“Mr. State Trooper, Please Don’t Stop Me:” The Image of Police in Bruce Springsteen’s Songs

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Abstract

As teenagers in the 1960s, we experienced first-hand that the policeman is not your friend. The image of police in Bruce Springsteen’s songs bears witness to his and his teenage cohorts’ encounters with the police—from local cops to state troopers. This paper examines the interconnectedness of real-life hassles by the police and Bruce’s internalization and output in song.

In the Jersey shore towns and on the boardwalks lining the beaches, teenage residents of Monmouth County, New Jersey, found the police to be a major impediment to having fun. On the cusp of rolling over from the repressive 1950s, the early 1960s offered little more than the same. With the rise of the Beatles in 1963-1964, Jersey shore kids started forming bands in most of the local towns. Bands needed to play at dances for their teenage fans and, apart from the high school and junior high school sanctioned monthly dances, several outlets opened in the towns. The Catholic schools sponsored Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) dances, VFW halls allowed dances on weekend nights, the beach clubs in and near Sea Bright hosted dances, and specialty clubs sprang up, particularly Le Teendezvous in Shrewsbury and the Hullabaloo franchises in Freehold, Middletown, and Asbury Park.

“Battles of the Bands” nights at the Matawan-Keyport Roller Drome brought rock bands together from across Monmouth and Middlesex counties to compete for the title and prize money as the best band in the north shore area. Bruce Springsteen’s band, The Castiles, competed in one of these contests at the roller skating rink. The bands mostly played at the dances within a small radius of their home town. In the 1960s the biggest bands that crossed over the dividing line between western and eastern Monmouth County included The Mods, the oldest rock band around comprised of college boys, and The Motifs, a Freehold band who often played the VFW dances in Middletown. Both of these bands
recorded and locally released 45 rpm singles which only added to their glamour. The Mods recorded a cover version of “Everybody Needs Somebody to Love,” and The Motifs released “Molly.” Behind the scenes, and often out front as well on keyboards, Norman Seldin of Red Bank organized concerts, recorded bands on his Selsom Records label, and performed in a band called Joyful Noyze which also included a saxophone player named Clarence Clemons. This band even recorded an album.

The parallel folk scene nurtured local, and soon to be national, artists like Janis Ian (originally Janis Fink) of Farmingdale and Melanie Safka of Long Branch. Dick and Marlene Levine of Middletown organized and ran the Middletown Folk Festival at which local musicians such as Ruth Johnson and Jeannie Clark gained wider fame. Jeannie later opened for Bruce at a beach club dance. In May 1968, two Middletown Township High School graduates opened the Off-Broad Street Coffeehouse in Red Bank which offered both an open stage for drop-in performers and scheduled band nights. My late husband, Joe, and I regularly performed at the Off-Broad Street and noticed an exciting solo artist who had potential. We mentioned to our manager that he ought to check out this guy but John, being heavily into R&B, was not interested in any more folkies. He passed up a chance to work with Bruce.

As the music veered into psychedelia, the late 1960s saw concerts at Monmouth College (now University) and Ocean County Community College where the kids did not come primarily to dance but to stand in front of the band and watch and listen to the musicianship. Throughout the 1960s, no matter where the music originated we wanted “to be where the bands are.” The sheer number of teenagers congregating in one place brought the ubiquitous police presence and it was not for our protection but for control.

Growing up in Middletown in the late 1960s, the big spectre hovering over all teenage activities outside the home was police chief Joseph M. McCarthy. I come from an Irish-German family with an uncle who was a cop in Newark and a nephew who is a cop. That made no difference in my attitudes
toward the police. They hassled us and tried to control our every move. They feared large gatherings of
teenagers. In this light, it is no wonder that the infamous incident with Bruce and the band at the
Clearwater Swim Club in Middletown came to a violent conclusion when Chief McCarthy pulled the plug
at 10:00 p.m. during the band’s performance. McCarthy’s modus operandi had always been “shut ‘em
up and shut ‘em down.” In 1967, the Township of Middletown appointed McCarthy from within its ranks
as the next Chief of Police. According to the department’s history on its Web page, “During a colorful
career as Chief, he was credited with establishing a professional and aggressive department of over 100
officers with a no nonsense attitude toward those who would break the law.”

During his eulogy for E Street Band organist Danny Federici on April 21, 2008, Bruce finally revealed all the details of the
Clearwater incident on September 11, 1970:

... it was the “police riot” in Middletown, New Jersey. A show we were doing to raise bail
money for “Mad Dog” Lopez who was in jail in Richmond, Virginia, for having an altercation with
police officers who we’d aggravated by playing too long. Danny allegedly knocked over our huge
Marshall stacks on some of Middletown’s finest who had rushed the stage because we broke
the law by...playing too long. As I stood there watching, several police officers crawled out from
underneath the speaker cabinets and rushed away to seek medical attention. Another nice
young officer stood in front of me onstage waving his nightstick, poking and calling me nasty
names. I looked over to see Danny with a beefy police officer pulling on one arm while Flo
Federici, his first wife, pulled on the other, assisting her man in resisting arrest. A kid leapt from
the audience onto the stage, momentarily distracting the beefy officer with the insults of the
day. Forever thereafter, “Phantom” Dan Federici slipped into the crowd and disappeared.

Bruce goes on to relate how they had an upcoming show in the gym at Monmouth College and Danny
risked arrest for the Clearwater incident. Bruce notes that
At the end of the evening, during the last song, I pulled the entire crowd up onto the stage and Danny slipped into the audience and out the front door. Once again, “Phantom” Dan had made his exit. (I still get the occasional card from the old Chief of Police of Middletown wishing us well. Our histories are forever intertwined.)

In 1969, my late husband Joe and I were on the beach and boardwalk in Bradley Beach on the Fourth of July awaiting the evening fireworks. Joe used to hang out in Bradley before I met him and he knew a lot of the hippies who hung out there too. Some of them came up to us that evening to complain that they’d heard that hippies were not going to be allowed on the boardwalk during the fireworks. Joe, being an activist and loudmouth, wanted to find out if it was true. He asked a Bradley Beach cop who confirmed the rumor. Joe asked what the precedent was; the cop, true to form, did not know what he meant and replied, “You want to see the president?”, and promptly hauled my husband off to jail. Word spread that they’d taken Joe and a crowd of teenagers swarmed the local police station demanding to know why Joe was arrested. The cops feared they’d have a riot on their hands so they let “the ringleader” go to keep the peace. But we still could not go on the boardwalk to watch the fireworks. That same year, we were leaving the Off-Broad Street Coffeehouse and pulled onto a side street to wait for friends in another car to catch up to us. We were stopped by a Red Bank cop for obstructing traffic when there was no one behind us to obstruct. Another time while exploring the Pine Barrens, I turned around in the front seat and reached behind to get a piece of chocolate cake from the back seat. Two cops saw this action and pulled us—a pair of long-haired hippies—over because what I did looked suspiciously like I was trying to hide the dope when I saw them. I had not seen them, but they insisted we were suspicious and made us get out while they searched the car. They found nothing but the chocolate cake. They wanted to know what we were doing there, and could not believe we were just exploring the Barrens. Without even an apology, they left. These kinds of incidents speak to
the siege mentality of the Jersey shore cops when confronted with teenagers. Teens, and especially long-haired hippies, threatened the establishment and needed to be controlled.

Bruce has spoken in his stage raps in 1984 about being stopped by a cop on Route 33 off Turnpike Exit 8 between Hightstown and Freehold. With his personal experiences as a driver and as a band member at the Clearwater Swim Club, and probably countless other nasty encounters, it is no wonder that the police would play a role in his songs. In a close reading of all of his recorded songs published in his book, “Songs,” plus recordings since, I find an extraordinary amount of references to the police, especially in his earlier songs when their negative interactions were recent memories.

The image of police in thirty-one of Bruce’s songs falls into three main patterns: off-hand, passing references in songs not directly about them; head-on commentary where they are integral to the story; and as the main character of the song. There are several themes running through these songs: controlling behavior, authoritarianism, corruption, police violence, and the bearer of bad news.

**Passing References to Police**

As early as “Blinded by the Light,” Bruce wrote, “Yes and Scotland Yard was trying hard, they sent some dude with a calling card, he said ‘Do what you like but don’t do it here.’” We see here the distant police from another country acting the same as our local police—controlling teenagers’ behavior. Move along, move along.

“Seeds”: Bruce introduces the song in concert with a story about northerners who went south looking for work in the oil fields. They found no jobs and were sleeping in tents and cars on the side of the road. Cops came along and told them to move on. Here the police act as enforcers against innocent behavior. Again, move along, move along.
“It’s Hard to Be a Saint in the City”: “And when the heat comes down and it was left on the ground/The devil appeared like Jesus through the steam in the street/Showin’ me a hand I knew even the cops couldn’t beat.”⁶ Equating the police with the devil—police power is second only to the devil’s—offers a heady commentary on police authoritarianism.

“The E Street Shuffle”: “The newsboys say the heat’s been bad since Power Thirteen gave a trooper all he had in a summer scuffle. . . Little Angel hangs out at Easy Joe’s, it’s a club where all the riot squad goes when they’re cashin’ in for a cheap hustle.”⁷ Now the police are corrupt.

“4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)”: “Did you hear the cops finally busted Madam Marie for tellin’ fortunes better than they do.”⁸ Here’s a case of arbitrary police power reminiscent of Joe’s 4th of July detention in Bradley Beach.

“Incident on 57th Street”: “And Johnny cried ‘Puerto Rican Jane, word is down the cops have found the vein.’”⁹ Well, now, who knows what this is about?

“Open All Night” and “Living on the Edge of the World”: “Underneath the overpass trooper hits his party light(s) switch” and the narrator leaves him behind with “Goodnight, good luck, one, two power shift.”¹⁰ Bruce comments that this is a song “in which the hero braves snow sleet rain and the highway patrol for a kiss from his baby’s lips.”¹¹ The police are an impediment to a man/boy’s happiness with his girl.

“Man at the Top”: “Here comes a fireman, here comes a cop . . . Everybody wants to be the man at the top.”¹² This is another image of the police in a power role.

“Brothers Under the Bridge” (1995 version): “Up here there’s too much brush and canyon/For the CHP choppers to touch down.”¹³ The California Highway Patrol helicopters harass homeless veterans living under bridges and out in the scrub.
Integral to the Story

“Lost in the Flood”: “Everything stops, you hear five quick shots, the cops come up for air. . . And some kid comes blazin’ ‘round the corner but a cop puts him right away.”14 This song shows the violently hostile, no reason given, no arrest, just blow the kid away behavior of the cop.

“Zero and Blind Terry”: “Now Terry’s dad hired some troopers to kill Zero and bring Terry back home/They crawled up in the night/Like firelight/Now snow-white troopers from the council of crime/Rode silver foxes through Terry’s field/Oh they met the Pythons down on Route 9 but they refused to yield/The Pythons fought with buzz guns/And the troopers with swords like light/And Zero and Terry they ran away/As the gang fought all through the night.”15 Here Terry’s father invokes the cops to make her come home—another instance of police as controllers.

“Jungleland”: “Well the Maximum Lawman run down Flamingo/Chasing the Rat and the barefoot girl. . . There’s a ballet being fought out in the alley/Until the local cops/Cherry tops/Rips this holy night.”16 Here’s another case of police violence.

“Out in the Street”: “The black and whites they cruise by/And they watch us from the corner of their eye/But there ain’t no doubt, girl, down here /We ain’t gonna take what they’re handing out.”17 The cops as behavior controllers again.

“You Can Look (But You Better Not Touch)”: “I found a lovers’ rendezvous, the music low, set to park/I heard a tappin’ on the window and a voice in the dark/You can look but you better not touch, boy.”18 Ah, the days when we used to park in a dark deserted area locally known as “Lover’s Lane” and inevitably a cop would show up, tap on the window, and tell you to move on. Here the police act as morality enforcers, similar to “Zero and Blind Terry.”
“Roulette”: “Down by the river that talks/The night speaks in searchlights/And shortwave radios squawk/The police patrol the streets. . . They stopped me at a roadblock they put up on the interstate/They put me in detention but I broke loose and then I ran/They said they want to ask me a few questions but I think they had other plans.”19 While driving away from an unmentioned incident (interpreted to be the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster) paranoia sets in after a man is hassled by the cops who are now doing preventative control. No longer targeting teenagers, everyone is fair game for detainment.

“Rockaway the Days”: “Billy stole a car and headed out on the road/Pocketful of pills and his brain on overload/Seen some lights in his rearview mirror, panicked and gave her the gun/Wrapped himself ‘round a telephone pole way out on 101/Well Billy got cut out by the highway patrol/Just lay there with the cars passing on slow/Sheriff told Billy’s ma that Bill died/She buried his body by the riverside, alright.”20 Paranoid by seeing the police in the rearview mirror, Billy crashes. How many of us automatically think we must be doing something wrong whenever we see a police car behind us? In this case, Billy had done something wrong, but just the police presence was enough to scare him to death. How much did the police contribute to his death? The police have a two-pronged role here, pursuit and then being the bearer of bad news.

“Wreck on the Highway”: “And I thought of a girlfriend or a young wife/And a state trooper knocking in the middle of the night/To say your baby died in a wreck on the highway.”21 Here the state trooper is solely the bearer of bad news, which hits on another idea about the police—they’re either coming for you or bringing bad news.

“Nebraska”: “Sheriff, when the man pulls that switch, sir, and snaps my poor head back/You make sure my pretty baby is sittin’ right there on my lap.”22 The criminal thinks the police should naturally be willing to execute his girlfriend.
“Johnny 99”: “Johnny’s wavin’ his gun around and threatenin’ to blow his top/when an off-duty cop snuck up on him from behind/Out in front of the Club Tip Top they slapped the cuffs on Johnny 99.”

Ralph, nicknamed Johnny 99, is arrested by an off-duty cop who sneaks up on him and arrests him. Jim Cullen suggests that the arrest being made by an off-duty policeman “implies a sense of responsibility that is more than official or contractual,” and Rob Kirkpatrick states that “perhaps more to the point is that the incident illustrates a keen awareness of narrative detail; only a cop dressed in civilian clothes would be able to get anywhere near a gun-wielding criminal while still having the wherewithal to apprehend him. Although the off-duty policeman acts on behalf of law and order—a cause to which we are surely sympathetic—putting ourselves in Ralph/Johnny’s shoes, we can imagine his sense of betrayal at getting captured by one of his blue-collar brethren.”

Another interpretation could be that on-duty or off, the police mindset is a 24/7 attitude of looking for criminal behavior and, even if he’s not working, to jump in and arrest someone.

“Losin’ Kind”: Robber Frank Davis, after wrapping his car around a telephone pole during a high-speed chase, crawls out of the wreckage. The patrolman tells Frank he’s “lucky to be alive.” Frank replies, “Well, sir, I’ll think that one over if you don’t mind/Luck ain’t much good to you when you’re the losin’ kind.” This is the third instance of a cop as bearer of bad news.

“State Trooper”: The car thief has no secret wish to be caught, and pleads with the state trooper, real or imagined, not to stop him with the last line of each verse, “Mister state trooper, please don’t stop me.” Here’s another instance of paranoid thinking whenever you see a cop in the rear view mirror.

“Darlington County”: “We drove eight hundred miles without seeing a cop. . . Ain’t seen my buddy in seven days . . . Driving out of Darlington County/Seen Wayne handcuffed to the bumper of a state trooper’s Ford.” Here’s every northern hippie’s nightmare, a Southern cop. Whether Wayne did
something to warrant arrest or he’s about to be dragged behind the cop car is anybody’s guess. But it sure puts a negative spin on their first encounter with a cop after eight hundred miles.

“Working on the Highway”: A road construction flagger met a young girl but trouble soon followed: “We lit out down to Florida, we got along all right/One day her brothers came and got her and they took me in a black and white” and he ends up on a prison road gang. Whether the girl was underage, or her brothers were overprotective, the flagger still gets arrested. There’s no mention of a trial and the implication is he was railroaded by the cops into a Southern road gang.

“Murder Incorporated”: “The cops reported you as just another homicide.” In this impersonality of death, when the police don’t see you as a person, only a statistic, it is too easy to dehumanize you.

“The Ghost of Tom Joad”: “Highway patrol choppers comin’ up over the ridge.” Moving from road patrols in the car to airborne reconnaissance, the police have a wider scope of surveillance.

“Balboa Park”: The border patrol (the migra) searches for illegal aliens in San Diego. “One night the border patrol swept Twelfth Street/A big car come fast down the boulevard/Spider stood caught in its headlights/Got hit and went down hard/As the car sped away Spider held his stomach/Limped to his blanket ‘neath the underpass/Lie there tasting his own blood on his tongue/Closed his eyes and listened to the cars/Rushin’ by so fast.” The vivid imagery belies the tragedy but we still don’t know if it was one of “the men in their Mercedes” who ran him down or one of the border patrol which ultimately should shoulder the blame because without the raid Spider would still be alive.

“American Skin (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.’” Unmentioned but implied
is the February 19, 1999 shooting of unarmed Amadou Diallo in New York City by four NYPD officers. The tension between Bruce, his songs, and the police reactions is never more apparent than the outcry when Bruce sang “American Skin.” Calling him a “fucking dirt bag” and “floating fag” (whatever that has to do with it), Bob Lucente, president of the New York chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police, urged his members to boycott the Madison Square Garden concert in New York City. According to Dave Marsh who attended the June 12, 2000 concert at Madison Square Garden a week after Bruce debuted the as yet unrecorded, unreleased song in Atlanta, a cop sitting in front of him in the audience hurled “furious threats and belligerent curses” at Bruce while he sang the song. Gary Graff reports that other police factions came to Bruce’s defense including a group called 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement, and police lieutenant Michael J. Gorman who wrote a letter to the New York Times noting that Bruce “has generally been a supporter of police officers, giving generously to police charities.” While the song is more about race and is sympathetic to the cops for what may have been an honest mistake, the cops’ knee-jerk reactions only reinforce their reputation for rigidity. Other responses to Bruce’s songs depicting police or criminals included disappointment with Bruce’s failure to see the crime victim’s side, unhappiness that “Highway Patrolman” and “State Trooper” don’t offer the policeman’s perspective.

“The Hitter”: “I was no more than a kid/When you put me on the Southern Queen/With the police on my back I fled to New Orleans.” The itinerant boxer/street fighter found the only life where he was successful after he had to leave his family and hometown because of a run-in with the police.

Main Character

“Highway Patrolman”: Joe Roberts, the highway patrolman, chooses his family over his job when he lets his brother Frankie escape from a bar brawl gone bad. “Well if it was any other man, I’d put him straight away/But when it’s your brother sometimes you look the other way.” Joe, the
reluctant cop who claims to do his job “as honest as I could,” does not do his job and does not bring in his brother. Dave Marsh described it as “caught between family and responsibility, duty and love.”

“The Line”: The narrator, Carl, “Went to work for the INS on the line/With the California border patrol . . .Well I was good at doin’ what I was told/Kept my uniform pressed and clean” but he met a Mexican woman who convinced him to help her, her child, and younger brother get across the border. The brother turns out to be a drug runner and when Carl’s partner Bobby Ramirez approaches in his jeep “I pulled over and let my engine run/And stepped out into his lights/I felt myself movin’/My gun restin’ ‘neath my hand/We stood there starin’ at each other/As off through the arroyo she ran. . . .Bobby Ramirez he never said nothin’/Six months later I left the line” and he drifted from town to town searching for Luisa. The California border patrolman must choose between duty and personal ties. He’s “good at doin’ what I was told”—not the usual virtue in a rock song. Like Joe Roberts, this cop chooses the personal over the professional.

Conclusion

Despite all the negative lyrics in his songs, Bruce appears to have made peace with the police—except for the “American Skin” backlash upon which he did not comment but simply sang his song. As an adult, Bruce has moved beyond his rebellious teen and early twenties years, and participates in numerous local charitable events. The most notable one, relevant to this discussion, is a benefit concert on January 31, 1998—organized by Jon Bon Jovi—which raised $112,000 for the family of slain Long Branch, New Jersey, police officer Sgt. Patrick King, killed by a fugitive on November 20, 1997.

On his two most recent albums, Magic and Working on a Dream, none of the lyrics contain references to the police. As Bruce has grown up, so too have his characters. It appears they are less inclined to tussle with the law and rather confront unemployment, bad marriages, and aging. Forty
years down the road, Bruce has relinquished the angst of the flashing lights in his rearview mirror—at least in his songs.


3 Springsteen, “Farewell to Danny.”


5 Marsh, Two Hearts, p. 564.

6 Springsteen, Songs, p. 19.

7 Springsteen, Songs, p. 29.

8 Springsteen, Songs, p. 32.

9 Springsteen, Songs, p. 35.


11 Springsteen, Songs, p. 141.

12 Springsteen, “Man at the Top,” Tracks lyrics booklet (Columbia Records, 1998), p.34.


16 Springsteen, Songs, p. 61.

17 Springsteen, Songs, p. 112.

18 Springsteen, Songs, p. 116.


21 Springsteen, Songs, p. 131.

22 Springsteen, Songs, p. 143.

23 Springsteen, Songs, p. 149.


26 Springsteen, Songs, p. 153.

27 Springsteen, Songs, p. 171.

28 Springsteen, Songs, p. 172.

29 Springsteen, Songs, p. 266.

30 Springsteen, Songs, p. 279.

31 Springsteen, Songs, p. 286.


34 Marsh, Two Hearts, p. xxi.


36 Kirkpatrick, Magic in the Night, p. 114.


38 Springsteen, Songs, p. 152.


40 Springsteen, Songs, p. 284.