more attuned to the music than the lyrics on first listen, the initial thing I noticed is the riff from the Yardbirds' version **[PLAY CLIP 51]** of Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man." **[PLAY CLIP 52]** On *Wrecking Ball*, rather than sing another songwriter's verse, Bruce samples an earlier recording. "Death to My Hometown" **[PLAY CLIP 53]** contains portions of "The Last Words of Copernicus" **[PLAY CLIP 54]** by the Alabama Sacred Harp Convention. And "Rocky Ground" **[PLAY CLIP 55]** opens with "I'm a Soldier in the Army of the Lord" by the Church of God in Christ Congregation, here represented by Rev. Gary Davis's version. **[PLAY CLIP 56]**

In addition to incorporating a portion of another songwriter's lyrics and/or music into his own song, Bruce has also recorded the song enhanced with new verses he's written. For *We Shall Overcome; The Seeger Sessions*, he recorded Blind Alfred Reed's Depression-era song, "How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?" **[PLAY CLIP 57]**, kept the original last verse, and shortened it with two new updated verses **[PLAY CLIP 58]** to, as June Skinner Sawyers noted, "offer trenchant commentary on the incompetence of the Bush administration in the wake of Hurricane Katrina."⁵

When Bruce started listening to country music, he absorbed the themes of Hank Williams and Merle Haggard that we find on the albums *The River* and *Lucky Town*. Bruce's penchant for borrowing movie and song titles takes Roy Acuff's 1943 ballad "Wreck on the Highway" **[PLAY CLIP 59]** title and theme for his own "Wreck on the Highway" **[PLAY CLIP 60]** and Williams' 1947 "A Mansion on the Hill" **[PLAY CLIP 61]** for his "Mansion on the Hill."⁶ **[PLAY CLIP 62]** Bruce roughly based the song, "The River," **[PLAY CLIP 63]** on Williams' "Long

Gone Lonesome Blues.”⁷ **[PLAY CLIP 64]** Johnny Cash figures prominently in some songs, particularly his rhythm line surfacing in “I’m On Fire,” **[PLAY CLIP 65]** that came to Bruce “one night in the studio when [he] was just goofing around with a Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Three rhythm,”⁸ plus credited lyrics from “Ring of Fire” **[PLAY CLIP 66]** in “We Are Alive.” **[PLAY CLIP 67]** The Stanley Brothers’ “Rank Strangers” **[PLAY CLIP 68]** turns up as a phrase in “Long Walk Home.” **[PLAY CLIP 69]**

Folk music also contributed to Bruce’s musical education. From Pete Seeger’s anti-war song, “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” **[PLAY CLIP 70]** Bruce borrowed the title to use in the chorus to his song, “The Big Muddy,” **[PLAY CLIP 71]** on *Lucky Town*. The Irish-sounding “American Land” **[PLAY CLIP 72]** is based on Seeger’s 1957 song “He Lies in the American Land” **[PLAY CLIP 73]** written by a Slovak steelworker in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.⁹

In 1980, when Bruce discovered Woody Guthrie through Joe Klein’s biography, he started playing Woody’s “This Land is Your Land”

[PLAY CLIP 74] in concert, and performed “Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportees)” [PLAY CLIP 75] in 1981 and, along with “Riding in My Car,” [PLAY CLIP 76] on the album, *Til We Outnumber ‘Em*, a live performance held in Cleveland's Severance Hall in September 1996 as the grand finale of a 10-day celebration of Woody Guthrie's influence on the evolution of folk and rock music. In “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” [PLAY CLIP 77] Springsteen pays homage to Woody’s song, “Tom Joad,” [PLAY CLIP 78] with, as Bob Santelli noted, “a Guthrie-like flow to the song and a commitment to detail that mark many of Guthrie’s gems and that Springsteen deeply admired about Guthrie’s writing style. . . . Rarely has an artist so magnificently celebrated his influences, while at the same time creating a unique voice able to speak of issues still so chillingly relevant in America.”¹⁰

In addition to musical influences on his lyrics, Bruce reaches back into the literary canon of William Shakespeare when the narrator of “The Rising” sees Mary in the “garden of a thousand sighs” from the Bard’s *Twelfth Night*.¹¹ John Steinbeck, whose *Grapes of Wrath*

spawned two songs about the character Tom Joad, also contributed tone and subject matter from *Of Mice and Men* to Bruce's "The New Timer."¹² Bruce took "the name of who I ought to kill" for "The New Timer" **[PLAY CLIP 79]** from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.¹³ "The cliché-popping sheriff in noir writer Jim Thompson's book, *The Killer Inside Me*, inspired 'My Best Was Never Good Enough.'" ¹⁴**[PLAY CLIP 80]**

Conclusion

The folk process involves putting your own spin on songs, usually traditional folk songs, adding or eliminating some lines or verses, and passing this new version on to other musicians who can choose to play it the same way or include their own changes. Heretical as it may seem, Joan Baez changed lyrics in Bob Dylan's songs that she sang and not just to the appropriate gender. In a broad sense, Bruce Springsteen is contributing to the folk process when he incorporates bits and pieces of older songs into his music. The clearest example of the folk process is "How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live." By tying one original verse still applicable to today's economic situation to new lyrics, Bruce

is able to breathe new life into an old song and revitalize its relevancy. And in the process, because Bruce acknowledged the original source in the liner notes in *We Shall Overcome; The Seeger Sessions*, music aficionados may seek out Blind Alfred Reed's recording and bring the song full circle. Even though Bruce jokingly alluded to his "successful theft," I would argue that the musical and lyrical bits and pieces he has incorporated into his songs are homages to his predecessors and a vital part of the folk process to keep those sounds alive.

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¹ Louis P. Masur, *Runaway Dream; Born to Run and Bruce Springsteen's American Vision* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), pp. 122-123.

² Copyright Law of the United States of America and Related Laws Contained in Title 17 of the *United States Code*, Circular 92, Section 301(c).

³ Masur, *Runaway Dream*, p. 98.

⁴ Bruce Springsteen, *Songs* (New York: Avon, 1998), p. 25.

⁵ June Skinner Sawyers, *Bruce Springsteen: Halfway to Heaven & Just a Mile Out of Hell* (New York: Metro Books, 2009), pp. 176, 178.

⁶ Bryan K. Garman, "The Ghost of History: Bruce Springsteen, Woody Guthrie, and the Hurt Song," In *Racing in the Street: The Bruce Springsteen Reader*. Edited by June Skinner Sawyers (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 227.

⁷ Garman, "The Ghost of History, p. 223.

⁸ Springsteen, *Songs*, p. 166.

⁹ Sawyers, *Halfway to Heaven*, p. 178; Pete Seeger, introduction to “He Lies in the American Land,” *The Complete Bowdoin College Concert 1960* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2012).

¹⁰ Santelli, “Beyond Folk,” p. 54.

¹¹ Symynkywicz, *The Gospel*, p. 150.

¹² Sawyers, *Halfway to Heaven*, p. 131.

¹³ Marc Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), p. 320.

¹⁴ Springsteen, *Songs*, p. 277.