Hard Times: Bruce Springsteen and Tom Morello Carry on Woody Guthrie’s Legacy

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Woody Guthrie’s musical and social conscience influence extends beyond the usual folk singer suspects of his son Arlo Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and the late Bruce “U. Utah” Phillips. Later generations of rock musicians discovered Woody and have absorbed his ethos in their songwriting, performances, and social activism.

Giles Morris in a recent issue of C-ville, Charlottesville, Virginia’s news and arts weekly newspaper, noted, “It is easy to trace our country’s political conversations through Woody’s songs. He was singing about war, work, immigration, race, class discrimination, and patriotism through the Depression, World War II, and the ‘50s. . . . Woody sang songs for poor working people, the least political class in the country since its beginning. Woody told Ed Cray in his biography. . . .
‘I am out to sing the songs that make you take pride in yourself and in your work.’ Who’s singing that song today? What’s the tune?"¹ Two of rock music’s performers who carry it on in song and tune are Bruce Springsteen and Tom Morello. [SLIDE 2]

This paper will explore Woody Guthrie’s influence on Bruce Springsteen whose work has become increasingly politicized, and on Tom Morello, guitarist with the rock groups Rage Against the Machine and Audioslave, and in his solo acoustic career as The Nightwatchman. Morello participated in several of the Occupy Wall Street protests including singing “This Land is Your Land” at Occupy L.A., and in February 2012 performed at the Woody Guthrie 100th Anniversary Concert—Festival Musik & Politik—in Berlin. Springsteen’s latest album, Wrecking Ball (on which Morello performs on “This Depression”), features a song, “Shackled and Drawn,” [SLIDE 3] whose lyrics could have come from a Guthrie songbook.

Bruce Springsteen [SLIDE 4]
As a rock musician, Bruce Springsteen came later in his career than contemporaneous folk musicians to appreciate Woody Guthrie. Like most kids of his generation, he was first exposed to selected verses of “This Land is Your Land” in grammar school. In 1980 Bruce received a copy of Joe Klein’s biography, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* and soon added Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land” to his set list. He recognized the resemblance between Woody’s Dust Bowl Depression and the recession gripping America. Guthrie’s political and social activism inspired Springsteen to develop a pro-active political voice, and Ronald Reagan’s attempt to manipulate Bruce’s fame for his re-election campaign spurred Bruce’s political activism. Within two years, Bruce’s album *Nebraska*, with its marked shift in songwriting style and focus on criminals, outcasts, and “honest men stranded on a desolate American landscape,” began a thread of Guthrie-influenced writing, performing, and activism. Music critic Robert Palmer declared that “he is a kind of latter-day Woody Guthrie singing about America—not the
major enclaves of the rich, but small-town, working-class America, where young people frustrated by dead-end jobs, factory shutdowns and the sound of shattering hopes and dreams are as much a part of the picture as the more traditional rock-and-roll imagery of fast cars and summertime romances.”

Bob Santelli has noted that “despite his late introduction to Guthrie, it is Springsteen who most authentically has carried out the Guthrie influence in modern rock and roll. He has acted as the musical conduit for those younger songwriters seeking a Guthrie-esque style in which music becomes a potent sociopolitical force.”

Bruce envisages an inclusive world. Unlike “This Train”—the old folk song that Guthrie adapted and sang—that does not carry gamblers, liars, or thieves, Bruce’s reworking of the lyrics, including a bit of The Impressions’s “People Get Ready,” into his song “Land of Hope and Dreams” finds the train carrying saints and sinners, losers and winners, whores and gamblers, midnight ramblers, the brokenhearted, souls departed, fools and kings. And like Guthrie, whose “This Land is Your
Land,” is often misconstrued as a flag-waving anthem for America rather than the critical indictment of “private ownership of land and the poverty spawned by unchecked capitalism”\textsuperscript{9} in the protest verses ignored by the school songbooks, Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” received the same type of misinterpretation of what is actually a protest against the treatment of returning Vietnam veterans.

Fast forward to 2008 and we find Bruce Springsteen actively campaigning for Senator Barack Obama. [SLIDE 6] In the intervening twenty-eight years, Bruce arrived slowly to his support for a political candidate, from playing a small acoustic benefit concert at the Red Bank Drive-in for George McGovern’s presidential campaign in 1972\textsuperscript{10} to his public endorsement of John Kerry in 2004 [SLIDE 7] through the Vote for Change Tour concerts [SLIDE 8] at which he risked alienating some fans who preferred their music without a dose of politics when he spoke openly about pursuing “a deeper patriotism.” While Bruce has steadily and increasingly incorporated social issues in his songs, stage
raps, public service announcements for local food banks at each
concert, and his own donations of time and money to food banks and
charitable causes, he shied away from endorsing political candidates
until he felt he finally had to speak out to elicit support for change in
the American government. In the intervening years between reading
Joe Klein’s book in 1980, immersing himself in Woody’s *Dust Bowl
Ballads*, the release of his albums *Nebraska* in 1982, *The Ghost of Tom
Joad* in 1995, *Magic* in 2007 expressing “the political and social results
of what came out of the tragedy of 9/11,”¹¹ and *Wrecking Ball* in 2012,
Springsteen honed his songwriting craft to more pointedly incorporate
stories about the dispossessed, migrant workers, unemployment,
homelessness, and immigration, among others. While Springsteen’s
*Wrecking Ball* songs highlighting the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on
a ravaged New Orleans mirror Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* about the
plight of Oklahoma refugees, *The Ghost of Tom Joad* [SLIDE 9] is a linear
descendant. In the title song, “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” Springsteen
pays homage to Woody’s song, “Tom Joad,” 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.”

In critic Mikal Gilmore’s review of the album he noted “the sense of language and storytelling owes much to the Depression-era sensibility of Woody Guthrie.” And when Springsteen toured to support this album, he slicked back his hair, rolled up his sleeves, and shucked the rock and roll schtick for a laid-back performance worthy of an old folkie. The songs took center stage and Springsteen was simply the conduit by which the audience could hear the words and messages without the distraction of a rock show. Perhaps realizing that only a certain core group of fans would come to see a solo acoustic show, and that a smaller audience in a more intimate venue would best showcase
the lyrics to his songs, Springsteen opted for theaters and auditoriums rather than his customary arenas and stadiums. And that worked. But to get the message across to a wider audience, during the next full-fledged Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band tour, [SLIDE 11] they incorporated some of the songs from *The Ghost of Tom Joad* and *Nebraska*, sometimes solo, sometimes with a few acoustic instruments, and sometimes as a full-out band version. Springsteen worked at balancing the message with the music. And when that did not work and the country elected and re-elected George W. Bush, Springsteen finally broke his political abstinence and campaigned for John Kerry and then Barack Obama. [SLIDE 12] He told *Rolling Stone*’s publisher Jann Wenner, “I knew after we invaded Iraq that I was going to be involved in the election. It made me angry. We started to talk about it on stage. I take my three minutes a night for what I call my public service announcement.”14 Bruce explained in an August 2004 *New York Times* editorial, “personally, for the last 25 years I have always stayed one
step away from partisan politics. . . the stakes have risen too high to sit this election out.”

In 1985, Springsteen lent his vocal talents to select political and social causes’ recordings, benefit concerts, and tours—such as MUSE (Musicians United for Safe Energy’s “No Nukes” in 1979—the first time he became politically involved), 1981’s Vietnam Veterans of America, 1985’s USA for Africa’s “We Are the World,” and 1988’s Human Rights Now! tour to benefit Amnesty International—but he did not speak out publicly at these concerts or in the tour booklets. He quietly recorded his part on the “Sun City” record written by his friend and former band mate Steven Van Zandt [SLIDE 13] in August 1985. Springsteen was hoping that by bringing attention to apartheid in South Africa, “It’d also make us look in our own backyards, at the terrible problems we have with racism right here in this country right now. . . For me, music was always informative, educational, and fun. . .”
Beginning with the 1984 world tour to support his *Born in the U.S.A.* album, Springsteen donated over $1 million to community action projects in the cities where he performed, highlighting the problems of the unemployed, the hungry, and the homeless. Since then his political involvement has grown from promoting various local food banks and unions in concerts to supporting Vietnam veterans to participating in numerous political rallies. The first recorded statement Springsteen made about politics occurred prior to singing “Badlands” at Arizona State University on November 5, 1980, when he told the audience, referring to Ronald Reagan defeating Jimmy Carter for the presidency, “I don’t know what you guys think about what happened last night but I think it’s pretty frightening. You guys are young, there’s gonna be a lot of people depending on you coming up, so this is for you.” The closest he got to a political statement during the Human Rights now! Tour in 1988, was when Springsteen declared, “The great challenge of adulthood is holding onto your idealism after you lose your
innocence and believing in the power of the human spirit. . . Amnesty International is an organization that reaffirms that power.” On September 21, 1984, Bruce first articulated his position on the politics of class when he prefaced the playing of “My Hometown” with the comment, “It’s a long walk from the government that’s supposed to represent all the people to where we [are now. It] seems like something’s happening out there where there’s a lot of stuff being taken away from a lot of people that shouldn’t have it taken away from them. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that this place belongs to us, that this is our hometown.” When the workers at the 3M plant [SLIDE 15] in Bruce’s hometown of Freehold—many of them former employees of the defunct A.M. Karagheusian Rug Mill (the textile mill featured prominently in “My Hometown”)—protested the imminent closing of the plant in 1986, Bruce and some members of the E Street Band made an unannounced appearance at a concert at the Stone Pony [SLIDE 16] to raise funds for the Oil, Chemical and
Atomic Workers Union Local 8-760, and he donated $20,000 to the union. In 1990 he performed two acoustic benefit concerts for the Christic Institute, a public-interest law firm with left-wing interests. Following his writing of “Streets of Philadelphia” [SLIDE 17] in 1993 for Jonathan Demme’s film, Philadelphia, about an AIDS-stricken gay lawyer who sues his own law firm for discrimination, Springsteen quietly donated $30,000 to the American Foundation for AIDS Research and $35,000 to the AIDS Project Los Angeles. By Fall 1996 Springsteen was no longer content to play a benefit concert consisting simply of music, hoping that his mere presence and his lyrics would get the point across; instead, he encouraged a crowd in California to vote against Proposition 209 [SLIDE 18] which would have reduced funding for affirmative-action programs. Critic A.O. Scott describes Springsteen as a “lonely avatar of a faded tradition of social conscience and left-wing populism.”
Echoing Scott’s description, June Skinner Sawyers notes that “on the 1995 The Ghost of Tom Joad tour, Springsteen picked up on John Steinbeck’s ‘one big soul’ theory, which, in turn, was an extension of Woody Guthrie’s brand of social conscience and left-wing populism. Essentially, it amounts to the thesis that we are all in this together and we all need one another to survive. Individual accountability and collective activity are intertwined— injustice is everyone’s responsibility, and we also have a responsibility toward one another.”

At his summer 2000 concert in Madison Square Garden in New York City, [SLIDE 19] Springsteen committed his most political act to date on stage when he segued from the audience participation in singing “Your hometown” for several minutes into the band repeatedly singing “41 shots” from his song “American Skin” about the police shooting of the unarmed Amadou Diallo—reminding them that collective responsibility goes hand in hand with citizenship.
In juxtaposition to the 1960s folkies who wrote protest songs, in particular Phil Ochs, [SLIDE 20] a topical songwriter to whom Bob Dylan once sneeringly said, “Ochs, you’re just a journalist,” many of whose songs refer so specifically to then-current events [SLIDE 21] that they remain rooted in their time and place unable to transcend their context, Bruce Springsteen writes songs that have a life outside their political content and context so they stand on their own and have multiple meanings.\(^\text{29}\) In a song such as “Streets of Philadelphia” he does not mention AIDS or HIV but within the context of the movie Philadelphia the vague inferences are understood; apart from the movie the song transcends a mono-dimensional meaning to a more expansive sense of loss and hurt. Springsteen wrote “Roulette” a week after the Three Mile Island nuclear incident—without mentioning TMI by name—and toward the end of The River sessions he wrote “Held Up Without a Gun” about rising gas prices.
Besides covering Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” some of Springsteen’s own songs [SLIDE 22] can be seen as “Woody’s Children.” Like Guthrie’s “Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportees)” which Bruce played in 1981, he wrote and recorded four songs for The Ghost of Tom Joad album that deal with Mexican immigration—“Across the Border,” “Balboa Park,” “The Line,” and “Sinaloa Cowboys.” Woody Guthrie addressed the question of the consequences of the choices you make. Springsteen told Neil Strauss he “wanted to write about things that people always have to go through at some point in their lives. My music wasn’t going to be about fashion or style. It was going to be about family and struggle and identity questions, spiritual questions: Who am I? Where am I going? How do you live an honest life, and is it possible? How do you make the kinds of connections that keep you from the worst of yourself and bring out the best of yourself? And then there’s fun and good times—how do you find them?”30
With the help, guidance, and friendship of his manager Jon Landau, Bruce educated himself about the history of the United States and began reading voraciously and in the process transformed himself from a lonely outcast inarticulate misfit who barely made it through high school and a short stint at a community college into a thoughtful, erudite adult with a commitment to make a positive difference in people’s lives.

**Tom Morello [SLIDE 23]**

Bruce Springsteen’s major political contributions consist of donating his talent at benefit concerts and behind the scenes with financial contributions (and encouraging fans to do the same), not his physical presence as an activist on the front lines. In the next generation of rockers willing to take it to the streets we find Tom Morello. Where Bruce Springsteen took a long time to perfect his political songwriting skill and wrap it in counterpoint instrumentation
and tunes, Tom Morello [SLIDE 24] began his music career in a band with overt political lyrics [SLIDE 25] set to heavy metal rock music—the kinds of songs that hit you over the head with their message and if at first you don’t get it, smash you even harder. Rap/heavy/funk metal rock band Rage Against the Machine recorded “The Ghost of Tom Joad” in 1997 as a single and re-recorded it for their Renegades album in 2000. Their guitarist, Tom Morello, began his own solo career in 2003, playing political acoustic folk music at open-mic nights and various clubs under the alias The Nightwatchman [SLIDE 26] often performing “The Ghost of Tom Joad” on tour—finally joining Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band in Anaheim, California, for a duet of the song in April 2008. He’s compared The Nightwatchman to Bruce Springsteen, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan. When Morello began playing as The Nightwatchman, he joined artists Billy Bragg, Lester Chambers of The Chambers Brothers, Steve Earle, Jill Sobule, Boots Riley of The Coup and Mike Mills of R.E.M. on the Tell Us the Truth Tour in November 2003.
The thirteen-city tour was supported by unions, environmental and media reform groups including Common Cause, Free Press, and the A.F.L.-C.I.O. with the ultimate goal of “informing music fans, and exposing and challenging the failures of the major media outlets in the United States.” Tom Morello further explained, “Media consolidation needs smashing and globalization needs unmasking. When presidents and politicians lie, it is the job of the press to expose those lies. When the press fails, the gangstas come out from hiding. The lie becomes the law. The point of the Tell Us the Truth Tour is to help others make connections, and to show them that activism can change the policies of this country.”

Through the 2000s, Morello as The Nightwatchman barnstormed across America as if he was Tom Joad. As Springsteen wrote: [SLIDE 27]

Now Tom said "Mom, wherever there's a cop beatin' a guy Wherever a hungry newborn baby cries Where there's a fight 'gainst the blood and hatred in the air Look for me Mom I'll be there
Wherever there's somebody fightin' for a place to stand
Or decent job or a helpin' hand
Wherever somebody's strugglin' to be free
Look in their eyes Mom you'll see me.”

On August 27, 2008, Morello performed in Denver, Colorado, at the Open the Debates rally in opposition to the Commission on Presidential Debates exclusion of third party candidates from the nationally televised debates. He performed “This Land is Your Land” as The Nightwatchman and endorsed independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader. In October 2009, Morello, among a number of musicians, sued the U.S. government for the declassification of all documents relating to the use of music in interrogations at Guantanamo Bay. He stated, “Guantanamo is known around the world as one of the places where human beings have been tortured—from waterboarding to stripping, hooding and forcing detainees into humiliating sexual acts—playing music for 72 hours in a row at volumes just below that to shatter the eardrums. Guantanamo may be Dick Cheney's idea of America, but it's not mine. The fact that music I helped
create was used in crimes against humanity sickens me.”

Morello has played at many Occupy movements, including Occupy Wall Street as well as Occupy Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Seattle, Vancouver, British Columbia, Nottingham and Newcastle, England.

In February 2011, a week into the struggle to defend the working families of Wisconsin from the assault on their rights by Governor Scott Walker and his Republican allies in the state legislature, a group of rockers from around the country showed up to sing in solidarity with the tens of thousands of Wisconsinites who had gathered outside the state Capitol in Madison. They played their way through a rousing list of labor and protest songs, finishing with “This Land is Your Land,” restoring the song to its radical roots when Morello resurrected the “lost verses” that Guthrie sang when he wrote the song in the 1940s. The most famous of Guthrie’s songs is again being sung in the radical spirit that he intended. Morello would sing those words again and again through that year and 2012, as he appeared at union
rallies around the world, as well as “Occupy” events. Morello is winning critical praise and awards for his advocacy on behalf of working women and men everywhere. He told an AFSCME union journalist, “The day that I got back from Wisconsin last February, I wrote a song called ‘Union Town’ [SLIDE 29] about my experience in Madison. That was fleshed out into an eight-song record under the same name and I donated all the proceeds to the union struggles across the Midwest. The courage of the public service workers in Wisconsin and across the country has been a great inspiration to me and my music.” On Saturday morning, June 30, 2012, thousands of marchers in Los Angeles’s Chinatown, hoped to stop the low-wage, anti-union Walmart from opening a new store there. The rally featured music by Tom Morello and Ben Harper, both of whom played in front of a banner that read “Walmart = Poverty,” underneath iconic Chinese dragons. Morello kicked off the rally with his anthem for workers’ rights, “Union Song!”
In May 2012, Morello performed at a number of rallies and concerts over three days at the NATO protests in Chicago, and told Democracy Now!, "Across the globe, and certainly across the United States, from the Veterans Against the War movement to the rising, boomeranging-back-around union movement, social justice movements are on the rise again. I hope, to some small degree, that my songs can help be a soundtrack for that struggle and they help people on the front lines." Morello’s activism continued to be on display that month, taking part in the May Day demonstrations in New York, receiving an Officer’s Award from The Sidney Hillman Foundation presented by Harry Belafonte, and taking part in the National Nurses Union rally in Chicago. Morello was one of the featured attractions at the rally, though his presence did create some drama prior to the event when Chicago’s mayor attempted to revoke the permit for the event after hearing of his involvement. According to PeoplesWorld.org, the musician told the crowd, “They couldn’t shut us down, because we
stood up. It was a few politicians, skeevy lawyers, and some trembling NATO generals who caved in. If NATO, the defender of the free world, is afraid of a musician with an acoustic guitar and some nurses, we’re in a lot of trouble.” For Morello, it was a chance to return to his hometown, a place where he grew up in a household that supported unions. During the May 18 rally at Chicago’s Daley Plaza, the guitarist joined the audience in a sing-along, performing a 30-minute set that included “This Land is Your Land,” “One Man Revolution,” “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” and “World Wide Rebel Songs,” the title track from last year’s album by Morello as The Nightwatchman. Like an oratory superhero, wherever there is social injustice, Tom Morello will be there.

Morello said in a recent TV interview with Bill Moyers, “Whether I’m standing in the streets of Chicago or the Occupy Wall Street or in Madison, Wisconsin, my job is to steel the backbone of people on the frontlines of social justice struggles, and to put wind in sails of those struggles. And people who are fighting on a daily basis, at a grass roots
level, for the things that I believe in. . . . Desperate times deserve
desperate songs.” He believes there have been tangible gains at the
grassroots level, and his job is to be the lobbyist for the poor.

Conclusion

Both Bruce Springsteen [SLIDE 30] and Tom Morello carry on
Woody Guthrie’s legacy of social conscience. Springsteen, the rich rock
star, encourages his fans to support, and lends his voice and donates
money to social and charitable causes that have a direct impact on
workers’ lives. His finely crafted songs wrap a political message in
instrumentation ranging from quiet finger-picking to ten-piece full band
stadium rock. Tom Morello made a lot of money with Rage Against the
Machine and Audioslave so that he can now afford to donate the
proceeds from some concerts to union causes. He is front and center
on the line, speaking and performing at rallies—taking the direct action
approach. Morello’s songs, delivered one degree below a raging shout
with a howling guitar accompaniment, attack the problems head-on.
Springsteen and Morello each inherited Woody Guthrie’s legacy and took different paths. Which one is more effective history will decide. There’s a need for both.
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6 Masur, Runaway Dream, p. 158.
8 “This Train is Bound for Glory,” woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/, accessed July 25, 2012; Bruce Springsteen, “Land of Hope and Dreams,” Wrecking Ball (Columbia, 2012)
9 Sawyers, Halfway to Heaven, p. 98.
11 Sawyers, Halfway to Heaven, p. 184.
12 Santelli, “Beyond Folk,” p. 54.


Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ‘n’ Roll*, p. 175.


Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ‘n’ Roll*, p. 221.


Sawyers, *Halfway to Heaven*, pp. 16-17.


His early political songwriting efforts with Steel Mill were heavy-handed diatribes. He has become a master at matching depressing topics with bright, cheery music, heeding the Mary Poppins song, “A Spoonful of Sugar Makes the Medicine Go Down.”

Sawyers, *Halfway to Heaven*, p. 133.


Kate Childs Graham, “From Guthrie to Morello, A Tradition of Labor Activism Through Song” (*AFSCME WORKS* blog at AFSCME.org, July 11, 2012; accessed July 31, 2012)


