

# The Summer of Springsteen's Political Baptism

By Marty Weil

On November 9, 2005, Bruce Springsteen told an audience in Philadelphia, “I write two kinds of songs: songs of hope and songs of eternal damnation. And I don’t like to pussyfoot around in the middle.” More than 20 years earlier, when Springsteen released the title track for his watershed 1984 album, *Born in the U.S.A.*, it seemed clear—at least in the mind of the artist—that the title track was about the latter. The lyrics of the song, “Born in the U.S.A.,” form a bitter indictment of the poor treatment of Vietnam veterans and working Americans that stood in sharp contrast to the more prevalent “Morning in America” appeal of Ronald Reagan’s 1984 re-election campaign. “Born in the U.S.A.,” however, had a patriotic-sounding chorus, which caused many casual listeners to mishear the song’s questioning allegiance as mere flag-waving patriotism—setting up a public showdown with a sitting U.S. president.

When *Born in the U.S.A.* was released, albums were still made of vinyl and took up a linear foot of record store shelf space. To draw attention to a new release, record companies sometimes included a cardboard promotional sign to be placed in the slot where the records were displayed for sale. In the case of *Born in the U.S.A.*, Columbia Records produced a promotional item with an alternative—and at least in the mind of the woman who took the album’s photographs, a superior—image, which featured Springsteen leaping into the air while wildly strumming his guitar. The “leaping Springsteen” photograph would be used again on the 45-sleeve of the “Born in the U.S.A.” single release. The album, meanwhile, was released with a cover shot prominently displaying Springsteen’s jean-clad buttocks—a curious choice that would lead to additional controversy and further cloud the album’s meaning.

*Born in the U.S.A.* was no ordinary pop record. The album sold a whopping 15 million copies and peaked at Number 1 on the charts. It spawned a record-tying seven Top 10 hit singles in the United States, and is by far the best-selling album of Springsteen’s storied career. It was also a critical success, being voted as the best album of the year in *The Village Voice*’s Pazz & Jop critic’s poll. In 2003, the album was ranked number 85 in *Rolling Stone* magazine’s list of the 500 greatest albums of all time.

“There was a real conscious decision on the part of Springsteen and his management to go for the Brass Ring with the release of *Born in the U.S.A.*,” says Jim Cullen, author of *Bruce Springsteen Born in the U.S.A. and the American Tradition* (HarperCollins, 1997). “They were seeking commercial success, as an experience in its own right, and as a tool for consolidating the Springsteen brand. It gave Springsteen the freedom to do other things. It gave him the kind of cultural and financial capital that has sustained him ever since. Subsequent records such as *The*

*Ghost of Tom Joad* might not have been possible without *Born in the U.S.A.* With *Born in the U.S.A.*, you had the sense that this was a guy experimenting with different dimensions of the record business.”

Springsteen’s *Born in the U.S.A.* “experiment” had been bubbling in the lab for a long time before its release in 1984. According to an article in *Backstreets* magazine (*Backstreets’* Liner Notes, Winter 1998), the song “Born in the U.S.A.” was originally written and recorded with the rest of the songs on Springsteen’s dark and somber 1982 album, *Nebraska*, and was presumably considered for inclusion on that record; however, Springsteen seems to have recognized early on that “Born in the U.S.A.” was meant to be played as a rock anthem and shelved the song. According to *Backstreets*, the misunderstood song can be traced back to multiple sources for inspiration, including Ron Kovic’s book, *Born on the Fourth of July*; Springsteen’s long-time friendship with Vietnam veteran Bobby Muller; Jimmy Cliff’s “Vietnam”; and the Paul Schrader film script of the same name, which was later re-titled *Light of Day*.

Eventually, the music of “Born in the U.S.A.” (but not the lyrics) was re-worked with a full band arrangement and became the hit title track on Springsteen’s 1984 album. At the 1986 Bridge School Benefit Concert, and much later on the 1995 *Tom Joad* Tour, Springsteen reclaimed the misinterpreted song by performing an acoustic arrangement that was, in sound and spirit, closer to its original form. And, later still, on the 2005 *Devils & Dust* Tour, Springsteen turns the song into an angry sort of ‘field holler,’ during the performance of which, he stomps his foot, blows a rich-sounding “tremolo” harmonica, and shouts the lyrics through a handheld “bullet” microphone that is set to a demonic level of distortion. Anyone who heard the *Devils’* rendition of “Born in the U.S.A.” had little doubt about the true meaning of the song.

“Over the years I’ve had a lot of opportunity to reinterpret “Born in the U.S.A.” many times in concert,” Springsteen writes in *Songs* (Avon Books, 1998). “Particularly on the *Tom Joad* Tour, I had a version that could not be misconstrued. But those interpretations always stood in relief to the original and gain some of their new power from the audience’s previous experience with the original version. If I tried to undercut or change the music, I believe I would have had a record that might have been more easily understood, but not as good.”

If the song had been more easily understood, the fall of 1984 might have turned out differently for Springsteen and President Reagan. According to Nicholas DeLuca’s article, “Reagan Cites Bruce: Bruce Cites Nebraska,” published in the Winter 1985 issue of *Backstreets*, the trouble began when the *National Review*, a conservative journal, cited albums by Bruce Springsteen and Little Steven (a.k.a., Steve Van Zandt) as notable highlights of a new, patriotic

trend in American rock music. Soon afterward, George Will, a syndicated columnist and former Reagan speech writer, wrote a column detailing a surprisingly exciting performance he had seen at a recent Springsteen concert. (Will had been invited to the concert by Max Weinberg, Springsteen's drummer.) Finally, President Reagan himself, speaking at a campaign rally in Hammonton, N.J., on September 19, 1984, invoked the rock star's name in declaring that America's future lies in the dreams of its people. "It rests in the message of hope in songs of a man so many young Americans admire—New Jersey's own, Bruce Springsteen," Reagan said. "And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about."

Although Reagan doesn't specifically reference "Born in the U.S.A." in his Hammonton speech, few people doubt it was what he had in mind. "Reagan—or his speechwriter—was likely thinking of one song in particular: 'Born in the U.S.A.,' the title cut from Springsteen's No. 1 album of the time. The song, with Max Weinberg's thunderous drums, Roy Bittan's glittery keyboards, and an anthemic [sic] chorus, was impossible to avoid that year," wrote *CNN*'s Todd Leopold in a 2004 article, "Analysis: The Age of Reagan."

"The Reagan camp understood the way the song came out that there is a real disconnect between the words and music," says Cullen. "The words have a dark message and the music is upbeat. They correctly recognized that the song is an affirmation of an American identity, and even though there are antithetical readings of what that American identity is, there is a half-truth there that they were able to take and run with."

Cullen continues, "Reagan had secured the youth vote at the time he made reference to Springsteen. The location [Hammonton] represented a cross-section of America. The folks on the outs, like Union members, are clearly Springsteen's turf. The song was used not to convert votes, but rather to make Springsteen's fans who had twinges of doubt feel as though they could vote for Reagan with a clear conscience."

What Reagan and the barrage of news reports that followed failed to remember was that on November 5, 1980, the night after Ronald Reagan's first election, Bruce Springsteen walked on stage in Phoenix, Arizona, and instead of bursting into song, he mused to the audience, "I'm not sure what you think about what happened last night, but I think it's pretty terrifying."

For Springsteen, Reagan's comment in Hammonton was a nightmare come true. He found himself the subject of jokes from barrooms to *The Tonight Show*, all because of something he had no control over. Worse yet, the Mondale camp immediately responded, denouncing Reagan's reference to Springsteen and claiming the Boss was in their political arena.

According to DeLucia's article, Springsteen himself greatly agonized over how to react, and finally in Pittsburgh he responded, noting the President's comments with apparent anger. He quipped about which of his albums was Mr. Reagan's favorite.

The following night he elaborated: "There's something really dangerous happening to us out there. We're slowly being split into two different Americas. Things are getting taken from people that need them and given to people that don't need them. There's a promise getting broken. I don't think the American Dream was that everyone was going to make it or that everyone was going to make a billion dollars. But it was that everyone was going to have an opportunity and the chance to live a life with some decency and a chance for some self-respect."

Springsteen was even more to the point when he told *Rolling Stone* in October: "And you see the Reagan re-election ads on TV—you know: 'It's morning in America.' And you say, 'well, it's not morning in Pittsburgh...it's midnight...and that's why when Reagan mentioned my name in New Jersey, I felt it was another manipulation, and I had to dissociate myself from the President's kind words."

DeLucia draws this conclusion: "The real irony of Reagan's and Will's comments is that his music is diametrically opposite from those ideas which they associate him with. The New Right has an obnoxious habit of claiming associations with anyone or any thing that is a positive representation of traditional values like hard work, family responsibility, friendship, perseverance, etc. Since Springsteen has always espoused the importance of such qualities, they have decided to claim him as one of their own."

The title track of *Born in the U.S.A.* wasn't the only controversial album-related issue causing trouble for Springsteen during the fall of 1984. Springsteen's use of the American flag as a backdrop for the album cover raised eyebrows as well, especially when some in the media began to suggest that Springsteen's posture led reasonable people to conclude that he was in the act of urinating on the flag.

"Springsteen disavowed any such reading of the photo," says Cullen. "The flag backdrop is an iconic thing. The twist is that his back is to the camera, which permitted the reading that he was urinating on the flag. I'm in the camp that says that this was an oversight that escaped his attention."

But could it have also escaped the attention of the photographer, especially when the photographer in question was the legendary Annie Leibovitz? By the time she shot Springsteen, Leibovitz was an institution in her own right. From 1970 to 1983, Leibovitz proved herself to be one of the most exciting and original photographers in the publishing world. Her cover shots for *Rolling Stone* magazine were as important as the information found inside, and created the image

of the magazine as much as the work of any one contributor. Who could forget Leibovitz's photograph showing Demi Moore with a suit painted on her naked body or John Lennon and Yoko Ono photographed on the very day that Lennon was murdered? In 1983, Leibovitz ended her association with *Rolling Stone* by signing with the newly resurrected *Vanity Fair*. To complete this stage of her life, Leibovitz released an impressive collection of some her greatest work in the book *Photographs* (Pantheon/Rolling Stone Press). Since then, she has published four additional books of photography.

An interview conducted by Alren Schumer in *Backstreets* ("Cover Me: The Birth of *Born in the U.S.A.*, Part Two," Spring, 1986) with the album's art director, Andrea Klein, sheds important light on how the controversial Leibovitz image made its way onto the cover of *Born in the U.S.A.* "Annie Leibovitz was told that her creative role in the process would be limited," Klein said. "I explained to her that it was going to be heavy art direction, and she appreciated my honesty. My main fear with working with Annie Leibovitz was that she would not be willing to work with tight art direction. She really wanted to do it; she would have done it for free. She loves Bruce."

Leibovitz agreed to Klein's stipulations, and while she may have had a wonderful time taking photographs of Springsteen, she lived to have some regrets about the cover photo and her decision to oblige Klein. Speaking to Bob Zimmerman during another *Backstreet's* interview ("Behind the lens with Annie Leibovitz," Spring 1985), Annie Leibovitz said, "I really haven't been real happy with my album work because it's not like editorial work. You're really hired by people to do pictures. So when you're hired by them, they have their own ideas. So like with Bruce, I mean, we did five or six different shootings... he chose this picture for the album, which is to me like a 'grab' shot. And he really liked that. I took a lot of pictures that I liked a lot better. He doesn't really like to look at himself."

Klein's comment to Schumer on the same topic was, "When all was said and done, Springsteen just didn't like any pictures of himself [from the Leibovitz photo sessions]. He liked this image [the cover shot] the best; he picked it."

Springsteen picked the infamous cover photo, but not without serious consternation.

The idea for the front cover came from an idea the team of Klein, Springsteen, and Leibovitz originally had for the *back* cover of *Born in the U.S.A.* "Bruce had his hat in his pocket," Klein recalled in her interview with Schumer. "Great back cover! Even though some of us talked about it being the front cover [sic]. Bruce kept saying, 'Yeah, but I can't put my butt on the cover'."

After taking additional time to consider, Bruce finally agreed to allow the image to be used on the front of the album.

According to Klein, Bruce was in full control of what images would be used. “[Bruce] maintains complete control of his own image,” she said. “And one way he does that is by making sure, from the graphics side of it, he sees and approves every single solitary thing that goes out. It gets down to this slash mark right here [pointing to the album cover photography]; he didn’t think it should be there. That’s how involved he gets.”

Then Schumer asked Klein an important question: “Considering that it was 1984, an election year, did you foresee the immense co-opting of the album’s flag imagery as patriotic propaganda?” Klein replied: “I think Bruce, at one point, did picture it. He was a little bit afraid to use the flag. We all knew the flag was a great marketable image. That was clear to all of us.”

What isn’t clear is whether or not Springsteen and Leibovitz consciously decided to besmirch the flag by purposefully posing Bruce so that it appeared he was urinating on Old Glory. When Leibovitz was asked by Zimmerman if she’d read the reports that someone thought Bruce and she had conspired to make a statement by depicting Bruce urinating on the flag, Leibovitz was reported to have shown considerable surprise and replied, “No! Someone said that? No. If anything, Bruce feels strongly about the flag. He’s very patriotic.”

“Springsteen [by working with Leibovitz] was self-consciously seeking out a visual iconography to make a statement, and the photography from *Born in the U.S.A.* shows how savvy Springsteen was in that regard,” says Jim Cullen.

And, in the final analysis, Cullen says, people did come to understand the essence of the song, “Born in the U.S.A.”; they understood its critical edge.

“The chief significance of ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ is that Springsteen really articulated—unlike any politician or artist—that there could be such a thing as left-based patriotism,” Cullen concludes. “In that regard, he has kept alive the ember of [Walt] Whitman.”

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