



Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition (Music/Culture)

By Jim Cullen

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Moving beyond the biographical and journalistic approaches of most writing on Bruce Springsteen, *Born in the U.S.A.* was the first major work of cultural criticism to situate Springsteen's work in the broader sweep of American history—the heir of Walt Whitman and Woody Guthrie, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. Springsteen is an influential chronicler of our society, says Jim Cullen, a “good conservative” who preserves the traditional values of hard work, inclusive families, and genuine concern for the less fortunate. In the new edition to this landmark work, Cullen also discusses new currents in Springsteen's music since 9/11, notably his 2002 album *The Rising*. This Wesleyan edition includes a new foreword, introduction, and afterword. Must reading for any serious fan—or anyone who has ever been curious about what all the fuss has been about.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

There already exists a surfeit of Springsteen books, but maybe this tome, arriving as he rapidly approaches spent-force status, is the cornerstone of a subgenre devoted to assessing his precise position in rock history. The issue of a former *Rolling Stone* editor, it displays the usual good and bad features of such spawn. Depth and documentation are excellent: quotes attributed, dates given, references traced. The writing is, uh, expressive. The typical *RS* tendency to find complexity everywhere is either a strength or a weakness, depending on your attitude; this time, at least, it is exercised relatively gently. No doubt Springsteen is a complex man; his lyrics and utterings suggest as much. But is he, as Cullen asserts, more important than Walt Whitman? Does he really offer "an unusually vivid picture of manhood" ? To those who enjoy this sort of minute intellectualization about a music that is often as much about rhythm as lyric content, Cullen's book is highly recommended. Other pop fans may find it valuable if occasionally numbing. *Mike Tribby*

From Kirkus Reviews

Cullen's study of Bruce Springsteen is a full-fledged cultural critique, examining how "the Boss's" music has been influenced by the society around him. The author covers a lot of ground but rarely spreads himself thin. Harvard historian Cullen's perspective is initially historic, using Reagan's evocation of the song of the title during his 1984 reelection bid. While Springsteen is no Republican, Cullen maintains that he is a "republican" in the Jeffersonian and Lincolnian sense of believing in the ideals of representative democracy. Widening his focus, Cullen follows the well-traveled link between American government and the works of Emerson, Twain, and Steinbeck to suggest Springsteen as the heir to this tradition. A close reading of the lyrics of "Thunder Road" serves as an example. Cullen treats Springsteen's relationship with the Vietnam War and its veterans (having lost a friend in the war, Springsteen deprived himself of sleep to earn a 4-F classification but has since worked extensively with veterans). More sociological sections of the book look at Springsteen's preoccupation with working-class values and his own strong work ethic, demonstrated by his legendary four- to five-hour live shows. The book's final sections look at Springsteen's development from a "boy culture" singer of male bonding to a mature husband and father--these latter roles brilliantly mined on his album *Tunnel of Love*--and the lapsed Catholicism of this self-described "failed altar boy." Cullen quotes Jesuit novelist and sociologist Rev. Andrew Greeley, who claims that *Tunnel of Love* may be more significant from a Catholic perspective than a papal visit to the US. Cullen is perhaps overly idealistic in his historical depictions (Lincoln was certainly less of an egalitarian than Cullen would seem to believe), but his parting words, "When I listen to Bruce Springsteen, I remember how to be an American," finally ring true. (8 pages b&w photo, not seen) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Review

"Jim Cullen writes with authority and empathy about the blue-collar roots that shaped Bruce Springsteen and gave rise to his music of rebellion. This is a provocative look at one of America's cultural icons." —Eleanor Clift, *Newsweek*

"... offers illumination and thoughtful, discriminating observations about its myriad subjects. And it has aged almost as well as 'Nebraska.'" —Eric Alterman, *The Nation*

“This is a well-written, painstakingly researched, and surprisingly unpretentious book.”—*Asbury Park Press*

Users Review

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