Approaching popular music in the field of English

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APPROACHING POPULAR MUSIC IN THE FIELD OF ENGLISH:
CRITICAL BOUNDARIES, REMEDIATION, AND PERFORMANCE THEORY

By

Christopher Reid Kerr

Accepted in Partial Completion

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Christopher Reid Kerr
May 2008
Abstract

In light of current disciplinary shifts toward digital media and multi-modal textual analysis, this thesis explores how the field of English can take up popular music for scholarly study. Through a blend of text and context, the first chapter maps a methodology to discuss central zones of analysis which include audience, author, composition, media, and cultural context – fluid zones of analysis which hold textual relationships. The second chapter isolates two forms of media, the audio recording and live performance, to discuss specific features of authorship, authenticity, audience rituals, and remediation. As an application of the theory, chapter three explores the artistic craft of popular musician Bruce Springsteen to survey his literary voice which enacts strong bonds between artist, text, and audience. These bonds, demonstrated through the release of thematic works like *Nebraska* and *The Rising*, allow Springsteen to blend sacred and secular themes, build his ethos as a contemporary cultural critic, and enact live performance rituals which remediate the audio recording and reshape textual meaning for listeners.
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Approaching Popular Music in the Field of English:

Critical Boundaries, Remediation, and Performance Theory

As an avid music listener, musician, and literary scholar, I am continually struck by the intersections of popular music and the field of English. My genuine interest in popular music and its critical possibilities leads me to consider the subject as a rich scholarly endeavor in English studies. This project is an exploration into the ways the field of English can take up popular music as a subject, particularly through a methodology and analytical approach which accounts for, and examines, intermedia textual relationships.

As critical approaches in the field of English take on multi-modal texts and develop the area of cultural studies, popular music becomes a rich text for scholarly engagement. In what follows, I hope to offer a methodology to help conceptualize forms of popular music texts and, in the process, offer an approach to popular music analysis which capitalizes on the theoretical frameworks offered by the discipline of English studies. Chapter 1 will survey critical boundaries surrounding popular music, situate scholarly opportunities in the field of English, and present a mapped methodology to conceptualize popular music textual relationships. In Chapter 2, I will indentify two specific textual relationships, the audio recording and live performance, formed through the process of remediation – a refashioning of one media through another media. These theoretical chapters set up Chapter 3 which will apply the methodology and theories of Chapters 1 and 2 through a discussion of popular musician Bruce Springsteen, his oeuvre, and his performance techniques informed by his crafted literary voice.
Through this project, I hope to contribute to a body of popular music scholarship struggling to find a hospitable discipline and suggest the possibilities English studies can offer popular music as a scholarly endeavor. In turn, popular music can open up opportunities in critical conversation in a range of areas from literary analysis to intermedia studies. As popular music comes into view, its culturally rich, critically challenging texts are a source of exciting, engaging intellectual dialogue lying in wait for scholars of English. For those who cultivate an intellectual life on Whitman, Yeats, or Milton, may others find equal rewards in the work of Springsteen, Mitchell, or Dylan.
Chapter 1

Opening Up Critical Boundaries: Popular Music Analysis in the Field of English

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.”

– Elvis Costello, Musician, 1983

Popular music analysis continues to be tricky, maligned, and often excluded scholarly work in the academy. There are brave souls attempting popular music criticism, creating classes, publishing in select journals, but those who take it up seriously are few and far between. Elvis Costello’s notion seems to be a poignant one: writing about music is not only difficult, but maddening to do and frustrating to read. The troubles lie in the multitude of factors involved in analysis; there is a constant challenge in deciding where focus should be placed and what extent text and context relate to each other. In his book Interpreting Popular Music, David Brackett makes the point that lines are drawn in academia in terms of where focus is placed, and the level of priority given to either the popular music context or the popular music text. He writes that “while proponents of each side understand that contexts consist of texts and that texts exist within a context, the lines of battle are nonetheless drawn: sociologists study contexts while musicologists study texts” (17). Brackett grants that these “lines may be growing fuzzy,” but it is still unclear how musicologists and sociologists can fully look at the important relationships between the text and context. Each field is concerned with their own set of theoretical perspectives and methodologies which grant priority to their focus. Consequently, the questions arise: who can do the work – to offer critical space for popular music analysis, and what methodologies can be taken up – an approach which takes
into account the wide range of variables which construct a popular music “text” and the contexts surrounding the forms.

I propose that English departments have the critical space and theoretical framework to take on popular music scholarship as a significant aspect of its ties to cultural studies. As English studies currently evaluates and takes up multi-modal textual analysis, be it film, visual rhetoric, digital media, technical writing, the discipline simultaneously offers space for popular music analysis as it remains bound by multi-modal factors (lyric, music, image, performance, etc. which creates the message) and surrounded by various contexts (the who, what, when, where, how questions always bound up in an imaginative text produced by an addresser and received by an addressee).

Making sense of a variety of factors related to text and context is, after all, the job of literary theory. Just surveying the critical approaches taken up by English can demonstrate the breadth of interpretive frameworks. Certainly, English studies is very familiar with and adept in handling textual analysis that must always juggle a variety of factors through reflexive and malleable methodologies. Perhaps this is why cultural studies and multi-modal media have found a home in many English departments; indeed, literary studies supports academic work that can blur the boundaries of text, context, and, even, academic fields.

**Exposing Critical Boundaries**

Surveying the humanities, it is the assumption that both musicology and sociology would have the academic interest and theoretical foundation to work with popular music. Yet there remains resistance in approaching the form as viable scholarly work. In academia, popular music remains separate from “higher,” more classically oriented forms (a far cry
from its inception, jazz is often considered in the higher category now). High and low art distinctions often leave Western popular music cold and unexamined, probably due to its values; it is not considered art music. Rather, popular music is bound up with mass media, capitalism, and is played, oftentimes, by untrained musicians. David Griffiths points out that “in appealing to so many consumers, pop music admits of little formal complexity,” a feature which may account for the scholarly neglect. Simon Frith has an interesting point that popular music is “described by the wrong criteria” (175). In fact, he argues, the only difference between the classically “trained” and the popular “untrained” distinction is pedagogical:

Most pop and rock musicians are, in formal terms, self-taught, which means by ear and hand (rather than by score and teacher), and it is true that in the pop world there is a remarkably short period between deciding to play an instrument and having the nerve and confidence to join a group and play in public. But such an apparently “spontaneous” process is still time-consuming, dependent on dedication, a rigorous rehearsal routine, and very hard work, and indeed, a clear sense of “master” performers, the guitarists, drummers, and producers whose recordings the learner musician endlessly tries to copy.

(Frith 175)

As Frith points out, it is difficult to make the case that classical music is more cultured and, therefore, more academically rich. Taking on popular music, however, involves taking on these high/low culture debates which have been shattered by the postmodern condition, but remain unresolved.
There are also tensions between academics and fans which critic Matt Hills attributes to “mutual marginalization.” Hills writes that “academics draw on an us/them distinction which maps onto the ‘common sense’ separation of rational/immersed, while fans defend their activities by drawing on a ‘common sense’ distinction between immediacy/over-rationalization” (21). These are imagined subjectivities in Hills’ view, and Frith agrees as he remarks: “academics can be fans and fans can be academics” (183). For that matter, academics might acknowledge that fandom drives literary scholarship and specialization as certain writers or theorists become favored. Consequently, it is the hearty enthusiasm of the fan-scholar or the scholar-fan that sparks intellectual inquiry on popular music. Academic fan culture is always at work in cultural studies and acknowledging so dissolves perceived high/low distinctions. I’m not suggesting that all academics are Trekkie cult nerds but that popular music holds cultural power, which implicates us all and, therefore, holds a potentially rich endeavor into scholarly dialogue.

The strong cultural power of popular music points to the importance of context, an area of grounded academic study. The growing field of ethnomusicology, for example, concerns itself with context implicated in a musical text yet still avoids most popular music formats. As Brackett notes, “ethnomusicology takes the entire range of music made during any historical period in the world as its subject,” in theory, as the field attempts to “find relationships between social structure and musical structure…the characteristics of which can then be mapped on to or derived from a musical structure or a set of musical characteristics” (22). In practice, however, ethnomusicology continues to favor “non-industrialized, non-Western” music and work from a formalistic approach (and jargon/notation) of musical
theory (Brackett 22). The musicological approach, therefore, addresses music theory or the actual score, notation, transcription, of the musical text.

On the other hand, sociology is concerned with the audience and the cultural ramifications constructed or produced by a piece of music or a particular artist. Sociological work is a more ethnographic approach to audience, fan response, and the discourse of reception – be it mass media or fan based. In essence, musicology and sociology work on two extremes with theoretical perspectives that do not fully accept context or text in full relationship with each other.

A combination of text and context, however, is crucial for popular music analysis. Analysis of a musical text can certainly be autonomous, as can social-cultural analysis; but what gets passed over is the relationship language and music share in a musical composition and the method of delivery to an audience. The field of English can address these entities adequately in its concerns over language, form, and cultural context. Popular music analysis in the field of English should not do the work of other fields, but rather address a critical void concerned with text and context relationships. The larger question is how analysis can get done, which calls for a methodology that can stake out where analysis might take place on the part of the field of English.

As noted above, the critical spaces that English can fill moves beyond the boundaries set up by fields like musicology and sociology. English does not have to be fully concerned with music theory and notation, nor social theory on a large scale; these are extremes of different disciplines that English can traverse between. Even so, taking on popular music as a subject crosses boundaries in the field of English that could be seen as subversive and
heretical. The language of social theorist David Sibley seems useful in describing these boundary tensions within academic fields.

In his book, *Geographies of Exclusion*, Sibley analyzes how socio-spatial boundaries construct exclusion. While he examines boundaries associated with gender, race, and sexuality, Sibley’s conclusions can describe how disciplinary boundaries marginalize popular music. In his view, boundaries “assume considerable significance because they are simultaneously zones of uncertainty and security” (183). Consequently, he states, “a fear of mixing unlike things often signifies a reluctance to give ground and relinquish power” and “policing boundaries is one way of reducing fear” (Sibley 183).

In this case, there are boundaries between academic fields, as well as the field of English studies, limited by fear and power in various ways. Yet scholars have to recognize how these academic boundaries limit knowledge, then attempt to open up the “zones or spaces of ambiguity and discontinuity” (Sibley 33). Constructing a methodology to address these issues is one possible approach, explored in the following sections.

By crossing and avoiding boundaries that limit analysis, room can open for significant scholarship through critical methodology. At the suggestion of Pat Sullivan and James E. Porter, methodology can operate as a heuristic, taking advantage of boundaries and frameworks (64-65). In their work, Sullivan and Porter maintain that “real methodological power and productive inquiry exists beyond and between the conventional boundaries” (65). For popular music analysis, fluid boundaries become crucial critical spaces where significant work can take place.
For English studies, disciplinary boundaries tend to shift and sort themselves out from department to department. After all, departmental or disciplinary boundaries are “ideological and socially constituted” and therefore remain contentious (Sullivan and Porter 65). Even in the midst of contentious politics, these issues may sort themselves out by addressing the more specific question of how analysis can take place as English takes up popular music. At this juncture, boundaries within music analysis remain at stake as notions of text and context are negotiated. A mapped methodology, therefore, is a way to conceptualize the contentious, yet rich zones of popular music analysis available to the field of English.

**Setting forth a Methodology**

In effort to suggest a more approachable theory for music analysis in the field of English, consideration should be given to the three main factors surrounding popular music: the composition, the media that guide delivery, and the cultural context – all of which are surrounded by larger contextual factors which include the author/speaker/musician and the audience. *Figure 1* offers a visual representation of the relationships between these factors. The methodology and theory here serves as a heuristic by creating zones which can frame analysis. In application, consideration or priority can be given to any of these factors and combinations of factors with the understanding that all zones are in constant relationship with each other.

In the following sections, I will discuss the three primary zones of analysis, the composition, media, and cultural context, as they operate on their own and in reciprocal relationship with each other. To help illustrate these concepts, Bruce Springsteen’s composition “Born in the U.S.A.” will operate as a lens to discuss the relationship between
music and lyrics which make up the composition, the media which guide delivery and reshape meaning, and the cultural context always at work in popular music.

Figure 1 – Zones of Analysis in Popular Music
Lyrics and Music as Composition

It might be a common assumption that English studies would only concern itself with lyrics, the clearest, traditional form of a literary text – written word produced by an author. Certainly, lyrics can be viewed as a stand-alone text or literary work with a message communicated by an addresser to an addressee. For the sake of definition, it is even useful to consider how a musical text resembles literature. Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory* notes that literature can be broadly defined as an imaginative text, or more accurately, a text that “uses language in peculiar ways…a disproportion between signifiers and the signifieds” (1-2). Language or lyrics work in a composition much like traditional literature, which “transforms and intensifies ordinary language” and “deviates systematically from everyday speech” (Eagleton 2). The features of language in a composition call for interpretation and can be read for meaning like any piece of literature.

Analyzing lyrical meaning is important interpretive work, yet one has to concede that the music which supports the lyrics carries significant weight in the meaning of a lyrical message. This is a key complication in the literary approach. While lyrics can be isolated for analysis, it is crucial to recognize the musical context in which they appear and the extent which the musical qualities can affect meaning or interpretation. With popular music, a song is usually comprised of two components which carry symbolic meaning, lyrics and music, which are bound to each other as contextual values. As Figure 1 shows, the entities of lyrics and music make up the composition in equal part. While music and lyrics can be extracted exclusively for analysis, one has to note the reciprocal relationship music and lyrics have with each other in terms of meaning.
Bruce Springsteen’s popular composition “Born in the U.S.A.” illustrates the degree to which the music can dictate and influence the meaning of lyrics. Two dramatically different versions have been recorded by Springsteen, a power rock anthem on Born in the U.S.A. and a dark, stripped-down acoustic Nebraska demo version found on Tracks. The two versions demonstrate the point that musical qualities inform the meaning of the language in the performance situation. Factors of tone, melody, instrumentation, rhythm, genre identification, and vocal inflection, to name a few, comprise the set of variables which can influence the musical qualities. As the listener comes to the lyric and music juxtaposition, the musical qualities determine audience interpretation even when the lyric is identical.

The 1984 album version of “Born in the U.S.A.” remains the most famous version of the song. It is a major-key, anthemic rock composition, described by author Jim Cullen as “energetic yet precise” almost like a march (without ever becoming one) (94). The first five lines of lyrics setup a narrative for the speaker to relay the experience of the Vietnam war:

Born down in a dead man's town
The first kick I took was when I hit the ground
You end up like a dog that's been beat too much
Till you spend half your life just covering up
Born in the U.S.A. (Born)

It is interesting to notice how meaning shifts in an alternate, stripped down version of “Born in the U.S.A.,” recorded in 1982 and released in 1998. For the listener, the lyrics can take on a much different meaning just from the musical variables at work. The Nebraska (1982) session version, released on Tracks (1998), features an altered minor-key melody with a
heavy echo effect on the guitar and vocal. Consequently, it is a darker, more intense opening, much different from the fist-pumping synthesizer/snare drum intro of the 1984 single.

The comparison of these two versions, which have the same lyric composition, demonstrates how integral the musical elements can be to the lyric or song message. The first version is a powerful rock song which has often been misinterpreted as a patriotic, positive song. Yet the lyrics paint a dark portrait of an isolated Vietnam veteran who returns home with “nowhere to run” and “nowhere to go” (Born). Cullen maintains that the lyric content, stripped from the ’84 musical context, is mournful akin to that of a Mississippi Delta bluesman (95). However, the driving rock musical setting of the ’84 single masks the dark narrative exemplified in the lyrics. This mournful, desperate, or blues feeling does emerge in the 1982 solo-acoustic demo version through the haunting musical backdrop and a stronger emphasis on the lyric meaning, both of which are absent in the popular 1984 single version. Listening to each version of the song clarifies a larger point here: musical elements always complicate and affect lyrical meaning and, therefore, lyric analysis is obligated to acknowledge the musical meaning.

**Language Issues**

As the field of English approaches musical analysis there is an obvious issue of how to do scholarly work, from writing to teaching, without the language or the background of music theory. If the musical foundation is a significant part of the meaning of lyrics, there obviously has to be appropriate language and theoretical knowledge to describe what the music is doing. To return to Costello’s point, writing (and talking) about music is always slippery and ambiguity is always a risk, especially in the absence of music theory or
musicological jargon. Nevertheless, the way most people discuss music coincides with a listener’s experience, much like the language at work with a reader interacting with a text.

With reader response theory in mind, the language that comes out of the listener’s experience seems sufficient in talking about meaning and context, just through description of features like tonality, rhythm, energy, etc. A listener oriented interpretation might rely on the notion of “interpretive communities,” as theorized by Stanley Fish:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.

(2087)

Consequently, listening oriented interpretive communities are unfixed, organic, learned abilities of interpretation “constitutive of being human” (Fish 2088). A music listener is, therefore, always interacting with a musical text through an interpretive community, and therein lies fan culture, audience response and encoded, untheorized meanings which grow out of the listening experience. These acts do not require music theory background, especially since being a fan or a casual listener/audience member is much like the experience of a casual reader. A listener oriented critical response resembles that of perspective readers equipped with various strategies for textual interaction. Therefore, theoretical space can be granted for those who are not armed with music theory and its language; instead, English
studies can give a voice to interpretive communities, which are more concerned with listening, fandom, and everyday interaction with popular music.

For many listeners and scholars, music theory, notation, and jargon do not reflect or demonstrate how a work is communicated, performed, or mediated to an audience; nor does it accurately describe the effects of a listening experience. In other words, the notation or musical text has to be performed (and most often mediated) to enact a rhetorical situation and an experience for the listener. Therefore, English does not have to concern itself with music theory, but instead take up a listener oriented method of talking about music – to use the common vernacular which surrounds popular music and its audiences. Specificity is always an issue in this case, which reflects the subtlety and attention to context that surrounds the work. Most of all, the intertextual relationship between lyrics and music deserves attention without either entity being rendered totally exclusive.

**Remediation of a Composition**

To reach an audience, a composition must always be performed in some manner. A variety of media can deliver the performance to an audience, and as Figure 1 illustrates, there is always a strong relationship between a composition and its culture of media. Essentially, the media and the performance enacted through the media is a “remediation” of the composition. The term “remediation” comes largely from digital media, but works well in the conceptualization of the strong composition-media relationship. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin qualify the term as “the representation of one medium in another” (45). Generally, a composition is remediated through four main entities: an album, a live
performance, a film, and other media such as books or a website (these are often paratextual in nature, which can add further degrees of remediation).

In many cases the media entities blend in the remediation of a composition. Take, for example, an additional version of Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” On the 2001 album *Live in New York City*, there is a live performance captured in the album form, released as an audio CD, yet also out on film in DVD format. The live album, in this case, remediates the live concert performance, which also remediates the composition of “Born in the U.S.A.” Interestingly, the 2001 version is another solo-acoustic stripped-down arrangement which starkly contrasts the two previously recorded versions from 1984 and 1982 respectively. For the 2001 version, Springsteen plays the song with a slide in an alternate tuning to create a drone effect on the guitar, which emulates a sitar in some moments and traditional delta blues in others. The vocal is once again powerful, but more gospel or blues based in delivery. The 2001 live album, in effect, acts as a remediation of the live performance at Madison Square Garden in October 2000, a remediation of the previously recorded or performed versions of “Born in the U.S.A.,” and a remediation of the composition itself in terms of music and lyric arrangement. The process of this layered remediation suggests that “each act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation” as medias layer upon each other and reshape meaning for listeners (Bolter and Grusin 55).

Consequently, one might consider the implications of Springsteen’s remediation of the “Born in the U.S.A.” composition. Had the 1984 single version not been a major hit, there would be less reason to perform the composition live in 2000. The 1984 production style of the single might also bring up remediation in terms of instrumentation or
arrangement to better suit the cultural context of 2000. As it turns out, a great deal of cultural and political baggage accompanies the 1984 single version, which might prompt a remediation that casts the composition in an entirely different context through musical and performance changes. Releasing “Born in the U.S.A.” on the live album and the live performance DVD serves as a remediation of all the previous versions of the song, and consequently exposes a key assertion maintained by Bolter and Grusin: “no medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning” (55).

Cultural Context

For popular music, there is always a form of media attached to the composition which serves as a remediation of the composition through performance and artifact. All of the composition-media relationships are situated in a cultural context, which is the third major zone indicated by Figure 1. Layers of cultural meaning can be found in both the zone of media and the zone of the composition. Consequently, cultural context is always a part of both factors. Cultural context remains integral to meaning for the listener and for scholarly analysis. To return to the 1984 “Born in the U.S.A.” single, the release was a commercial success yielding Springsteen’s highest popularity, chart success, and album sales to date. The song also appears in a cultural context of the political moment in 1984. Even as a cynical, somewhat dark portrait of a Vietnam veteran returning to America without work, opportunity, or hope, the song was interpreted by a large majority as a flag-waving patriotic song. Perhaps in this case, the full-band power rock performance overshadowed the lyrics to the point that the verses were ignored in favor of the title/chorus “Born in the U.S.A.” The
right-wing political moment ironically co-opted and misinterpreted Springsteen’s song to praise it as a patriotic anthem, from writer George Will to President Ronald Reagan. Presumably, they were not listening to the verses of the song and the overall meaning attached to the lyrics.

Even though “Born in the U.S.A.” in its 1984 recorded version remains tied to the cultural context of 1984, Springsteen continues to perform the song (often altered from the ’84 album version, as demonstrated by 2000 performance from *Live in New York City*). Remediation through live performance is even more interesting in a case like the 2004 Vote for Change events where Springsteen and the E-Street Band performed the full-band version reminiscent of the 1984 arrangement. The all-star concert tour, and October 11, 2004 finale in Washington, D.C., was a political rally moving through the U.S. “swing”/“battleground” states discouraging the reelection of George W. Bush. The cultural context in the Vote for Change “Born in the U.S.A.” performance certainly changes the song’s meaning (perhaps, enacting its intended cultural critique), almost in protest to the way the song was co-opted in 1984. In this case, cultural context offers a source for meaning for the composition and a crucial zone for analysis.

The zone of cultural context remains broad in *Figure 1* and is explicitly so, given the fact that cultural meaning is always shifting and dependent on the other factors in analysis. Nevertheless, the three zones, composition, media, and cultural context, remain bound together and can never be purely removed from their relationships. All three zones are surrounded by larger contextual issues which involve the addresser or author/musician, the audience or fan, and the experiences of listening and performing. While conceptually broad,
these zones and their relational boundaries propose a method for music analysis in English studies, particularly through text and context relationships.

**The Shift toward Multi-Modality**

Music scholarship in the field of English calls for the embrace of multi-modal analysis and the multi-modality offered by a composition. English studies is currently taking up multi-modal discourse analysis through digital media which, consequently, opens up critical space to take on popular music as a multi-modal text which demands interpretation and scholarship beyond what is already being done by other fields. By conceptualizing the relationships at work in a composition, the media, the cultural context, and the larger context surrounding all three, there is sufficient space to do critical analysis through a methodology that acknowledges fluid boundaries and crucial contexts. Combinations and foci can be drawn from the suggested map of *Figure 1*. For example, one could do a focused analysis on the lyric representations of “Born in the U.S.A.” on Springsteen’s website in the cultural context of 2008; or perhaps an analysis of the musical elements of the compositions performed on a particular night of Springsteen’s 2005 “Devils and Dust” tour. Essentially, the methodology and relationships highlighted here can be paired and isolated with the acknowledgement that all other zones mapped in *Figure 1* are at play.

A combination of factors currently open up a critical space for popular music in the field of English through the inclusion of multi-modal texts, a focus on cultural studies, and the need to address the boundaries of music analysis. In effect, English can embrace popular music as a text for analysis through representation and language, which accounts for a listener oriented experience much like that of a traditional reader approaching a literary text.
Scholarly interest and enthusiasm about popular music, joined by a heuristically framed methodology can validate popular music scholarship in academia beyond the fields which currently neglect its possibilities for scholarly work and pedagogical value.

With this discussion in mind, two crucial zones of media might concern English scholars predominantly: the audio recording and live performance. Chapter 2 examines both mediums and explores the relationship between them, bound through remediation acts, demands for features of authenticity, and performance rituals unique to popular music.
Chapter 2

The Audio Recording and Live Performance: Authenticity, Remediation, and Ritual

As English studies takes up popular music texts, distinctions between textual forms are important to establish. The characteristics and aesthetic theories behind textual forms can illuminate the relationships between the forms of texts noted in Figure 1. These relationships are spaces of interest for rhetorical and social meaning. Relationships between textual forms, or more often, media, develop meanings and cultural phenomena that sustain popular music’s cultural significance. Characteristics of form are good starting places as well; they remain integral to textual analysis, particularly in the field of English, as digital media complicates the traditional print-oral binary.

The present shifts toward digital media and the ever-present word-image-sound combinations make popular music multi-modal, and recognizing it as such complicates holistic analysis. Putting aside the formal characteristics of the composition, i.e. music and lyrics, attention must be given to the form of presentation – the delivery of the text to a listener or an audience. In this chapter, I want to consider two forms in particular: the audio recording and live performance, both exclusively and in relationship to each other. These are the two primary forms of remediation in popular music as they shape compositions or groups of compositions. As media shaping the popular music dynamic they operate as crucial sites for social and cultural meaning. In the process, the three primary zones of analysis, shown through Figure 1 in Chapter 1, share theoretical space even if each are examined on an exclusive basis.
To start with, it is important to establish the experiential nature of popular music, which calls for human participation that does not separate a musician or listener from the musical composition. Unlike an author and her manuscript, a musician has to produce a musical text through acts of performance, be it a recording or a live concert. In short, to aurally encounter a musical text is to encounter a performance; and while this notion seems basic, it is fundamental because performance fuses the close connections between author/listener and musical text, and these connections construct popular music’s social and cultural power – the mystical, romantic, experiential aura of popular music which deserves critical engagement and written scholarship.

By nature, performance constructs a close relationship between author and text that is inextricable in the listener’s aesthetic experience. When listeners encounter “Moanin’ at Midnight” by Howlin’ Wolf, for example, one might imagine Wolf (and no one else) singing the song, harp in hand in front of a mic. When I listen to the composition, I have an image of Wolf in my head, extra-musical knowledge about his persona, and genuine fan belief in the blues narrative lived by Wolf and put forth in the performance. I acknowledge the degree in which my listener response is socially and culturally constructed by blues ideology, but the “grain of the voice,” to enact Barthes phrase, puts Wolf’s authorship and human performance into direct relation with the composition. Perhaps it even overpowers the composition itself.

My point here is that the first-person delivery of a musical composition puts an author’s “voice” and persona in direct relation to the composition. A musical composition always bears a “definite signature,” to use Foucault’s concept, where “author-function” is a crucial sign for the musical text (1635). To offer another example, one could say that Bob
Dylan’s compositions are always attached to his persona and star power. Even if other artists perform his songs, the compositions are difficult to divorce from the artist. Furthermore, hearing Dylan’s voice and guitar deliver the musical text puts authorship at foreground of the aesthetic experience; it is not a background figure, as it is in printed text. Consequently, the “death of the author” discourse applies differently to popular music ideology. In part, the cultural power of popular music is wrapped up in persona, star power, and rock ideology. Who performs is often just as important as the musical text being performed.

Such a strong author-text relationship is rooted in the proliferation of the mass produced audio recording – the record. The effect of a mass produced recording method ushered in a “star system” in which amateur performances of published songs (sheet music) got replaced with the commodified, personalized recording artist. David Buxton explains:

Once blues music (which can be considered a folk music) was recorded in the 1920s, it developed a tradition of “great singers.” Initially, the invention of the microphone as an aid to recording favored a relaxed style of singing, which heightened the nuances of “personality” in each singer, rather than the rigorous technical perfection of the operatic tradition…And whereas in the past, one became a famous personality through the performance of extraordinary deeds, the recording artist became known to hundreds of thousands simply through “being” on record. The emphasis changed from what one “did” to what one was “like.” (429-430)

Even in his Marxist critique, Buxton makes the interesting point that the artist persona emerged through the mediation of the audio recording, folding the author into textual
significance. Therefore, with a stronger star persona folded into the creative act of making a record, authorship has served as a marker for aesthetic judgment and value construction.

An artist’s persona is equated with their artistic voice, the music played or lyrics sung. Still, most fans see the artist’s art as the primary value and the star persona a secondary construction. But there are unclear separations when it comes to the listening act (especially in cases like Howlin’ Wolf or Bob Dylan, as mentioned above). Simon Frith offers interesting observations that a singer’s voice “makes public (makes manifest, makes available) the supposed sounds of private (personal, individual) feeling” (211). In effect, “these public gestures are consumed privately, fitted into our own narratives, our own expressive repertories” (Frith 211). To extend Frith’s notion, listeners put together narratives, not only for their own lives, but for the lives of the performers. Hearing an artist perform a song enacts song meaning as something felt or experienced by the artist themselves, especially since many artists write and perform their own compositions.

In a 2005 episode of the VH1 series Storytellers, an audience member asks Springsteen, “Bruce I feel like you’re baring your soul when you sing, with songs like “Growing Up,” “My Hometown,” and “Promised Land,” I feel like I know you. Do I?” Springsteen responds:

No. [laughter] That’s part of the job – the whole feeling like I know you thing…Obviously you put a lot of yourself in the songs. It’s work, it’s an aesthetic, it’s a presentation, and you can’t write without pulling all that stuff up out of yourself. That’s what makes it feel real. That’s what makes it
communication. But, I guess it’s always an incomplete picture; that’s what keeps me writing. (VHI Storytellers)

This exchange between a fan and Springsteen speaks to the imagined autobiographical narratives listeners attach to an artist’s work. Regardless of authorial intention, an authorial illusion makes the music “feel real,” as Springsteen remarks. What is being described is the prominent, but unspecified feature of authenticity – a “human” and “musical judgment” of the sincerity of a performer or performance (Frith 71). Traditionally, authenticity (as it is socially constructed), is an ideological distinction largely originated by way of the audio recording and complex conflation of author and musical text.

The Audio Recording

For musicians, the audio recording is a constructed piece of performance or performances, depending on technique, bound by the studio setting and its technologies. The studio process is one of an author drafting, editing, and publishing a text for public consumption. In its finality, the audio recording shares similar characteristics with a print text as it goes out into the world, replicated and disseminated through mediators. The recording, then, is the primary contact to listeners. Historically, the recording has acted as the origin – a site of illusionary authenticity between performer and audience.

This word authenticity is an important one for popular music; it has no clear definition, but it is always present in listener vernacular. The definition of authenticity seems to be dependent on genre and certain expectations such as “instrumental virtuosity, original songwriting, social criticism,” etc. (Douglas 22). In many ways, the audio recording has remained authentic for listeners throughout various forms of mechanical reproduction.
Recordings have retained a Benjaminian “aura” due to the illusions created by performance. 

Frith offers a listener’s perspective on the performance aura in his book *Performance Rites*:

> Just as a singer is both performing the song and performing the performance of the song, so we, as an audience, are listening both to the song and to its performance. For me this is a literal process: to hear music is to see it performed, on stage, with all the trappings. I listen to records in the full knowledge that what I hear is something that never existed, that never could exist as a “performance,” something happening in a single time and space; nevertheless, it is now happening, in a single time and space: it is thus a performance and I hear it as one, imagine the performers performing even when this just means a deejay mixing a track, an engineer pulling knobs. 

(211)

With Frith’s description, one can see the recording as a performance site where an illusion, or aura, of authenticity is ideologically created by a close relationship between author, text, and listener.

As Frith mentions, the act of listening in “a single time and space” gives an immediacy to an audio recording, regardless of its date. Listeners fall into a metaphorical virtual space, which theorist Susanne Langer attributes to illusions enacted through the appearance of movement in music and felt time. In *Problems of Art*, she maintains that music creates “a virtual time created by sound” (41). For Langer, virtual time “is an image not of clock-time, but of lived time, [which] is the primary illusion of music” (41). Through musical sound, “melodies move and harmonies grow and prevail, with the logic of an organic living
structure” (Langer 41). Langer’s unique view of an organic, “virtual image of subjective time” opens up the possibilities that music creates *illusions* in the listening experience (39). The virtual time, then, is created by musical elements which enact human emotion and feeling, and that meaning is attached to the author and the perspective listener in the musical encounter. The audio recording, in its possessed, commodified nature, is the most common point of origin for inscribed meaning and the virtual experience.

Theoretically, it is the recording which becomes the authentic, definitive text in which listeners get to know an artist and song. By extension, it becomes the standard for all other performances. A musical author is commonly expected to create, replicate, and continue to perform the musical text just like its commodified, reproduced state. Joni Mitchell equates this act of repeated textual performance to Van Gogh being asked to paint *A Starry Night* again and again, in front of an audience (*Miles of Aisles*). This public expectation of musical authors puts the reproduced text in a precarious position. The frozen, static performance on record is the one consumed and internalized by listeners; in some cases, it is the definitive version and the live performance is the way to confirm its authenticity.

**Remediation of the Audio Recording in Live Performance**

In his book, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, Theodore Gracyk writes that “studio recordings have become the standard for judging live performances,” and consequently, musicians are usually re-creating music from an audio recording in a live performance, not making new music (84). Gracyk’s assertion is that rock is primarily a recorded medium, not a performed one. But Gracyk’s position leaves out the notion that live
performance is now the primary site of authenticity, a proving ground for the artist and a larger, collective virtual space for the listener.

To further situate the term “authenticity,” Philip Auslander engages the term to conclude that

Rock authenticity is performative, in Judith Butler’s sense of that term: rock musicians achieve and maintain their effect of authenticity by continuously citing in their music and performance styles the norms of authenticity for their particular rock subgenre and historical moment, and these norms change along with changes in the prevailing discourse of authenticity. (72)

As Austlander points out, the discourse of authenticity is always in flux. Yet, it is always an important factor in rock culture. At this juncture, the relationship between a recording, or album, and live performance may be shifting.

As recording technology has changed, authenticity has become much more deceptive for the listener. Digital manipulation, which is now industry standard, is usually a mark of an inauthentic performance for listeners; it is somehow less human, more machine-like (less folk, more electronic). To the listener’s imagination, the aura of authenticity disappears with computer mediated instrumentation and recording methods. So even if the recording acts as a virtual performance, as Frith maintains, authenticity is sustained and/or provided by remediation through live performance.

With changing technology, many listeners want the assurance that the artist (human) is actually playing the music or could do so on demand. Of course, the nature of the studio is not that of the live stage, so music is created differently. The Beatles’ illustrated this dynamic
in 1967 with their revolutionary album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. By deciding to no longer perform live, The Beatles, created *Sgt. Pepper* as an album which could not be sonically replicated live (without playing the recording). In effect, *Sgt. Pepper* ushered in the constructed studio art as its own performance setting. Since 1967, however, the discourse of authenticity has shifted. Computer mediation in the recording process makes judging an authentic performance quite tricky in ways unimaginable in the *Sgt. Pepper* sessions. Digital recording and advanced software technology such as Pro Tools allows quick manipulation of music itself, not just editing effects like reverb or mixing. Now, singers do not have to be on pitch or on time in the performance; all of that can be corrected and reconstructed by digital technology. Theoretically, a performer does not have to actually perform the music heard on the finished audio recording.

Meanwhile, back in the physical world, the audio recording is now an unheld, unseen object in the form of a digital file. In October 2007, Radiohead released their new album *In Rainbows* through a set-your-own-price, computer-only file download, a political move which proved highly successful and trend-setting in a mainstream music industry plagued with problems. In effect, all of these factors influence the extra-musical illusion of authenticity and the narratives which drive authentic popular music lore. It seems that many are worried that the album or recording itself is in crisis, but perhaps the concern is more about a crisis of authenticity and rock simulacra.

Live performance, then, becomes the space to create authenticity and recast the recorded album in more significant ways than ever before. In effect, live performance remediates the recording by putting it into physical experience and claiming authenticity for
the musical composition (not a “decay of aura,” just a relocation from recorded form to performance). In effect, live performance can remediate a recording, thereby changing meaning in the process (once again, Springsteen’s 2000 remediation of the 1984 album version of “Born In The U.S.A. serves as a strong example of the remediation act). In this case, the live performance resembles an oral medium where listeners and authors interact and musical compositions change form and content. In improvisational music, the “oral,” performative tradition is well understood, and this notion may be just coming around to mainstream rock genres.

**Live Performance**

The concert experience is a space where authenticity and origin validate an artist, album, or song through an event. A live performance has the ability to satisfy an audience’s demand for authenticity through performers’ actions and audience response. Such demands for authenticity infer that music is an important personal, social, and cultural experience for people and it cannot be unreal or fabricated. We might look to Schopenhauer here in his claim that art can console suffering by providing will and desire for the audience. In *The World as Will and Idea*, he writes:

> Music is distinguished from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomenon, or, more accurately, the adequate objectivity of will, but is the direct copy of the will itself, and therefore exhibits itself as the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, and as the thing-in-itself to every phenomenon. We might, therefore, just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will; and this is the reason why music makes every
picture, and indeed every scene of real life and of the world, at once appear
with higher significance, certainly all the more in proportion as its melody is
analogous to the inner spirit of the given phenomenon. (339-340)

To follow Schopenhauer, the live musical performance allows an audience to participate in
will and representation through the creation of music and/or an artistic event for “higher
significance.” A concert is a chance to get as close to the art and artist as possible in a space
which takes on its own movement and virtual time, to echo Langer. Therefore, the appeal of
concert going is more than the thrill of seeing someone famous in person; there seems to be
more at work.

Going to a concert resembles a religious service in certain ways in its communal spirit
and attentiveness to the addresser. It’s about paying homage to art or an artist you look up to,
being in the same place as them, celebrating their creation, experiencing artistic creation as it
takes place, and creating energy for the artist to respond to. I’m not thinking of “rock gods”
here, rather it is the implementation of certain acts in the live performance which satisfy
audience collectivity and artistic authenticity even if both are an illusion.

Certain tropes and actions are useful for describing the collective and authentic
experience for the artist and the audience. Chapter 3 will take on more detailed discussion of
these tropes through the analysis of Springsteen’s live performance techniques, but for now,
a general survey will set up what follows.

To a large degree, both ritual and spontaneity make a live performance resonate with
the audience. Rituals might include anything from particular fan behaviors which evolve
with a performer or tour (fans screaming during the new stop-time intro to the Dave
Matthews Band’s “Warehouse”) to the expectation of certain songs (James Taylor will play “Fire and Rain” towards the end of every show). Rituals are the social behaviors which codify and bond fan cultural, and more so, collective audience experience in the concert setting. These are roles which draw the audience in and bridge the division between stage and seat. Oftentimes, rituals occur organically as they are created by fans or dictated by artists. These are usually spontaneous creations, another important feature guiding authenticity.

Audiences usually have high expectations from performers; they want to know that the show they are attending is special, worth the money spent, and musically proficient. To fulfill these requirements, a performer must interact with the audience by leading them through an experience which seems spontaneous, even if it is highly constructed, to give fans the illusion that the attended performance is unique and uncanned. Special guests, the performance of rare or new songs, altered versions of original arrangements, and specific verbal/non-verbal rhetoric might create spontaneity in the audience’s experience. The live spontaneity can lean to ritual, as Sarah Thornton discusses briefly in her book Club Cultures:

Sometimes, the enactment of spontaneity is as limited as the well-rehearsed deviation from the record track in the form of the guitar or drum solo. At other times, the deviation is more dramatic, involving special guest stars (“my good friend, Eric Clapton, on the guitar”) or what has become a perennial crowd pleaser, smashing one’s instruments on stage. More than anything else, it is perhaps this act of destruction which signals that, since the late sixties, music performance has moved into territories well beyond its usual preserve. The Who, the first well-known band to wreck their instruments during a gig,
borrowed ideas from artworld “happenings” which fetishized the impermanence of performance. Later, punk groups, then grunge bands, would turn guitar-smashing into a semi-regular rite. (81)

Part of being a fan is experiencing the actions which shift between ritual and spontaneity, all of which blur tropes of sacred and secular events and are informed by traditions. An action like call-and-response shows up quite often in live performance, thanks to folk/blues roots and gospel tradition. Like a religious event, the call-and-response dissipates the artist/audience separation as the gathering becomes interactive and the audience becomes part of the song (as they sing along or respond) and help create the music. The effect is an entire arena collectively participating and experiencing a song with the artist, which remediates any previously recorded version by letting the audience in on the performance act.

These confluences of musical authors, texts, and audiences create the key sites of interest for text/context analysis, as it might occur in English studies. My aim in surveying these sites is to note key features and relationships as they map across popular music. These are the sites where methodology will be useful and theory will be welcomed as popular music analysis continues to evolve through cultural studies.
Chapter 3

The Ministry of Rock and Roll: Bruce Springsteen’s Literary Voice in Performance

“Talk about a dream, try to make it real”

- Bruce Springsteen, “Badlands,” *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, 1978

As a fan-scholar of Bruce Springsteen, I find myself continually intrigued by Springsteen’s craftsmanship as a rock performer. The term “craftsman” seems appropriate in Springsteen’s case as he constructs music and lyric combinations with thematic effect, deep artist/fan relationships through performance, and performance rituals which lead his audience through revival-like celebration which blends sacred and secular traditions. It is Springsteen’s perceived dedication and sincerity in every performance that keeps me returning as an audience member and, consequently, leads me to this application of the methodology set up in Chapter 1. To return to Hills’ assertion, this kind of fan “intrigue” seems like a good starting place for popular music scholarship, on any level. No doubt, I approach “Springsteen Studies” as another fan contributing to a growing body of scholarly enthusiasm.

Anyone who has seen Springsteen live or delved into his prolific body of work will notice that he is an artist working on his own terms, assembling musical and literary fusions steeped in American tradition. On the records, Springsteen positions himself as a distinctly American writer who weaves profound thematic threads into his songs: hope, redemption, struggle, suffering, isolation, and interpersonal connections fundamental to human experience and, to a large degree, American experience. In the live setting, audiences
perceive Springsteen’s dedication, sincerity, and commitment to give them an experience he
describes as “part circus, dance party, political rally, and big tent revival” (60 Minutes). In
many ways, Springsteen constructs the concert event for specific ends, be it a carefully
chosen setlist or particular rituals unique to the band or a particular tour. But a Springsteen
show never seems canned or too carefully planned; instead, the show always feels
spontaneous and vibrant with a great deal of improvisation. An investigation of the live
dynamic happening at a Springsteen show might start with a discussion of Springsteen’s
ethos.

Returning to Figure 1, the ethos of an artist may be shaped by a variety of features
mapping across popular music. The composition which provides lyric and musical features
can be a source of meaning for audiences about who the artist is, or the image they present
through the songs they perform. In most cases, media guides the composition delivery
through forms like albums and live performance; these outlets are also integral to meaning
and authorial image. Relevant to all these entities is the cultural context, in relationship to the
audience, the composition, the media, and the artist themselves. In Springsteen’s case, all of
these features are rich for exploration because the connections between these features are
layered and aesthetically unique. As live performance and album releases mediate and
remediate the compositions, Springsteen’s ethos take shape to form a relationship between
Springsteen as a performing artist and his audience/listeners. Specifically, the effects of the
performance rituals Springsteen employs rests in his connection to his audience, synthesized
through a distinct literary voice, coupled by the illusion of a sincere, personal delivery which
breaks typical artist/fan divisions.
The Construction of a Literary Voice

In recent years, several scholars have taken up Springsteen as a primary subject. Jim Cullen’s compelling book, *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*, examines Springsteen’s cultural significance through his writing and his character. In Cullen’s words the book “explores a series of myths, symbols, and words in American culture, and the ways in which Springsteen’s music clarifies, revises, and reinterprets them” (3). Cullen’s comparative analysis of myths and symbols matches Springsteen with the likes of Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr, among many others to underscore Springsteen’s significance to American culture. While these comparisons may seem like a stretch, Cullen is echoed by Brian K. Garman in *A Race of Singers: Whitman’s Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*. Garman sees Springsteen as a crucial figure in a working-class hero lineage which starts with Walt Whitman and recasts through Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan as they wrestle with social justice, national identity, and personal freedom through their art. Coupled with Daniel Cavicchi’s well researched 1998 ethnography *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* and Larry David Smith’s 2002 book *Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and American Song*, it is clear that Springsteen’s work inspires serious critical engagement. In all cases, these writers discuss Springsteen’s ethos as a performer and a writer as one who creates authenticity through a close relationship with his audience and his thematic choices.

In the discussion, these recent works pick up on the margins of many fields outside of musicology, from history to sociology to literature, with little regard for rigid critical boundaries. A complex, comparative, ecumenical critical approach taken up by Cullen,
Garman, and Smith is precisely the kind of openness which might thrive in contemporary English departments interested in popular music analysis. In the forward for Cullen’s book, Cavicchi describes this work as a healthy “intellectual diaspora” (xv). In my view, this kind of scholarship can find a welcoming home in English studies through the exploration of textual relationships mapped in Figure 1. A fusion of scholarly perspectives is what makes the field of English exciting and theoretically equipped to examine fusions assembled by musicians like Springsteen. In fact, Springsteen’s musical and literary fusions might account for the mounting scholarly enthusiasm for his work and cultural influence. Following Cullen and Garman’s work, Springsteen’s artistry is indeed tied to historical, sociological, and political paths of meaning familiar to the realm of literary theory. Consequently, as a literary scholar in the field of English, I attribute Springsteen’s ethos to his well-crafted literary voice which encompasses its own intellectual diaspora and reflects its synthesis back to listeners and scholars.

Springsteen’s writing seems carefully detailed and edited with distinct themes in mind which are simultaneously vast and abstract, personal and poignant. Springsteen’s lyrics are paradoxically rich as they offer particular character sketches with cinematic detail, but still leave the listener to fill in personal meaning. Musical support for the lyrics set emotional tones which situate setting, place, and mood. In a song like “The Promised Land” an anthemic chorus offers the lyric:

The dogs on Main Street howl

'cause they understand

If I could take one moment into my hands
Mister I ain't a boy, no I'm a man
And I believe in a promised land (Darkness)

The lyrics put the listener into a position of hopefulness (“I believe”), belief in a better place, and self-determination to rise above current suffering. Like many of Springsteen’s works, the song is personal in the first-person character voice dealing with a common theme of getting out of a limiting situation; yet, the song never clarifies what “the promised land” looks like or feels like. Left in the abstract, listeners attach to the concept of belief and faith in better days as “the promised land” assumes its own definition for the listener. A phrase like “the promised land” is somewhat mythical, with sacred biblical overtones, but cast in a secular working-class setting. Likely, it is a combination of these factors which provides meaning for audience members. At numerous shows I’ve seen audience members singing “The Promised Land” chorus with a great deal of passion, fueled by Springsteen encouragement for communal participation. The large mythical themes and abstract concepts gain meaning through the personal voice and communal agreement, inside the narrative and at the concert event. “The Promised Land” is just one example of Springsteen’s literary voice which speaks to working-class American culture, fuses sacred and secular themes along the way, and assumes a strong connection to the listening audience.

**Springsteen’s American Narrative**

Springsteen’s literary voice is in close connection with an American literary tradition made up of certain writers whose voices speak to and comment on America. In both praise and critique of American culture, the notion of an “ideal America” inspires certain writers to hold a delicate balance of hope and critique. Poet Walt Whitman might be the most
celebrated, or most defined, of these American literary voices, but Springsteen, in his own right, holds a similar position. Cullen and Garman both compare Springsteen to Whitman as an exemplar, and contemporary echo, of Whitman’s “working-class hero” (Garman 196).

Like the celebrated Whitman, Springsteen’s writing explores American culture through identification with ordinary people and ordinary language. The character in “The Promised Land,” for instance, has big dreams and possibilities on the horizon for a young man “working all day” in “daddy's garage” (Darkness). He is a commoner with heroic spirit, a consistent theme for Springsteen which threads through many of his songs. In effect, Springsteen picks up on Whitman’s claim in the “Preface to the 1855 Edition of Leaves of Grass”:

[T]he genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors…but always most in the common people. (43)

Springsteen’s thematic foci, and his own image, revolve around common people, which, like Leaves of Grass, holds them up in celebration – “a largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen” (Whitman 43). The common people Whitman lists all show up in Springsteen songs; one might even imagine Springsteen replacing Whitman’s voice, as Whitman writes:

Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,

A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,

Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest. (69)
These are occupations which circulate through Springsteen’s storytelling. Much of his work are narratives in song form as Springsteen offers portraits of characters directly facing the so-called American dream, an illusion of ideal freedom, hope, and redemption. Depending on the album, Springsteen offers stories and characters on one side or the other of the dream ranging from youthful optimism to isolated depression.

Albums like *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ, The Wild, the Innocent and the E-Street Shuffle*, and *Born to Run* contain songs which embody a search for hope and the promise of redemption in the American dream. Against those romantic visions comes a starker realism comprised by a loss of hope and dangerous isolation in records like *Darkness on the Edge of Town, Nebraska, Tunnel of Love*, and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. By addressing both sides of the mythical American dream, youthful hope and mature reality play out in the ears and minds of the listener as they scatter through Springsteen’s songbook.

Springsteen’s thematic dichotomy of youthful hope and mature reality can also be seen as a linear progression, much in line with Springsteen’s progression from a hungry young artist to a seasoned rock icon. The first three albums, *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ, The Wild, The Innocent, and the E-Street Shuffle*, and *Born to Run* share narratives associated with young people. Even the album titles offer the idea of being at a place (Asbury Park, NJ), leading a certain lifestyle (wild and innocent), and a subsequent emergence from a present state (born to run). It is after these initial albums that starker, harsher narratives appear offering experiences braved by more mature, older characters. As the narratives are adorned by music, the themes are colored appropriately through tonality, instrumentation, and roots music influences.
Springsteen’s musical confluences serve his narrative voice as well. One can see Springsteen’s musical path take aesthetic turns to suit certain thematic forms. These shifts include: singer/songwriter acoustic, rhythm and blues, driving rock ‘n’ roll, evangelistic gospel, and later, traditional folk. The tone of each genre communicates the writing with great effect as the music is molded to serve the message appropriately. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Springsteen’s skill for musical and lyrical cohesion is no accident. Musical choices, through arrangement and instrumentation, color meaning in equal measure with the lyric choices. The various versions of “Born in the U.S.A.” illustrate this relationship well, in addition to a comparative study between a stripped down, lyric based acoustic record like *Nebraska* and a cinematic folk/rock record like *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ*. In each case, Springsteen crafts the albums with particular song choices and thematic threads which act as installments in a body of literary works.

In literary style, Springsteen’s albums offer an American narrative, told through specific places, characters, and situations. The result is a focused literary voice, comparable to the clarity of Walt Whitman, the detail of Flannery O’Connor, and the criticism of John Steinbeck. While I discuss Springsteen’s work in the metaphor of literature, my aim is not to overextend the comparison. Rather, I hope it is beneficial to conceptualize Springsteen and his work with the critical framework akin to author and text (fused tightly together), and to consider comparative possibilities between popular musicians and literary figures. It is also possible to treat compositions as literature and to trace a literary voice as it filters through the three zones of analysis in *Figure 1*. What sets music apart, in this conceptualization, is the performative nature of music which creates a strong author-text relationship (as mentioned in
Chapter 2) far exceeding that of traditional print literature. By nature, the literary voice is easily equated with the author’s physical voice in performance. For Springsteen, these connections are integral to his style, thematic range, and audience relationship.

In shaping the literary voice, Springsteen’s writing works for specific ends with rhetorical awareness and literary tradition in mind. With nods toward romanticism and realism, the writing addresses an American public while it simultaneously speaks directly to individual equality and recognition. Certain albums and songs wrestle with themes of social justice and individual freedom, calling into question the values of democracy. Chronologically, the albums form a narrative of American experience moving in and out of explicit thematic entities separately and simultaneously.

A voice of youthful optimism emerges in Springsteen’s early writing. On the first release, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, rhythmic word play illustrates an innocence and recklessness that captures the longing and dreams of rebellious youth. While the illustrations might be fictitious, the rebellious spirit is probably not a stretch for Springsteen himself considering his life as a renegade musician on the Jersey shore in the early 1970s (Dave Marsh’s comprehensive biography *Two Hearts* tells it well). Immediately, Springsteen is locating himself in the unglamorous, street-wise boardwalk town of Asbury Park, NJ. The initial voice is clear and Springsteen makes no effort to cover his biographical past as he offers himself in the confessional singer/songwriter vein. The album states who he is and who he will write about – his own people.

Springsteen’s lyrical style on *Greetings* is uniquely fresh and Dylanesque, and even resembles Beat Generation poetry with stream of consciousness lyrics that bring a sense of
urgency, bursting with young excitement and optimism. The album opens with the lines
“Madman drummers bummers and Indians in the summer with a teenage diplomat / In the
dumps with the mumps as the adolescent pumps his way into his hat” (“Blinded by the
Light,” Greetings). Springsteen presents sketches of the teenage experience in suburban
America, a life on the margins propelled by the search for meaning, experience, and cheap
thrills. Reckless innocence haunts “Spirit in the Night,” one Greetings staple, as the gang
heads to Greasy Lake. Rebel without a Cause scenes come to mind in the street-wise
language:

Crazy Janey and her mission man were back in the alley tradin' hands.

'long came Wild Billy with his friend G-man, all duded up for Saturday night

Well Billy slammed on his coaster brakes and said, “Anybody wanna go on up
to Greasy Lake?”

It's about a mile down on the dark side of route eighty-eight.

I got a bottle of rose, so let's try it. (Greetings)

Mythical characters arise in the names of Wild Billy, Crazy Janey, Hazy Davy and G-Man as
nicknamed, street-wise kids, in search of fun, head to a place outside the city to be alive in
the night. With parents back in town, the youth escape oppression, find redemption, and lose
virginity, all by retreating to a new place. It is the act of leaving behind the status quo, and
opportunity to do so, where the American dream illusion of personal freedom captures the
tortured teenage soul. In a song like “Spirit in the Night,” the scene plays out through
Springsteen’s imagery juxtaposed with larger-than-life themes he equates to “plays” (qtd. in
Marsh 62). Marsh comments that the scene of Greasy Lake is Springsteen’s “equivalent of
John Ford’s Monument Valley, but [Springsteen] celebrates its inhabitants more than its natural splendor” (63). Springsteen uses “Greasy Lake as an archetype of similar places the listener has known, just as one understands the characters to be universal versions of figures in real life” (63-64).

As Springsteen captures the psyche of American youth, in cinematic 1950s style, he offers his characters liberation or a hope for change. These are the themes which hold listeners, especially coming-of-age stories of social justice and individual freedom. In “Growing Up,” the lines raise anthem-like cries:

I strolled all alone through a fallout zone
and came out with my soul untouched.
I hid in the clouded wrath of the crowd,
but when they said "Sit down" I stood up.

Ooh-ooh growin' up. (Greetings)

Unseen power gives the first-person speaker rebellion and freedom, and these are the key elements in telling the American youth narrative. Rising above oppression gives the speaker the ultimate liberation, even beyond the universe: “And I swear I found the key to the universe in the engine of an old parked car” (“Growing Up”). In Whitman-like style, Springsteen celebrates the commonplace object of the car as a “vehicle” for transcendence; this is one of Springsteen’s signatures in the presentation of the ordinary as sublime. Even in its first appearance (but certainly not the last) in Springsteen’s work, the car itself is a source for liberation as it symbolically holds the individual’s destiny as a source for movement.
While this movement is a source of happiness, Springsteen also makes a point to illustrate a narrative of struggle on *Greetings*.

On the street “It’s Hard to Be a Saint in the City” and even harder being “Lost in the Flood.” Harsh realities of violence, race, religion, and crime play out in “Lost in the Flood,” countering the celebratory nature of the other songs. As the song asks the question, “I wonder what they were gettin' into, or were they just lost in the flood?,” there is criticism of a larger system, “the flood” (*Greetings*). Being “lost in the flood” not only represents an individual struggling against a mass or majority, but also having no way out of the situation. Perhaps, this allegorical lyric marks the first time social injustice is pointed out and questioned in Springsteen’s work. However, this stark picture does not cover the *Greetings* palate as it does in later albums. Elements of celebration and hope are central to the lyrics on Springsteen’s introductory release, giving listeners a strong fusion between Springsteen’s authorship and the performed text.

Springsteen’s second work, *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E-Street Shuffle*, is a further connection of author, text, and setting as Springsteen explores the streets of America with a continuation of youthful exuberance. True to Springsteen’s own roots, the songs render coming-of-age stories set in suburban America, particularly in the shadow of New York City. With verisimilitude, Springsteen puts the listener directly in the location. A boardwalk romance, such as that in “4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy),” comes across in cinematic detail:

> Down in town the circuit's full with switchblade lovers
so fast, so shiny, so sharp.

And the wizards play down on Pinball Way on the boardwalk way past dark.

And the boys from the casino dance with their shirts open

like Latin lovers along the shore

Chasin' all them silly New York girls. (The Wild)

This scenario captures a Jersey shore summer with great economy, complete with a boardwalk accordion musical backdrop. A song like “4th of July” exemplifies Springsteen’s care for detail, the crafted literary voice, to convey the cosmopolitan makeup of a particular setting in American experience: the Jersey shore boardwalk, complete with gangsters, greasers, and flighty city girls.

Even as the subjects are trapped within the scene, both the narrator and Sandy have great promise and hope to leave the location to go on to greater things: “This boardwalk life for me is through / You know you ought to quit this scene too” (The Wild). However, even with this promise at hand, there is still a need to live for the moment in the boardwalk romanticism. It is still a summer fling as the character relays what might be a false promise: “Sandy, the aurora's rising behind us, the pier lights our carnival life forever / Oh love me tonight and I promise I'll love you forever” (The Wild). With the pier lights in the background, leaving the past behind is just hope for the future.

These early works continually wrestle with individual liberation in the everyday setting as a powerful theme listeners can identify with. Many of the songs dealing with this theme have become epic classics for Springsteen’s audience. In concert, fans seem to know the words as if they were internal narratives. “Rosalita (Come Out Tonight)” might be one of
the strongest examples. It is a song played live quite often (usually towards the end of the show), and remains a treasured fan favorite because of its celebratory nature. Listeners identify with the speaker and his message, carried through Springsteen’s literary voice and his performance voice as he sings physically. On the quest for authenticity and meaning making, there is a natural correlation listeners assemble between the speaker in the text, the “I” in the song, and Springsteen himself. The result is a development of Springsteen’s ethos as a real person constructed by the material he writes and the stories he tells. And, to further the fusion, there are occasional biographical elements in the songs. In “Rosalita” the speaker (the singing Springsteen) relates, “I know your mama, she don’t like me cause I play in a rock and roll band” (*The Wild*). As Springsteen sings, it is easy to assume that the literary voice is actually his own, as if he is telling a true story.

Springsteen’s ethos become even more powerful through the promise of redemption to Rosie: “I'm comin' to liberate you, confiscate you, I want to be your man / Someday we'll look back on this and it will all seem funny” (*The Wild*). The recurring theme of individual liberation is enacted by the working-class hero speaker, so as the song is performed, Springsteen also becomes that hero. Even as similar themes show up in other songs, they each tell slightly different variations of a heroic narrative. Liberation, hope, and redemption are key themes, and they reshape as Springsteen’s voice matures to tell starker, darker stories.

The seminal third album *Born to Run* follows the stories of *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E-Street Shuffle* through cinematic detail as the characters wrestle with liberation, hope, and redemption. But 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town* marks a new direction in
Springsteen’s writing both thematically and stylistically. The writing is distilled to simple structures which follow verse-chorus conventions. As the structures pare down, so does the celebration and liberation. As the title, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, suggests, a realistic “darkness” enters in as Springsteen’s narrative moves from youthful exuberance to the plight of the blue-collar worker.

The songs on the *Darkness* record pick up the harshness of “Lost in the Flood” with less romanticism and more realism. The spirit of the album gives voice to the working-class American citizen through starker, harsher portraits. Primitive elements of the American worker are shown in “Factory” as Springsteen moves away from the first-person delivery:

> Early in the morning factory whistle blows,
> Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes,
> Man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning light,
> It's the working, the working, just the working life. (*Darkness*)

In this text, Springsteen offers little elaborative detail in favor of simply stating the stark realities that face the typical factory worker. The character is addressed as “Man,” identifying the male like he is a machine. Consequently, the simple, stark quality of the narrative and its musical setting mirrors the factory job. Hope, so present in earlier songs, is not present in “Factory,” much less a path for transcendence. By 1978, this is a new, more outspoken, literary voice from Springsteen – indeed, a voice for the voiceless on his own terms. The material is not necessarily protest in nature, but presents critique through personal situations. Garman comments:
These narratives do not explicitly identify the enemy, but the represent the deep wounds inflicted by economic exploitation with an intensity and honesty uncommon in American popular culture. In the darkness of his own working-class experience and in the “mansions of fear” and “pain” in which his father dwelled, Springsteen uncovered the enduring muse for his cultural work.

(201-202)

As Garman hints, Springsteen’s thematic interests become more social and personal simultaneously on *Darkness*. Childhood memories of his parents’ struggle inform the direction of the album and, in the process, help form Springsteen into a viable cultural critic from 1978 on. In effect, an important shift takes place on *Darkness* from “spiritual hopefulness” to “cynicism” and critique (Springsteen, qtd. in Graff 105).

In the shift, religious imagery becomes a crucial literary device. In “Adam Raised a Cain,” Springsteen juxtaposes a contemporary domestic struggle with the biblical story of Cain and Able. This portrait finds the individual under the oppression of societal constructions through class and family. As if a clean start is impossible, the individual is crushed by factors beyond his or her control (who your father is, what class you are born into):

In the Bible Cain slew Abel and East of Eden he was cast
You're born into this life paying for the sins of somebody else's past
Daddy worked his whole life for nothing but the pain
Now he walks these empty rooms looking for something to blame
You inherit the sins, you inherit the flames

Adam raised a Cain (Darkness)

In these waves of despair and sin, hope is not offered. These are hurt songs which tell of oppression, in the spirit of blues and folk tradition. As some portions take on an evangelistic gospel tone in “Adam Raised a Cain,” the words gain much more power. It is this fusion of the sacred and secular where Springsteen finds meanings and traditions which circulate and layer in song meaning and performance. This sacred/secular fusion is something Springsteen returns to continually throughout his literary work, and plays out most effectively in later works like The Rising and Devils and Dust.

An Aesthetic Shift in Literary Voice

The relationship between lyrics and musical aesthetics seems to work best in Springsteen’s more acoustic ventures. Stripped-down, stark acoustic works serve as an extension to the literary voice Springsteen creates as he moves away from band arrangements toward a singular, even more personal writing style.

Nebraska, Tunnel of Love, The Ghost of Tom Joad, and Devils and Dust are all albums which move away from youthful exuberance, in favor of quiet, brooding music using acoustic instruments based in folk tradition. Opposite to the anthems found in earlier works, the songs offer more thought provoking ideas of how hope can become lost and redemption can become unobtainable. Relationships break down and characters become irrational, often to the point of murder. For listeners, this is the other side of the hard-rocking Springsteen as he presents melancholy work through storytelling ballads and sharp-tongued lyrics. As in the folk tradition, the songs have a message to deliver. The impact of the hurt song also comes
from the blues, as Springsteen writes and performs characters much different from himself. When asked about his shift in style on *Nebraska*, Springsteen responds:

I wanted to let the listener hear the characters think, to get inside their heads, so you could hear and feel their thoughts, their choices…I wanted the music to feel like a waking dream and the record to move like poetry. (qtd. in Graff 255)

Through the sparse instrumentation on *Nebraska*, Springsteen takes his voice out of the band context for acoustic authenticity. Even though Springsteen sings in character, listeners can hear a more personal delivery because it is only a guitar and vocal.

In these darker, quieter selections on the acoustic records, isolation becomes a key theme, especially as characters are rendered in the narrative framework. Whether it is “Cautious Man” Bill Horton or Tom Joad’s ghost, Springsteen describes an unhealthy form of isolation as a consequence of larger injustices and misfortunes. The stories find characters alienated by society through social class, family, and occupation. Springsteen describes this larger theme running thorough *Nebraska* as

American isolation: what happens to people when they’re alienated from their friends and their community and their government and their job. And if they slip away, and you start to exist in some void where the basis constraints of society are a joke, then life becomes a kind of a joke. And anything can happen. (qtd. in Marsh 340)

The isolation often leads to dangerous ends such as irrational homicide in “Nebraska” and “Johnny 99.” In these situations, the characters are so far removed from mainstream America
that life on the fringe removes law, morality, and basic human values. To set the scene, Springsteen’s voice is that of traditional balladeer working with stark imagery and vivid portraits of wayward individuals, outside communal relationships, heading toward the “darkness on the edge of town.”

An effective way to communicate this narrative is through the use of recurring symbols. As recurring icons in Springsteen’s writing, cars and highways represent the blessing and curse American freedom enables. The dream of a new car in Nebraska’s “Used Cars” shows the automobile as a status symbol for the upper class. However, the car also works in different ways: it affords the killers in “Nebraska” a means to commit mass murder, a getaway from the law in “Highway Patrolman,” and a means for deliverance “from nowhere” in “Open All Night.” This is a sharp contrast from the use of the car as a means for transcendence in “Growing Up,” freedom in Born to Run’s “Thunder Road” and good times in The River’s “Darlington County.” Using the same device, Springsteen illustrates that two extremes can exist – a fine line between the freedom to live out dreams in Born to Run and the freedom to extinguish dreams in Nebraska. The nuanced storytelling of Nebraska, of course, calls for more articulation and careful description for authenticity to ring true.

With minimal detail Springsteen captures bleak landscapes and soulless characters. It is no wonder Springsteen cites the work of Flannery O’Connor as a direct inspiration for the Nebraska writing. O’Connor’s writing lets vivid detail offer clues in the writing to thinly sketch a narrative. By nature, the audience is often left to fill in the blanks. Springsteen uses this literary strategy to great effect in the title track “Nebraska:” “I saw her standin' on her front lawn just twirlin' her baton / Me and her went for a ride sir and ten innocent people
died” (Nebraska). Juxtaposing the childlike innocence with the bleak statement of death gives the writing a very dark tone. Listeners can only infer why the character is a serial killer. All the listener knows is that this darkness is an extension of the one found at the edge of town; this is the darkness of American individuals.

Nebraska threads the dark themes in the murderous “Johnny 99,” a character coming to terms with a factory layoff. Family dysfunction surrounds “Highway Patrolman” in a fight between the law and the lawless. Materialism and the negatives of capitalism inform “Used Cars” and “Mansion on the Hill” with veiled political critique. Likewise, “Atlantic City” deals with the implications of gambling as an institutional trap of false redemption. Indeed, these narratives of America expose where democracy can fail in certain cases where the individual gets lost.

As Springsteen writes isolated characters, the text chooses not to pass judgment on the situation. The questions lie in the text to be drawn out by the audience. It seems that the characters’ isolation comes from outside forces, mainly societal constraints. It is an interesting question indeed why a mass murder might occur for no apparent reason as it does in the title cut “Nebraska,” based the 1959 true crimes of Charles Starkweather and Carol Fugate. Additionally, Terrance Malick’s film Badlands also presents the same murder case with equally stark detail as Springsteen. The song and the film both leave the audience to decide why two young people would commit murder. Implied in both works is the deep isolation the characters feel, as if they are alienated from society. Like Flannery O’Connor’s characters, alienation from society grants license to irrationality. “A meanness in this world”
is the only explanation given by the “Nebraska” character. If this is the case in the *Nebraska* and *Badlands* characters, society must be to blame for the breakdown of human decency.

The implication of these stories for Springsteen’s listeners is that society as a whole has a responsibility it must uphold. Wayward young people illustrated in *Badlands* find little identity in the adult world and their isolation finds them on the fringes of morality and civilization. They are not embraced, especially the murderer Kit who comes from “the other side of the tracks.” Yet, Kit only becomes irrational after he gets fired from his cattle job. Simultaneously, Holly’s father refuses to respect Kit and bans him from seeing his daughter anymore. Kit’s marginalization leads him to murder Holly’s father, the first death of the killing spree. Since society does not reach out a hand for Kit and Holly, they have no choice but to become famous feared killers crossing the Midwest. In essence, a shared societal responsibility can save the outsider from destruction; and it is obvious that failure and breakdown has occurred in the “Nebraska”/ *Badlands* story.

As isolation leads to destruction, Springsteen points out the key component of family. In “Highway Patrolman,” the bond of family is stronger than law. Even though the patrolman’s brother has committed murder, he cannot bear to arrest him. The patrolman offers the deviant brother another chance as he watches Frankie’s taillights fade across the Canadian border. The patrolman sings, “I’d catch him when he's strayin' like any brother would / Man turns his back on his family well he just ain't no good” (*Nebraska*). Concepts of brotherhood or sisterhood signify the importance of relational bonds. Yet, relationships can both create and prevent dangerous isolation. “My Father’s House” offers a scenario of a
character trying to rectify a family situation by revisiting the father’s house. With religious connotations the lines read:

My father's house shines hard and bright it stands
like a beacon calling me in the night
Calling and calling, so cold and alone
Shining 'cross this dark highway where our sins lie unatoned (Nebraska)

Unresolved “sins” haunt the character. A dysfunctional or unhealthy relationship with the father is cause for personal isolation. In this situation, chasing down the demons will not rectify the situation.

Along side the family relationships are basic values of romantic relationships, as illustrated in Tunnel of Love. When these relationships breakdown, a similar isolation takes place. The isolation again is described as being outside the mainstream. Ideals cannot be met, as in “One Step Up:”

When I look at myself I don't see
The man I wanted to be
Somewhere along the line I slipped off track
I’m caught movin’ one step up and two steps back (Tunnel)

In solitary thought, the speaker realizes his own deviance and hardly recognizes himself. An ideal set of values has not been met. Perhaps these are values that set what it means to be a man, husband, or friend. Whatever these ideals are, not measuring up to them is cause for great distress. Still at question is the source of blame. This also occurs in “Cautious Man:”

“Alone on his knees in the darkness for steadiness he'd pray / For he knew in a restless heart
the seed of betrayal lay” (Tunnel). Moments like these offer isolation that is reflective and less irrational than experiences described on Nebraska. However, the concept seems to be the same: the harsh realities of lost hope and unfound redemption. Just as Woody Guthrie sings about dust bowl hardship, Springsteen is calling awareness to these issues. People in these down and out situations can go as far as Johnny 99, and society as a collective whole cannot leave behind those who find themselves alienated.

Through detailed, narrative presentation of cultural criticism on the acoustic records, Springsteen has earned credibility as an artist who can speak about his own country and speak to listeners in a powerful way. In the rock setting, the large themes and tropes of hope and redemption define the early albums and inform later popular works like The River and Born in the U.S.A.. In the process, Springsteen has assembled a literary voice to speak to his audience and carved a distinctive place in American culture. Like Whitman’s “Democratic Vistas,” Springsteen sees his own writing as a quest to answer what it means to be an American, and, in turn, asks his audience to do the same. He writes:

A nation's artists and musicians have a particular place in its social and political life. Over the years I've tried to think long and hard about what it means to be American: about the distinctive identity and position we have in the world, and how that position is best carried. I've tried to write songs that speak to our pride and criticize our failures. (“Chords”)

Through this craft of literary voice, Springsteen has developed an ongoing dialogue with his audience about poignant themes which shape listener’s actual lives. Again and again, fans
discuss Springsteen’s work as being meaningful in their daily lives because of the powerful themes he explores.

By extension, going to a live performance is a way to more fully experience songs which have deep resonation. As found in Cavicchi’s study, fans compare a Springsteen concert to a religious event. It’s not that fans go to worship Springsteen as an idol, rather the construction of the experience and a more “authentic,” communal connection to the songs feels transformative. To see and hear Springsteen deliver the material in person is to experience the source, or aura, tied to the audio recording. As a way to make the experience more transformative, or religious in nature, communal rituals and non-verbal acts give fans a participatory role in the meaning of a composition. A look at the 2002 album *The Rising* and the tour that followed will clarify the dynamic at work between the audio recording and the live performance, and the relationship between Springsteen and his audience.

**The Remediation of *The Rising***

As Springsteen’s literary voice has developed, his position as a cultural speaker has evolved in strength and scope. In 2001, with the United States reeling from the September 11 terrorist attacks, Springsteen found himself called by fans to sound his voice at the cultural moment. In *The Ties That Bind*, Gary Graff relays that Springsteen was in a parking lot in Sea Bright, NJ days after the tragedy when a fan pulled alongside and said “Bruce, we need you!” (298). As the story goes, the man’s comment sparked Springsteen to begin writing new material and reassemble the E-Street Band at Southern Tracks Studio in Atlanta, GA to work on a new record.
As the new material took shape, Springsteen found thematic threads to form the new album with the undercurrent of 9-11 looming the background. The result gave way to the 2002 release entitled *The Rising*, a record which presents Springsteen’s strongest fusion of sacred and secular themes and symbols to date. On *The Rising*, Springsteen’s career-spanning themes of hope and redemption come together with authority and confidence.

In many respects, the record is sustained by a craft thirty years in development, successful in its ambitious themes thanks to Springsteen evolutionary emergence into a Whitman-like icon. As noted in Michael Azerrad’s 2002 op-ed article in the *New York Times*, just after the album’s release, *The Rising*’s success lies in Springsteen’s credibility:

> Coming just a month or so before the first anniversary of the attacks, the marketing of *The Rising* is a discomfiting union of commerce and emotion. But Bruce Springsteen is one of the few artists who can bring these opposing interests together. He has sold millions of records with songs about the emotional hardships of ordinary people under adverse circumstances, whether personal or historical. The events of Sept. 11 are a powerful mixture of both. But whereas in the past his characters either ran away, gave in or fought back (sometimes violently), there is little of that in *The Rising*. It's about transcendence. Sony, which owns Columbia Records, Mr. Springsteen's label, might be selling records. But Bruce Springsteen is selling hope. (par. 6)

Azerrad’s commentary is a profound snapshot of Springsteen’s ethos circa 2002. In Azerrad’s view, Springsteen is above the capitalistic, mass media response to the record; what matters is what Springsteen is saying in the songs. As Azerrad maintains, *The Rising*
has Springsteen opening a dialogue with his audience for “the ultimate test of his deeply held belief in the redemptive power of rock ‘n’ roll” (Azerrad par. 1). Springsteen himself comments:

> Our band was build well over many years, for difficult times...When people wanted a dialogue, a conversation of events, internal and external, we developed a language that suited those moments, a language I hoped would entertain, inspire, comfort, and reveal...I always believed that it was this conversation, this language, that was at the heart of our resilience with our audience. (qtd. in Graff 298)

It is interesting how Springsteen conceptualizes his writing as a dialogue with his audience, filtered through the contributions of the E-Street Band; it is not just his message, but a communal effect of musical language communicating along with the lyrics.

In his commentary, Springsteen supports the intertwined relationship between music and lyrics constantly at work in the composition. To return to the Figure 1 diagram, meaning is always wrapped up in music as well as lyrics. While I find this a crucial critical awareness, Springsteen uses the music-lyric relationship to full effect, particularly on one of The Rising’s anchors, “Into the Fire.” As one of the 9-11 themed songs, Springsteen employs unique instrumentation, uncharacteristic of the band, to serve the lyric message. An acoustic slide guitar provides a rough Delta blues background for the vocal: “The sky was falling and streaked with blood / I heard you calling me, then you disappeared into dust / Up the stairs, into the fire” (The Rising). The aesthetics of the blues accompaniment acts as an additional emotional subtext for the song meaning. Through its use, the musical allusion inserts another
layer of meaning derived from a blues sensibility, rooted in black American struggle. Scholar
Cornel West describes this blues sensibility as “the most profound interpretation of
tragicomic hope in America,” a form which encourages confrontation of “the harsh realities
of our personal and political lives unflinchingly without innocent sentimentalism or
coldhearted cynicism” (216). By including it, Springsteen situates “Into the Fire” as a blues
narrative of hope, informed by gospel tradition. By the final refrain, “Into the Fire” develops
into hymn-like chorus of voices singing lyrics which might be found in a gospel song:

May your strength give us strength
May your faith give us faith
May your hope give us hope
May your love bring us love (The Rising)

In the music and lyric combination, Springsteen fuses blues tradition and gospel spirit to
speak to the cultural emotions surrounding the 9-11 tragedy. In keeping with his literary
voice, Springsteen does not address the situation directly, in favor of abstract language which
could be equally meaningful outside of the 9-11 contexts.

Additional gospel overtones permeate The Rising to bring sacred images into secular
situations. On the title track, “The Rising,” Springsteen sounds an evangelistic call for hope
through Christ-like allusions to ascension: “Come on up for the rising / Come on up, lay your
hands in mine” (The Rising). The idea of ascension, to “come on up for the rising,” is multi-
layered in its religious connotation for spiritual uplift, a journey to heaven, or Pentecostal
revival. In the 9-11 context, the ascension imagery alludes to firefighters rushing up the stairs
to rescue people trapped in the burning twin towers of the World Trade Center. “The Rising”
is also a basic rise above suffering coming out of the “darkness,” weighed down by suffering (“On my back’s a sixty pound stone / On my shoulder a half mile of line”) (The Rising). By the use of an abstract, sacred theme, Springsteen crafts religious fervor into the modern rock format for a powerful effect. These are themes which seem important and large, and when transmitted through Springsteen’s seasoned literary voice and a first-person rhetorical stance, audiences connect the abstract themes to personal meanings.

This connection to the composition, or collection of compositions in an album, is especially interesting in the case of The Rising. For all that has taken place politically and culturally in America since September 11th, not all listeners resonate with the 9-11 connections. Even as the album came out in 2002, Springsteen was careful not to speak about The Rising as a direct response to 9-11. On 2002-2003 The Rising tour, Springsteen never mentioned 9-11 or explicitly attached the tragedy to his songs. In essence, the 9-11 context in the songs is only placed there by personal meaning and additional mediation outside of the audio recording. In every moment that seems like a 9-11 reference, alternate meanings are easily available as Springsteen’s use of language enjoys a bit of Derridian play. As listeners decipher their own meaning out of “the rising” imagery, Springsteen uses the live performance setting as a site of remediation for the recorded album.

On The Rising tour Springsteen focused each show around the new material, essentially performing most of the record at each show (in alternate sequences). Focusing so much of the setlist on The Rising material was a bold move, especially since most audience members were presumably unfamiliar with the new material. After all, for many Springsteen fans, a concert event is a chance to hear Springsteen perform old favorites like “Thunder
Road” and “Born to Run.” But in the case of The Rising, audiences found Springsteen committed to the new material and a specific thematic focus of communal experience. As communal voices come together in gospel tradition on The Rising songs like “My City of Ruins,” “The Rising,” and “Into the Fire,” Springsteen took measures to put audience members into that communal experience on The Rising tour, as a way to shape meaning for the album’s thematic foci.

Particular tour rituals took shape early in the tour and sustained throughout the two year outing – rituals of call and response, hand raising, and clapping that were introduced by Springsteen and adopted by fans organically. These rituals, started by Springsteen, worked to achieve a sense of community in the concert experience, especially for audience members searching for personal meaning in the new songs and in their own lives. In essence, the remediation act, by the live performance, led to further shifts of meaning in The Rising material.

As an attendee at four shows at different points of the tour (11/16/02, 12/8/02, 8/11/03, and 9/14/03), I observed consistent rituals between fans and Springsteen during The Rising songs. For each performance I attended, “The Rising” was the first or second song in the set, and immediately the excited fans sang along. In the refrain of the song, Springsteen created a scat-like hook to sing along with the melody: “li li li li li li li li” (VH1 Storytellers). At all the shows, the audience sang the “li lis” in unison; and therefore, from the start of the show, a communal ritual brought the audience into a participatory act of authenticity. With the audience having a role in the song, Springsteen’s thematic focus of collective unity on The Rising resulted in collective acts within the songs. At the same time, Springsteen and the
E-Street Band genuinely looked like they were having a good time, in the moment, engaging with the audience. For each performance of “The Rising” they did things which seemed spontaneous like sharing the same mic and exchanging expressive looks, all of which reflect a sense of community on stage as a working band. In effect, on-stage actions set up imitative audience response.

In “Lonesome Day,” the song following “The Rising” in each performance, Springsteen instituted a non-verbal act of hand raising on the “yeah” of the refrain “it’s all right, it’s all right, it’s all right, yeah!” (The Rising). Each time, Springsteen raised his hand on “yeah” and fans did the same. No doubt, many fans had been to multiple performances and were ready for the ritual. Even so, the effect of the hand raising gave a religious, “big-tent” revival spirit to the show, right from the start. These acts were performance techniques Springsteen and fans co-created to give The Rising material immediacy and collectivity in the concert moment – a bond between personal and public emotional meaning for the large, multi-layered themes of the album. Yet, these verbal and non-verbal acts did not seem forced in the concert setting. Instead, they seemed natural even in their repetition through multiple tour stops. Bolter and Grusin might call this artist/fan interplay “transparent immediacy,” an act which makes the viewer forget the presence of a medium but feel in the presence of “the object of representation” (273). In this situation, fans forget that they are just listening to music through speakers or responding to the “known” recorded artifact. To gain authenticity and immediacy in the experience, the verbal and non-verbal acts are the “contact points” (or “beliefs in contact points”) which connect the medium (music) and what it represents (communal hope conveyed in The Rising songs) (Bolter and Grusin 30).
What is striking is Springsteen’s use of “transparent immediacy” in moments that seem improvisational, but are somewhat rehearsed. Call-and-response acts are a good example. In “Mary’s Place,” another song played every night of the tour, Springsteen summoned evangelistic call-and-response from the audience to sing back “are you ready?” when he asked at the song opening. This was done in every performance, but in the moment, it seemed unplanned through the spiritual/musical tradition of call-and-response – the “belief in contact points” spurred by the performer speaking directly to the audience (Bolter and Grusin 30). After a partially scripted, partially tongue-in-cheek, revival style, spoken interlude, Springsteen offered a second call-and-response act in “Mary’s Place,” getting the audience to sing “turn it up” repeatedly. This was the illusionary, collective unity of big-tent revival and house party, the sacred and the secular, fused without separation in the rock concert setting.

These fusions were not only reflected in performance, but also the composition of “Mary’s Place” on The Rising record. Musically, the composition takes on a gospel flavor through call-and-response and multi-voiced choral refrains, mixed with classic rhythm and blues soul, the improvisation of jazz (especially in Clarence Clemon’s sax solo), and Elvis Presley style rock theatrics. The lyrics read:

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 my way
Your favorite records on the turntable / I drop the needle and pray
(Turn it up) Band’s countin’ out midnight (Turn it up)
Floor’s rumblin’ loud (Turn it up) / Singer’s callin’ up daylight

(Turn it up) Waitin’ for that shout from the crowd (The Rising)

As the song continues, repetition emphasizes the gospel elements while referencing romantic feelings and celebratory calls to turn up the music and meet at Mary’s Place for an all-night party. Simultaneously, there are allusions to the biblical seven days, seven candles, evangelic calls to “turn it up” and prayer over the turntable to spiritualize sexuality, rock music, and loud parties. This sacred and secular fusion becomes a spiritualization of the secular commonplace exemplified on the audio recording and in Springsteen’s live performance as he takes on the character of the gospel preacher, soul singer, and Elvis rock idol to pull together musical and rhetorical traditions. Through these acts on The Rising tour, during the performance of “Mary’s Place,” Springsteen, in effect, remediated the sacred and secular fusions of The Rising into physical manifestation and collective musical experience in the live performance. Through illusions of authenticity, and the use of rituals rooted in known traditions, Springsteen’s live show pulled The Rising songs out of the 9-11 historical/cultural context and into an immediate experiential context akin to a religious revival.

A similar remediation act occurs with the 2003 DVD release from The Rising tour, Live in Barcelona. The concert film, shot in Barcelona, Spain, illustrates the thematic setlist indicative of the tour, the rituals among fans (especially Barcelonans), and meaning for The Rising songs far removed from American post-9-11 sentiments. The DVD itself, therefore, remedies The Rising as it reshapes the listening context for the enthusiastic Barcelona audience and American viewing audience. A look at the DVD also demonstrates the recurring rituals Springsteen employed, regardless of the audience in attendance.
Consequently, one can see Springsteen consciously crafting the live performance experience for specific ends through particular rhetorical choices while leaving room for improvisational acts, both of which create authenticity for fans on every tour stop.

**Conclusion**

To consider these remediation acts is to acknowledge the dynamic relationships between media which shape and alter meaning for compositions, the artists who perform them, and the audiences that listen. In the live remediation, audience members observe the skills of a seasoned performer in Springsteen, and these skills enact crucial authenticities for the visual and aural experience. Live performance in Springsteen’s case is just as important, if not more important, than the records for the creation of song meaning. But the live performance remediation, and the performance theories that guide them, are rich critical spaces to explore in the case of any artist. As media studies and cultural studies come together in the field of English, a blend of text and context can open up critical analysis in ways unexplored by the academic community.

My efforts to discuss Bruce Springsteen’s literary voice and performance technique are to explore the kind of critical analysis that might provide rich scholarship in the field of English. As shown, this critical work is multi-layered – rich in its possibilities and frustrating in its complexities. Yet, these are challenges which can invigorate English studies scholars as multi-modal texts enter the discipline. With such rich connections between lyrics, music, visual media and cultural studies, popular music could very well find a critical space to inhabit, to the delight of scholar-fans and fan-scholars “dancing about architecture” while writing about music.
Works Cited


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