“Bruce, We Need You Now”: Bruce Springsteen’s Response to 9/11 with *The Rising*

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Bruce Springsteen’s album, *The Rising*, released in 2002, is generally acknowledged as his response to the Al Queda attacks on The World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the diverted attempt on the White House or the U.S. Capitol. That many of these songs were written years before the September 11, 2001, tragedy is a testament to Springsteen’s ability as a songwriter to craft lyrics that can be construed as applicable to a situation yet not be specifically about it. Springsteen has a reputation for painstakingly choosing songs among his prolific output that express his feelings, opinions, and viewpoint that he wishes to share with his audience on a particular album. While these fifteen songs appear to address 9/11, the core themes of loss, faith, and hope continue in the same vein that Springsteen has been mining for many years. It is the entirety of the album rather than individual songs that provides cohesiveness to the post-9/11 response. Scott Calif noted that “*The Rising* helped us collectively make sense of the numbingly unfathomable events of that day by reducing them to a personal scale,” and as a healing album, it “helped us to understand...gave us hope...that we as a people could again ‘rise up’...it helped us to look forward and not just back...and showed us something important...about ourselves and each other.”¹ Using multiple viewpoints—widows, widowers, victims, perpetrators, first-responders—Springsteen synthesizes the emotions underlying his characters to paint a broad picture of the world. He exploits a shared commiseration to explore how different people responded to the events of 9/11. This paper will analyze the songs to reveal how Springsteen achieved his goal by contextualizing the lyrics by theme, rather than song-by-song so that some songs bear repeating in more than one section.

**Chronology of Composition**
Springsteen’s home county of Monmouth in New Jersey lost 158 residents to the attack on the World Trade Center, more than any other county in the state. When he read in many of the obituaries that the deceased was a fan, he phoned several of the families to express his condolences. As Bruce left a Sea Bright parking lot a few days after the attack, a man drove by and shouted out the window, “We need you—now!” This plea kick-started Bruce into focusing his next album on 9/11—gathering older, unreleased songs that spoke to the theme and writing new ones. Marc Dolan noted that “the willed cheeriness of ‘Waitin’ on a Sunny Day,’ ‘Let’s Be Friends,’ and ‘Countin’ on a Miracle’ seemed as if they might be relevant. Even a seven-year-old song like ‘Nothing Man,’ which had been born of the same feeling of isolation that had yielded ‘Streets of Philadelphia’ and ‘Missing,’ could with a little retooling be turned into a song about a first responder with post-traumatic stress disorder.”

I don’t remember how I felt/I never thought I’d live
To read about myself/In my hometown paper
Now my brave young life/Was forever changed
In a misty cloud of pink vapor. . . .
You want courage, I’ll show you courage you can understand
The pearl and silver/Restin’ on my night table
It’s just me Lord, pray I’m able. . . .
I am, the nothing man.

Shortly after the September 21, 2001, television tribute, America: A Tribute to Heroes, Bruce wrote “Into the Fire” that became the linchpin on which the rest of the album hung. “You’re Missing” soon followed. Bruce described the songs as “an emotional feeling that I felt—and that I felt was in the air at that time. [Some songs] deal more directly with it than others, but the stories all happen in a post-September 11 context. You have to come to grips with the real horrors that are out there. And then all people have is hope. That’s what brings the next day and whatever that day may bring. You can’t be
uncritical, but just a hope grounded in the real world of living, friendship, work, family, Saturday night. And that’s where it resides. That’s where I always found faith and spirit. . . I’ve really tried to write about that basic idea my whole life. . . . I wanted other voices, other situations than just the American ones.
The eleventh was ultimately an international tragedy. . . I wanted to find a place where worlds collide and meet.” Among the other voices and situations, Bruce gives us a suicide bomber preparing for an attack in the song “Paradise.” “Where the river runs to black/I take the schoolbooks from your pack/Plastics, wire and your kiss/The breath of eternity on your lips/in the crowded marketplace/I drift from face to face/I hold my breath and close my eyes/And I wait for paradise.”

**Thematic Explorations**

*The Rising* album, “unified by a mood of romantic longing and a yearning for human connection,” contains several themes—love and loss, everyday people performing heroic acts, and resurrection. Many of the songs have multiple meanings. “Strength, faith, hope, and love” embody “Into the Fire,” “Waitin’ on a Sunny Day,” “Let’s Be Friends,” and “Mary’s Place.” Rather than identify the attackers and explore the motives and the morality of their actions, Bruce keeps the songs personal.

**Love and Loss**

The album opens with “Lonesome Day” as Bruce leads us not to the Promised Land but back to 9/11. Jeffrey Symynkywicz notes that “early impressions of a ‘sweet whisper’ and a ‘tender touch’ quickly degenerate in the second verse into a changed reality of a ‘dark sun’ rising, storms passing through, a house burning, and a viper lying in the grass. The narrator longs for revenge, but then ultimately chooses acquiescence. ‘This too shall pass’ he prays. Somehow he knows—though he’s probably not sure how—he’ll make it through ‘this lonesome day.’” The beauty of Springsteen’s lyricism lies in alternative readings—is this solely about 9/11 or the aftermath of a sudden and unexpected end of a relationship? One may choose to listen either to the universal or personal yet not diminish the impact of the song. “‘You’re Missing’ contains specific details that unmistakably convey that time and
place, right down to the ‘too many phone calls’ and ‘dust on my shoes.’”9 This song is the most intimate portrait of the loss—opening with “shirts in the closet, shoes in the hall” and including minute details of a daily life left suspended as the family does not know if the loved one will return home or remain missing. The poignancy of loss in “Countin’ on a Miracle” is heart-wrenching: “Your kiss was taken from me/Now all I have is this/Your kiss, your touch/Your heart, your strength/Your hope, your faith/Your face, your love/Your dream, your life.”10 And, again he invokes the dust from “You’re Missing” with a different twist: “Our love’s this dust beneath my feet/just this dust beneath my feet,”11 with the narrator literally standing in the dusty ashes of human remains.

“Mary’s Place” is also a song about loss and absence—with a “narrator trying to dance that absence away, if only for a few hours.”12 “From that black hole on the horizon/I hear your voice calling me. . . I dream of you in my arms/I lose myself in the crowd. . . I got a picture of you in my locket/I keep it close to my heart/It’s a light shining in my breast/Leading me through the dark/Seven days, seven candles/In my window lighting your way/Your favorite record’s on the turntable/I drop the needle and pray.”13 She wills her man to return by playing his favorite music and lighting his way home, all the while using his photo to help her leave the darkness of loss. When she asks, “Tell me how do we get this thing started,” it can mean the party at Mary’s place or starting a new life without her loved one.

Turning from loss to love, Springsteen sings that “there’s a lot of walls need tearing down/Together we could take them down one by one” in “Let’s Be Friends (Skin to Skin),”—calling on strangers to find common ground. In the lyrics, “I know we’re different you and me/Got a different way of walkin’/The time has come to let the past be history/Yeah, if we could just start talkin’,” it is not only a one-to-one connection but a broader, cultural one the singer seeks through individual effort to bridge the divide, and what better way than sexually—skin to skin—or maybe just a handshake. The urgency in “Let’s Be Friends” comes out in the lines, “Good things got a way of comin’ to an end/Don’t know when this chance might come again.”14 He takes it one step further in “Worlds Apart” when singing about a
love affair between a Westerner and a Muslim from the Middle East, possibly an American soldier and a Muslim woman. “We’ll let blood build a bridge, over mountains draped in stars/I’ll meet you on the ridge, between these worlds apart/We’ve got this moment now to live, then it’s all just dust and dark/Let love give what it gives/Let’s let love give what it gives.”

Not only did we lose people on 9/11, we lost a complex of buildings that signified the strength of New York City, the United States, and the economic seat of the financial world. “Empty Sky” reminds us of the hole in the skyline while paralleling it with “an empty impression in the bed where you used to be.” Although originally written for Asbury Park, “My City of Ruins” aptly describes the loss New Yorkers felt on and after 9/11. Bruce opens the song with, “There’s a blood red circle/On the cold dark ground/And the rain is falling down/The church door’s thrown open/I can hear the organ’s song/But the congregation’s gone/My city of ruins.”

**Everyday People**

The city—New York City—was indeed in ruins, both physically and emotionally. And who better to rush to the rescue of the trapped people in the World Trade Center than the city’s firefighters. Firefighting is a noble and risky profession. Those of us outside the brotherhood may not have understood the risks these men and women take on a daily basis until we witnessed their heroic efforts on 9/11. And who better to speak to the world of their heroism and sacrifice than Bruce. He captured this essence that, as Peter Ames Carlin describes, “evoked both the sadness of the rescue workers’ deaths and the spiritual beauty of their sacrifice,” in the lyrics of “Into the Fire”: “I need your kiss, but love and duty/called you someplace higher/Somewhere up the stairs, into the fire,” and in the refrain, “May your strength give us strength/May your faith give us faith/May your hope give us hope/May your love give us love.”

In his song, “Paradise,” Bruce’s commentary on suicide juxtaposes a suicide bomber awaiting paradise as “I hold my breath and close my eyes” with a Virginian attempting suicide by drowning who...
realizes in the water, “I search for the peace in your eyes/But they’re as empty as paradise... I break above the waves/I feel the sun upon my face.” While we don’t know for sure if the suicide bomber succeeded, we do know that the Virginian understood the futility of suicide. Two people killing themselves for false reasons demonstrates the absurd pointlessness of the act.

**Resurrection**

In the second edition of his book of lyrics and commentary, *Songs*, Springsteen noted that he wrote “The Rising,” late in the recording process as a bookend to “Into the Fire.” “The Rising” depicts the firefighter toting his sixty pounds of gear up the stairs into the fire, doing his job, walking into his impending death. The imagery in “The Rising” contains both the literal of the firefighter climbing the stairs (“Lost track of how far I’ve gone/How far I’ve gone, how high I’ve climbed”) and the metaphorical rising to heaven (“There’s 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”). As mentioned earlier “My City of Ruins” began as a lamentation; by the end it became an invocation to “Come on, rise up! Come on, rise up!”

**Conclusion**

The universality of Bruce Springsteen’s lyrics allows the listener/reader to interpret the songs on a personal level as well as a general one. Whether whispering about the loss of a loved one when the towers fell, or a shout from the crowd to turn it up at Mary’s place, Bruce captured the duality of the tragedy of 9/11—it was at once a deeply personal loss and a national catastrophe. By incorporating the varied voices and viewpoints, he succeeded in creating an album of multiple meanings yet still speaking to all of us touched by 9/11. Within the major themes of love and loss, redemption, and sacrifice emerged a hopefulness to move beyond the tragedy, to face the future and live our lives to the fullest, to “come on, rise up.”
5 Bruce Springsteen, “Paradise,” The Rising (Columbia Records, 2002).
9 Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ‘N’ Roll, p. 370.
10 Bruce Springsteen, “Countin’ on a Miracle,” The Rising (Columbia Records, 2002).
11 Bruce Springsteen, “Countin’ on a Miracle,” The Rising (Columbia Records, 2002).
12 Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ‘N’ Roll, p. 371.
13 Bruce Springsteen, “Mary’s Place,” The Rising (Columbia Records, 2002).
14 Bruce Springsteen, “Let’s Be Friends (Skin to Skin),” The Rising (Columbia Records, 2002).
17 Bruce Springsteen, “My City of Ruins,” The Rising (Columbia Records, 2002).
19 Bruce Springsteen, “Into the Fire,” The Rising (Columbia Records, 2002).
20 Bruce Springsteen, “Paradise,” The Rising (Columbia Records, 2002).
21 Bruce Springsteen quoted in Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ‘N’ Roll, p. 372.
22 Bruce Springsteen, “My City of Ruins,” The Rising (Columbia Records, 2002).


Wiersema, Robert J. Walk Like a Man; Coming of Age with the Music of Bruce Springsteen. Vancouver, B.C.: Greystone Books, 2011.