

Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series

ROUTLEDGE

Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream



An Ashgate Book

Edited by

**Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zolten
and Mark Bernhard**

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN,
CULTURAL STUDIES, AND THE
RUNAWAY AMERICAN DREAM

For Barb Brunhuber

Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream

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General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century has created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook has replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality has been challenged, and emphasis has shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is now a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* presents some of the best research in the field. Authors are concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series focuses on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

Professor Derek B. Scott
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Foreword

Howard Kramer

Since Elvis Presley died over thirty years ago, the examinations of his art, career, and musical legacy have undergone several major shifts. Beginning with the shock of his death there was myopic nostalgia, reflection on the state of American popular culture and a callous disregard for Presley's human shortcomings, as if he weren't permitted any. In the following decade or so, Presley's life was seemingly a footnote to his posthumous popularity as exhibited in displays of adoration from his committed fan base and a crass commercialization of his name and image. Eventually, his recorded works, Presley's true measure, were given a proper treatment by his record company in the form of decade-themed boxed CD sets. The Sun sessions, a seismic shift in American music, were upgraded and repackaged twice. A definitive biography by Peter Guralnick set the story straight in an informative and unsensationalistic manner. Even his own company, Elvis Presley Enterprises, seemed to get a handle on who Elvis was and how to treat the legacy it so closely safeguarded. Elvis was durable enough to withstand all forms of licensing and tell-alls. Elvis even survived, as it were, the sale of EPE. I'm not saying the final word on Elvis Presley has been written or that there will be an end to tasteless exploitation, but time has allowed Presley to remain in focus and be seen with much greater objectivity than ever before.

When you're dealing with the subject of Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Presley is a good place to start. Springsteen might not exist as we know him if not for Presley. Springsteen was just shy of his seventh birthday when he saw Presley's first appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, an admitted watershed moment for the young kid from New Jersey. Springsteen's embrace of rock and roll as defining purpose in life was all-encompassing. The pure energy of the music held hands with the myths that rock and roll conjured about itself and the people who made the music. Springsteen keenly used mythology and imagery for his own ongoing metamorphoses. Hell, you could sing half of Springsteen's catalog in an Elvis-styled voice and you'd swear that he wrote the songs with Elvis in mind. Try it. It's a fun game to play at parties. (Skip "Fire" and try "Atlantic City" or "Tougher than the Rest.")

There's a significant difference in the two artists as it relates to this particular type of publication. You see, Elvis had the luxury of having never heard, or even possibly encountered, an academic level of scrutiny. His death aside, he never sat for an interview and revealed the depth of his influences, the thrall that devotional music held on his life, what it was like to be dirt-poor or why he bought so many

Cadillacs. Springsteen, on the other hand, is alive and well. He has cloaked himself, and then revealed himself, at various times throughout his life. Numerous in-depth interviews show Springsteen discussing virtually all facets of his life, art, philosophy, geography—just about everything but the names of his pets. Then there's his life as performing artist, meticulously documented through the miracle of surreptitious recording. Every song intro, stage rap, tall tale, and performer's yarn from more than three decades of concerts are now distributed at lightning speed on the Internet. Combine that with a superior body of work and a voracious fan base, which seems to possess a disproportionate number of graduate degrees as compared to the general population, and, *voilà*, you get academic examination and theorizing. Springsteen, certainly, can pay no mind, and that's likely his reaction. Nonetheless, to quote one of his titles, it's the price you pay.

What is it that has carried Springsteen from Jersey Shore guitar hotshot and Class of '73/New Dylan to elder statesman of American popular song? Thinking back to his debut-era contemporaries—John Prine, Loudon Wainwright III and Steve Goodman—all were talented, if not gifted, song-crafters. All established an audience and, except for the late Mr Goodman, found the long arc of their careers to include renaissance and late-game triumphs. Springsteen took a significantly different path than his then-contemporaries. Sure, he's a singer-songwriter, but he was, and is, a rock and roll performer. Folk-rock confessional may have informed Springsteen, but it was a drop in the stream of influences that were constantly manifest and revealed—rock and roll as salvation, a generational voice, a declaration of independence, a bridge to the larger world, a great beat you could dance to, and the joy of life itself.

Additionally there was no small amount of ambition involved. The drive to achieve a real career in music, or, more to the point, the lack thereof, has left many a talented artists stuck at a sophomore record. As Springsteen's journey unfolded, the arithmetic of his singleness of purpose and enormous talent became clear. Despite some rocky times, he was going to be an artist of merit and a massive success, the rarest of combinations.

So the kid from Freehold hits big. What do you make of it? Part and parcel of being an artist is the reaction and impact that one's art has on the listener. It's the variable that is often the most difficult thing for an artist to reconcile and face. And sometimes they don't. Once the record is out there, and once it's internalized by the listener, there's an irrevocable transfer of ownership. In that process new meanings are imagined. Listeners project onto the song, the artist, the characters within the song, and even the dynamic of the lead break what they feel within and what it means in the context of their own lives and cultural reference points. The rabid Springsteen fans from Manasquan and Trondheim may sing the same song at the top of their respective lungs, but where is the common ground? Taking it a step further, when faced with music that challenges and moves you, what about the deeper meaning? Where is the Promised Land? What is a last-chance power drive?

As I read the chapters presented here, I felt a strange range of reactions. Part of it is based in my own deeply rooted cynicism. Over the course of my career,

I've seen the man and woman behind the curtain many times. Philosophically, I don't believe in placing artists on too high a pedestal. The fall is far no matter what. Trust the art, not the artist. And who am I to say what they mean in a song? There really isn't a high degree of hero worship displayed here, but there is a massive amount of admiration and respect. I vacillated between awe at the level of intellectual discourse, second-guessing the authors' theorems, and wondering if I missed something the first 500 times I listened to *Darkness on the Edge of Town* or *Tunnel of Love*.

It is an amazing testimony to the enduring nature of an artist's work when so many in the audience can feel and retain so much of what is given. Looking back at Presley and moving forward to Bob Dylan, another Springsteen touchstone, the case is made that rock and roll was elevated. The music that the music industry initially didn't care about was more than mere commerce. Dylan's command of language and poetic insight into the human condition came along at a point in history when his artistry was needed most. He fulfilled his promise and loomed huge over the landscape of his contemporaries. Springsteen did much the same and, contained within this collection, is sure proof.

The key elements presented here revolve around simple tenets: identity, humanity, responsibility, and faith. The identity of Springsteen as an artist, his methods of interpretation, how he contextualizes his characters and the lives they live in relation to the experiences of the world at large are all explored. Humanity is measured by the actions of the characters, what occurs to a person or character when faced with a crucial choice, how Springsteen presents the role of women, the value of individual lives and lives of his characters as we see them in ourselves. Anybody who has seen a Springsteen show since 1984 knows that responsibility is a mantra to him—responsibility to our communities, families, friends, strangers, and the political process to make sure voices are heard and holding responsible those who hold power. The concept of faith takes on an extraordinary range of examination, not the least of which is seen through the lens of Catholicism. As someone whose religious orientation comes from another part of the spectrum, I was amazed to see the resonance and fascination that religious imagery in Springsteen's songs has for some of the writers.

The bond of any relationship is based in trust. Great art speaks truth. Great art is also honest. There lies the crux of the relationship between artist and audience. Honesty is the single currency exchanged. That honesty is the underpinning of every essay and paper contained in this book. These writers are believers, but not true believers. They know the authenticity of Springsteen's work is deeply rooted. And it is that authenticity that permits them the platform to create their own honest dialogue about his art.

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

“Dream Baby Dream”: Bruce Springsteen’s American Serenade

Kenneth Womack and Jerry Zolten

There was a time when rock and roll was new, when the genre was not taken seriously in any quarter—not by parents, not by music critics, and certainly not by scholars. In a 1959 period piece, highly regarded jazz critic and historian Leonard Feather dismissed rock and roll as “coarse-grained” and “vulgar”—a genre that “said so much, so loudly, to so little artistic effect” and that, in the end, was a “passing fad” with “very few of the attributes of a valid art form” (66-67). Yet within a few years the winds would shift. A case in point is critic Robert Shelton’s thoughtful 1961 *New York Times* review of a Bob Dylan performance that helped propel Dylan’s career and signaled that pop music fare could and should be taken seriously.

By the mid-1960s magazines such as *Rolling Stone* and *Creem* offered critical reviews and revolutionary writing that kept pace with the velocity of expanding rock and roll. The best reporters and critics wrote with the same panache and anarchy that characterized the musicians about whom they wrote. Careers were born, some of the more outstanding being those of Ralph Gleason, Greil Marcus, Lester Bangs, Paul Williams, Nick Tosches, Robert Christgau, Dave Marsh, and Jon Landau. The latter two would have direct ties to Bruce Springsteen’s career. Marsh emerged as Springsteen’s principal chronicler, his most recent title being *Bruce Springsteen: Two Hearts* (2004). Landau, on the other hand, shifted from observer to participant, becoming Springsteen’s manager, a position that he still holds.

Contemporarily, writing both critically and with a classroom bent about the broad spectrum of rock and roll has become convention as opposed to exception. Given rock and roll’s more than sixty-year history, analytical retrospection is a natural inclination, and who could be more legitimate as a subject of inquiry than Bruce Springsteen, the consummate rock and roller famously characterized by Robert Christgau as “the first rock star in history ever to be propelled into prominence by print information.” In that spirit, this volume offers a multi-dimensional inquiry into the arc of Springsteen’s career, played out as much on page as on stage.

Indeed, there is little question about the incredible power of Springsteen’s work as a particularly transformative art, as a lyrical and musical fusion that never shies away from sifting through the rubble of human conflict. As *Rolling Stone*

magazine's Parke Puterbaugh observes, Springsteen "is a peerless songwriter and consummate artist whose every painstakingly crafted album serves as an impassioned and literate pulse taking of a generation's fortunes. He is a self-described prisoner of the music he loves, for whom every show is played as if it might be his last." In recent decades, Puterbaugh adds, "Springsteen's music developed a conscience that didn't ignore the darkening of the runaway American Dream as the country greedily blundered its way through the 1980s" and into the sociocultural detritus of a new century paralyzed by isolation and uncertainty.

This anthology provides readers with the first book-length critical study devoted to Springsteen's multifaceted work. In an effort to afford readers with a broad overview of his contributions to American culture, we have assembled a collection of essays that reflects the significant critical interest in understanding Springsteen's resounding impact on the ways in which we think and feel about politics, Americana, social justice, narrative, multiculturalism, and citizenship. Divided into four descriptive sections, *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream* traces the sociocultural impact of Springsteen's work in terms of its influential commentary about the American Dream. In Springsteen's textual world, the American Dream shares crucial interstices with religion, gender, class, and politics. In Part I, "'Land of Hope and Dreams': Springsteen's Working-Class Heroes and the Search for American Identity," David N. Gellman, Lauren Boehm, Jefferson Cowie, Donna M. Dolphin, and Elizabeth M. Seymour trace Springsteen's illustration of working-class life in terms of the songwriter's enduring search for American identity amidst a postmodern world in which local value systems, individualism, and patriotism have lost their sway. Drawing upon theories of nostalgia and social history, the essays in this section pit Springsteen's brash populism against the songwriter's own misgivings about the capacity of the American Dream to make a genuine difference amongst a nation drowning in the waters of its own materialism and greed.

Part II, "'There's a Sadness Hidden in that Pretty Face': Springsteen and Gender Identity," features chapters by Liza Zitelli, Samuele F.S. Pardini, and Heather Stur that investigate the ways in which Springsteen's female characters contend with a masculinized society that traffics in highly complex value systems wrought by religious hegemony and war. In Part IV, "'Lost in the Flood': Springsteen and Religion," Spencer L. Allen, Matthew Orel, and Scott Wagar examine Springsteen's spiritual explorations, especially in terms of his interest in revivifying Biblical stories and reflecting upon the mysteries of faith. In the collection's final section, "'It's Hard to Be a Saint in the City': Springsteen, Ethics, and Social Justice," Edward U. Murphy, Jason P. Stonerook, Steven Fein, and John Massaro discuss Springsteen's postulation of a sharply liberal, progressive politics both in his music and his public life on the global stage. They devote particular attention to Springsteen's ethical imperatives for developing senses of community and compassion in a political arena bifurcated by ideologies of blame and retribution.

By assembling a host of essays that engage in interdisciplinary commentary regarding one of Western culture's most enduring artistic and socially radicalizing phenomena, *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream* offers a cohesive, intellectual, and often entertaining introduction to the many ways in which Springsteen continues to impact on our lives by challenging our minds through his lyrics and music. Yet our critical enterprise in relation to Springsteen's career is also about his enduring attempt to ferret out the beauty of our existence even as we strive for the achievement of a greater interhuman good. As Springsteen recently observed during an October 2007 interview with Joe Levy, "It comes down to trying to make people happy, feel less lonely, but also being a conduit for a dialogue about the events of the day, the issues that impact people's lives, personal and social and political and religious. That's how I always saw the job of our band. That was my service. At this point, I'm in the middle of a very long conversation with my audience."

In many ways, this anthology is about bringing to life the very conversation that Springsteen describes. Drawing on the insights of literary theory, psychology, musicology, and social history, our contributors pit Springsteen's brash populism against the songwriter's own misgivings about the capacity of the American Dream to make a genuine difference amongst a nation drowning in the waters of its own materialism and greed. Yet they also demonstrate Springsteen's abiding efforts to posit presence over absence at nearly every juncture, and to elevate ideas of peace and hope in a world that is too often lost in the murky seas of its own self-delusion.

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PART I

“Land of Hope and Dreams”: Springsteen’s Working-Class Heroes and the Search for American Identity

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Chapter 1

“Darkness on the Edge of Town”: Springsteen, Richard Ford, and the American Dream

David N. Gellman

Introduction

A man makes his way northward on the New Jersey turnpike in his car; it is late at night and the lights of passing traffic blur into a tapestry of hypnotic motion: “Up ahead of me on the turnpike, blue lights flash far and near as I clear the toll plaza and start toward Cataret and the flaming refinery fields and cooling vats of Elizabeth” (Ford, *Independence Day* 175); the man contemplates relationships, complicated and unfulfilled. Later, on slightly less crowded roads, he finds himself checking into a hotel where a murder has just occurred. Another man, driving a stolen car, makes his way with his daughter and his girlfriend from Montana to Florida. Still another man, out of work, the day before the Fourth of July, contemplates why his wife, a waitress at a bar, has chosen to share his dead-end life; later, the couple wave sparklers in the backyard and dance in the rain. A boy, sixteen, discovers that a gulf between his own life and that of his parents has grown irreparably large—the boy learning that he can no longer count on or define himself according to his own father’s pain. It is the end of childhood, time to think about leaving home, to cast the past aside, though the storyteller is clearly marked by the memory of that moment when independence came not as choice but as a literal and a psychological necessity.

This kaleidoscope of themes, plots, and images are familiar parts of the Springsteen repertoire. Yet, they are drawn not from Springsteen’s work, but instead from a writer who is as accomplished in his field as Springsteen is in popular music. Richard Ford has published eight books of fiction. The most celebrated of these, *Independence Day*, received both the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he has garnered teaching appointments at some of the nation’s most prestigious universities. Ford, the traveling salesman’s son from Jackson, Mississippi, much like the bus driver’s son from Freehold, New Jersey, has lived out an artist’s version of the American dream (Walker, *Richard Ford* xi-xiii; Glynda Duncan 3).

Ford, like Springsteen, has created rich fictional worlds, in a variety of idioms, some spare and unsparing, some richly populated with personality and images

(Walker, *Ford* 118). In both men's work the idiosyncrasies of human frailty and big dreams of mobility are played out across a variety of American landscapes. Springsteen and Ford, each in his own way, subvert and render ironic as much as they affirm the American dream of fame, fortune, and independence, offering a wide array of characters whose lives are lived in the shadow of that dream.

An exploration of what these artists share and what they do not share in terms of imagery, sensibility, and character enhances our understanding of their work, showing how Springsteen is in dialogue with other important contemporary artists working in non-musical genres. The "darkness" that threatens to keep the American Dream permanently veiled from its aspirants has vexed Springsteen's characters almost from the beginning in ways that seem to affirm, in his famous words from "No Surrender," that you can learn "more from a three-minute record than [you] ever learned in school." Ford, with the additional leeway afforded a novelist, explores the possibilities for rendering that darkness through a less time-constrained art form which allows him to expand the imagery and storylines of wanderers and dreamers in the promised land.

Taken together, their work constitutes an ongoing cultural conversation about generational conflict, class, law, and the symbols of American nationhood, in which Springsteen has become a major participant; so doing helps to highlight what is distinctive about Springsteen's voice in a shared conversation. This essay will focus in particular on Springsteen's and Ford's use of Western landscapes and Independence Day metaphors. Each artist frequently accesses these landscapes and metaphors through narratives of father-son conflict.¹ Such a comparison rescues Springsteen from the hagiography that critic A.O. Scott has noted marks much of even the most serious writing about him. Thus, we can more readily appreciate how Springsteen's is a collaborative project in illuminating, through flashes of artistry, the darkness that forms the backdrop for even the most celebratory American imagery. Rather than emphasize Springsteen's role as the torch-bearer for an "American Tradition" (Cullen; Garman, *A Race of Singers*), this approach highlights the imaginative projects Springsteen shares with one of his most accomplished literary contemporaries.²

Treating Springsteen as a literary artist is quite appropriate, even though such a move entails a certain amount of historical irony. In a classic 1970s stage

¹ These themes hardly exhaust the ways in which these two artists can be brought into a lively dialogue. For example, the prominent Catholic cultural critic Andrew Greeley has made a powerful case for the Catholic, and specifically Easter, symbolism of Springsteen's *Tunnel of Love* album, while Ford commentators have noted that his first Frank Bascombe/New Jersey novel, *The Sportswriter*, which takes place over an Easter weekend, evokes images of death and rebirth (Greeley 155-65; Cullen 157-89; Bonetti 30-31; Guagliardo, "Marginal" 16-17; Caldwell 47). An entirely separate essay might be devoted to comparing the ethnic and racial population of the two men's creative landscapes.

² Bob Crane suggests Barbara Kingsolver, Tony Hillerman, and Jane Smiley as Springsteen's contemporary literary peers (339).

monologue delivered in the midst of the song "Growin' Up," Bruce Springsteen spoke humorously of his parents' career aspirations for their son—his father suggested lawyer, his mother author—but Bruce, launching back into the song commented "tonight, you'll both just have to settle for rock and roll" (*Live* disc 1, track 7). A quarter of a century later, the notion of Springsteen as lawyer still seems humorously far-fetched, but Springsteen-as-author has gained tremendous currency. Looking at the body of his work, critics and admirers have compared or linked him to many non-guitar-slinging artists, from poets Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams to fiction-writers John Steinbeck, Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, and Walker Percy (Garman, *A Race of Singers*; Coles 12-19, 22-28; Cullen 48-49; Sheehy; Crane 339). Springsteen's own comments encourage this line of inquiry, as when he directs such interviewers as Will Percy and Nicholas Dawidoff to the sources of his own literary inspirations and the way in which he constructs stories. Moreover, in the introductory essays to his published anthology, *Songs*, Springsteen discusses how he intentionally and self-consciously sought to develop characters (25, 46, 68, 100, 190-91, 274; see also Frith 135). Springsteen placed these characters in a variety of American landscapes to explore intensely personal themes that also speak to the broader American and human condition of their times (Marsh, *Glory Days* 93-94). Bruce Springsteen is many things—performer, political activist, celebrity—and author.

Springsteen's influence on other authors—including Ford—as well as filmmakers, is a matter of record (Alterman, *It Ain't No Sin to Be Glad You're Alive* 176-77), but should be treated as more than just so many feathers in the Boss's cap. Ford has made no secret of his interest in Springsteen. In 1985 he published a thoughtful, largely laudatory appraisal of Bruce during the height of the Boss's *Born in the USA*-era popularity. More to the point, Ford himself has indicated that the title and the rudiments of the plot of his masterpiece, *Independence Day*, derive from the Springsteen song of the same name. As Ford told Elinor Ann Walker in 1997, Springsteen's "great song, 'Independence Day,' this great anthem to leaving home, was probably the first thing that moved me along the path to writing a novel called *Independence Day*. The title for my book comes as much from his song as all the other sources that name could come from." (Walker, "Interview" 131-32 and Ford 22, 133, 203).

The question of influence, however, is at best only a departure point. Springsteen may at certain moments have inspired Ford, but he bears a different relationship to Ford's prose than to Bobbie Ann Mason's evocative and, from a distance of twenty years, eerily prescient *In Country*. In Mason's 1985 novel, Springsteen and the album *Born in the USA* become virtual characters as the teenage protagonist Samantha explores the echoes of Vietnam, a foreign adventure with daunting domestic consequences. This essay is not about Springsteen as character, but rather about the character of a certain broad swathe of Springsteen's work, and is thus first and foremost about dialogue. Richard Ford's America and Bruce Springsteen's America occupy overlapping actual and interpretive spaces. Both artists investigate the implications for the collective and individual psyche

of inhabiting America in the late twentieth century (Guagliardo, "Introduction" xiii and "Marginal" 5, 22). Intentionally or coincidentally, they are in dialogue by virtue of working the same landscape so thoughtfully and reconfiguring the same historical allusions. Psychiatrist-author Robert Coles, scholar Daniel Cavicchi, and Springsteen himself all have expressed the importance of dialogue and communication not only amongst Springsteen fans, but also between performer and audience (see esp. Cavicchi 88-95). In this essay, the dialogue is between authors and their culture, mediated not by fans, but fictional characters. Often those characters travel the open roads of America, hoping to construct new lives or reconstruct old ones—the past, personal and collective alternately informing or obstructing them from reaching their own imperfectly imagined destinations.

Land of Hope and Dreams or Darkness on the Edge of Town?

Ford, a native southerner, and Jersey's Springsteen have both turned to the American West in the quest for evocative landscapes that expand the scope of their work well beyond the narrowly biographical or the narrow confines of regionalism (Walker, *Ford* 13, 64-68; Walker, "Interview" 133-34; Hobson). Much of Ford's best work is set in Montana. He presents Montana as a lonely, quiet landscape where violence, theft, and betrayal are not cowboy tales, but rather the combined product of calculation, impulse, and a psychological distance between would-be intimates that is mirrored in the distances between sparsely populated towns on the vast American plains (Walker, *Ford* 122). The stories collected in Ford's *Rock Springs* explore the interior and exterior spaces of Western characters often hovering uncomfortably on the edges of towns like Rock Springs and Great Falls (Folks 143, 154). The narrators grapple with crimes, sometimes against property, sometimes against bodies, and sometimes against hearts and souls. The characters reflect with some detachment on their own lives, yet not without the ability to elicit reader empathy.

Earl, the narrator of Ford's title story, shares many traits with Springsteen characters in such songs as "Stolen Car," "Used Cars," and, to a lesser degree, "Reason to Believe." Earl has served time in jail for a petty theft, and has also written some bad checks. Loading his girlfriend Edna and young daughter Cheryl in a Mercedes, stolen from the parking lot of a Whitefish, Montana doctor, he makes his way to the outskirts of Rock Springs. He plans to dump the car, which turns out to have engine trouble, at the edge of town and lift another ride. Explaining his thinking in taking the Mercedes, Earl recounts, "I stole it because I thought it would be comfortable over a long haul, because I thought it got good mileage, which it didn't, and because I'd never had a good car in my life ..." (2). Rock Springs, the town on the edges of which the story takes place, contains a large corporate gold mining plant, bordered by a vast mobile home park for the laborers, a makeshift neighborhood that may or may not be rife with prostitution. Neither the riches of the mine nor the seedy vice draws in Earl. Instead, he takes

Edna and Cheryl to what he deems to be a respectable Ramada Inn, so they can get food and rest while he plans his next theft. Edna announces her desire to abandon the journey, and the story closes with Earl prowling the parking lot. He asks:

And I wondered, because it seemed funny, what would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the windows of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn? Would you think he was trying to get his head cleared? ... Would you think his girlfriend was leaving him? Would you think he had a daughter? Would you think he was anybody like you? (27)

Like the unnamed first-person narrator of Springsteen's "Used Cars," Earl is fully conscious of his class position as well as his personal failings. The gold, the Mercedes, let alone a sense of personal security, well-being, and self-esteem, all belong to anonymous others, not to Earl or, in the Springsteen song, the grown man remembering his childhood. The Mercedes is a means to an end—he really does want to drive to Florida—but it also represents an alternative identity and, as such, a measure of alienation as well; even having ditched the Mercedes, which turns out to be just another bad used car, Earl registers at the Ramada as an ophthalmologist, a "mister" even less likely to be riding around in a used car than the "mister" apostrophized in "Used Cars" (Leder, "Men with Women" 116; Garman, *A Race of Singers* 210).

The parallels between "Rock Springs" and Springsteen's "Stolen Car" are even more evocative. Like "Rock Springs," "Stolen Car" is narrated by a man whose romantic life is in tatters; the "little girl" with whom he "settled down / In a little house out on the edge of town" has repudiated their love. The "stolen car" in which each man drives represents a profound sense of fugitive dis-ease, a literal and figurative false front. Yet, ironically, Ford's car thief and Springsteen's car thief fear the very thing that makes it possible to get away with the crime—invisibility. Springsteen's thief doesn't fear arrest, but rather "That in this darkness I will disappear" (Cullen 171-72), a sharpening of the fear presented in "Fade Away," the song which precedes "Stolen Car" on *The River* album. Ford's character shares the same existential dread (Walker, *Ford* 132), wondering, ultimately, not so much whether he will get caught, but whether his fellow human beings could see his humanity at all. Ford's ending is even more ambiguous than those of Springsteen's "Stolen Car" and "Reason to Believe." As in the latter song, the desperate situation "seemed funny," yet it is hard to tell which would be worse for Earl—being perceived as wholly different (a car thief) from "you" or being essentially like "you," someone who has to soldier on in the midst of personal crisis, in this case for the sake of his child.

Ford's story "Sweethearts" creates a more optimistic effect while working with a similar mix of legal crimes and crimes of the heart as Springsteen's work. A narrator named Russ describes the day he helps his girlfriend Arlene drive her ex-husband Bobby to the sheriff's office, so that Bobby can commence a long jail sentence. Bobby, like Earl in "Rock Springs," had written bad checks—in other