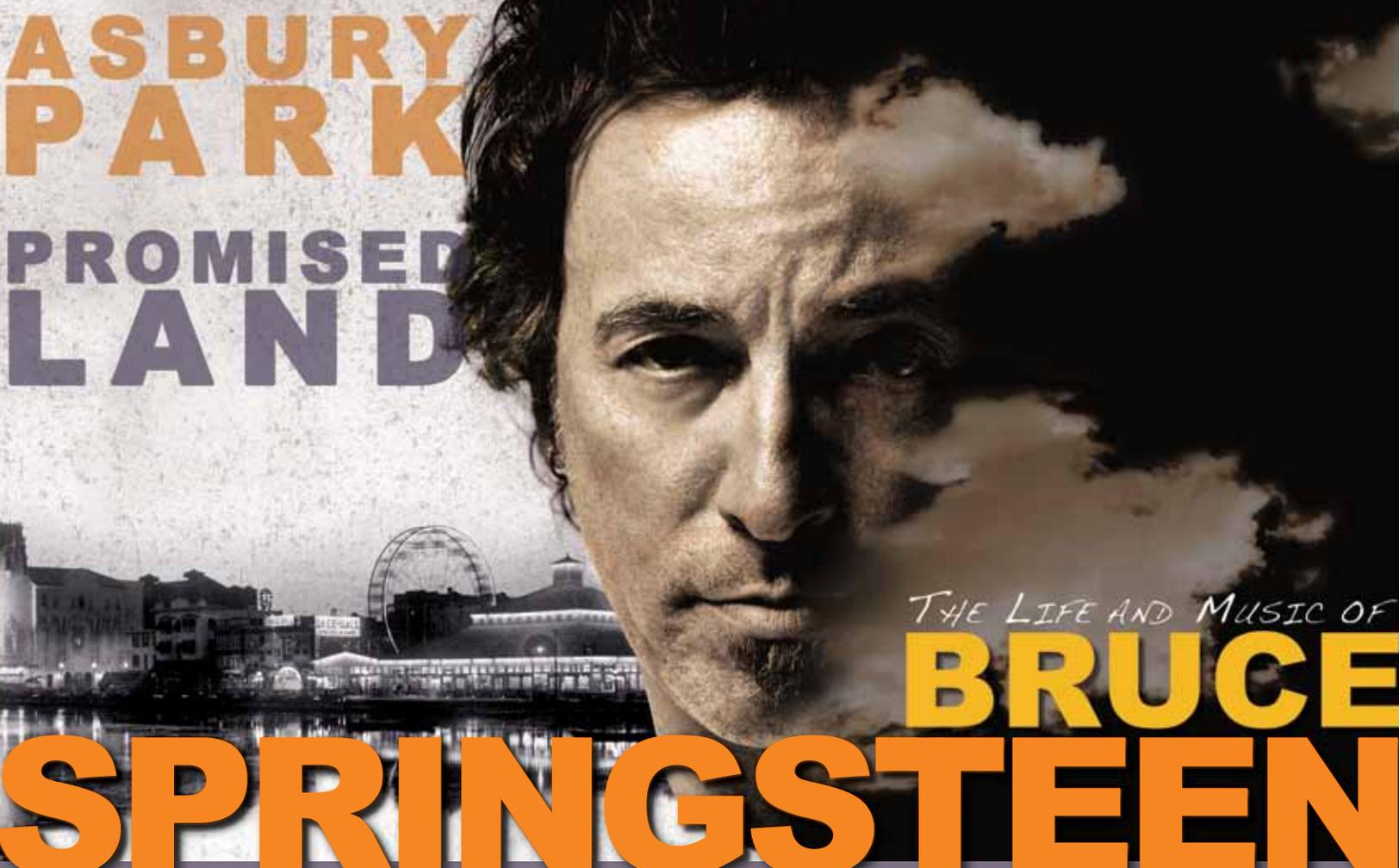


ASBURY
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THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF
BRUCE

SPRINGSTEEN

BORN IN THE U.S.A.: MUSIC AS POLITICAL PROTEST

OVERVIEW

Bruce Springsteen, in the tradition of American songwriters, uses music to express political views. Song lyrics—including (or especially) those that criticize government—are a form of expression protected by the First Amendment. Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” is a poetic work set to music. Many regard the song—and particularly its chorus—as a patriotic anthem. A closer look at the lyrics in its verses, however, reveals something far more complex than simple patriotism. In this lesson, students will analyze the song’s lyrics for a variety of rhetorical devices to discover how the song is both a praise and indictment of America.

RELATED ACTIVITIES

- **Sing for Your Rights!**
Learn about how the Constitution and Bill of Rights protect the rights of musicians.
- **Music and Historical Narrative**
Explore how music has shaped Americans’ understanding of their history.
- **Debate It!**
Role play two First Amendment scenarios and decide where you stand!



Developed in partnership with the Bill of Rights Institute

TEACHER NOTES

LEARNING GOALS

Students will understand:

- Songs can be understood politically as well as personally.
- Songs can be manifestations of individual and political identity.
- Song lyrics—including (or especially) those that criticize government—are a form of expression protected by the First Amendment.

EXTENSIONS

- A. Springsteen sings about the Vietnam War and the experience of returning veterans in “Born in the U.S.A.” In what ways does the song tell a personal story? In what ways does it tell a political one? Could the war itself be a metaphor for something else? Have students prepare an oral report or slideshow presentation on the various ways the song can be understood.
- B. Have students read the essay in Music as Historical Narrative, select one of the anti-war protest songs, and apply the same analysis of rhetorical devices.

THE VIETNAM WAR

The Vietnam War was one of the most controversial political issues of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy continued the Truman Doctrine of assisting countries threatened by Communism by sending supplies and military advisors to South Vietnam in its fight against Communist North Vietnam. U.S. troops were in combat less than a year later, even though there had been no declaration of war from Congress.

THE WAR BEGINS

President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and President Lyndon Johnson took over the management of the war in Vietnam. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, affirming that the U.S. was “prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force” to assist South Vietnam. Although there was no declaration of war, Johnson understood the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as empowering him to escalate the fighting. The war became increasingly unpopular at home. By 1965, the United States had large numbers of troops in Vietnam and many Americans had begun to question the wisdom of the war. Critics argued that there was no clear objective, that the United States did not seem to be winning, and that casualties were mounting. Under a barrage of criticism, President Johnson announced that he would not run for a second term.

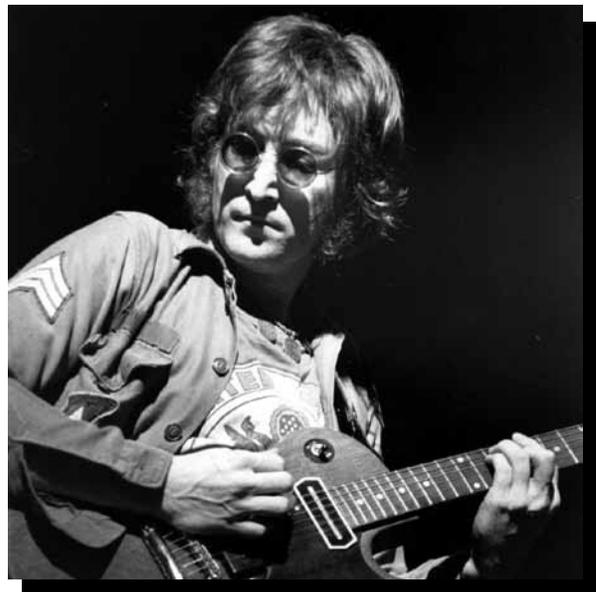
But the country was divided. Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern, who called for an immediate withdrawal of

troops from Vietnam, lost 49 of 50 states to Republican Richard Nixon. In that same election, voters returned a Democratic majority to Congress. After President Nixon was inaugurated in 1969, the news broke of the My Lai massacre (where U.S. troops killed unarmed civilians and children). Distrust of government intensified when the Pentagon Papers were published in 1971, revealing the government had misled the people about the Vietnam War. By 1973, all American troops had left Vietnam. Fifty-eight thousand Americans had died and tens of thousands more were wounded.

AFTER THE WAR

Although the war had ended, veterans of the conflict continued to struggle. Many faced hostility from their fellow Americans who believed the war had been unjust. In 1972, the Department of Labor reported that more than 300,000 Vietnam veterans were unable to find work and cited hostility towards

John Lennon was famous for his Vietnam War protest anthem “Give Peace a Chance.”

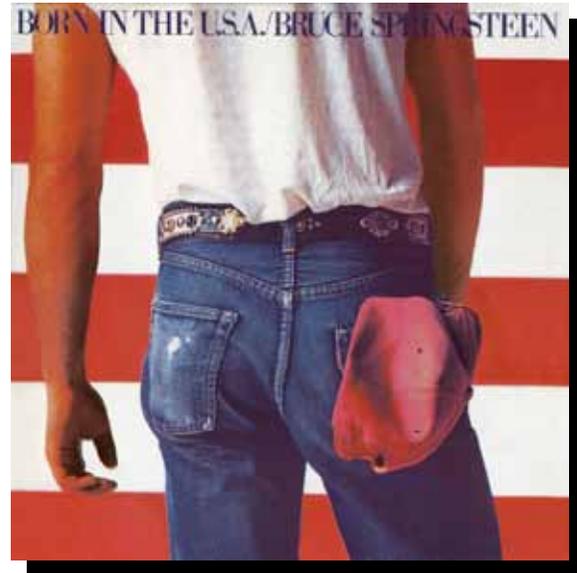


veterans as one of the causes. Veterans were unemployed at a higher rate than non-veterans, and they were unemployed for longer periods of time. “The serious plight of returning veterans who cannot find decent jobs,” reported the head of the National Advisory Council on Vocational Education in 1972, “and who consequently feel like rejects in the society which sent them to war in the first place, should severely strain our national conscience.”

“BORN IN THE U.S.A.”

Bruce Springsteen wrote “Born in the U.S.A.” in 1981, and it was released on the album of the same name in 1985. Written eight years after the war ended, the song reveals the emotional scars of Vietnam. Using a first-person narrative, the song takes on meaning both personally and politically: it shares the experience of a man who fought in the war

and returned. At the same time, it forces listeners to confront the question of whether the nation failed in its responsibilities towards those who serve in the military.



COMPREHENSION AND CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. When was the Vietnam War?
2. When did Springsteen write “Born in the U.S.A.”?
3. Is this time difference between the end of the Vietnam War and the release of “Born in the U.S.A.” significant? Why? Does it affect the way you understand the song?

DEFINING KEY TERMS

IRONY

The term irony can have many meanings. For example, irony may be “dramatic,” “situational,” or “literary.” In a literary or poetic work such as songwriting, words are ironic when their actual meaning is the opposite of their literal meaning. *For example: “Oh great, what a beautiful day!” to express disappointment over rainy, dreary weather.* Does Springsteen use irony in “Born in the U.S.A.”? How?

METAPHOR

A metaphor is a figure of speech where one thing is used as a symbol of something else. *For example: “To err is human; to forgive, divine” or, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”* Are there metaphors in “Born in the U.S.A.”? What are they?

ANTITHESIS

The contrasting of two ideas by placing them close together (juxtaposing them). *For example: “The deep green lawn was flecked with shadows, and the autumn trees blazes in hues of orange, crimson, and yellow.”* How does Springsteen use this rhetorical device in “Born in the U.S.A.”?

TONE

The author’s attitude towards what is being written about. How would you describe the tone of this song?

IMAGERY

Descriptive language that “paints a picture” in the reader’s mind. *For example: “She walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies.”* In what ways does Springsteen use imagery in his lyrics?

ANALYZING “BORN IN THE U.S.A.”

LYRICS

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR THINKING

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
'Til you spend half your life just covering up

How do these first lines introduce the song?

Born in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.

This chorus is repeated throughout the song. What is the function of this repetition? Do these words seem to “go with” the rest of the lyrics, or contrast with them?

I got in a little hometown jam
And so they put a rifle in my hands
Sent me off to a foreign land
To go and kill the yellow man

What experience is being described in these lyrics?

Come back home to the refinery
Hiring man says "Son if it was up to me"
Went down to see the V.A. man
He said "Son don't you understand"

What experience is being described in these lyrics?

LYRICS

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR THINKING

I had a buddy at Khe Sahn
Fighting off the Viet Cong
They're still there, he's all gone
He had a woman he loved in Saigon
I got a picture of him in her arms

What was the battle of Khe Sahn?

Down in the shadow of the penitentiary
Out by the gas fires of the refinery
I'm ten years burning down the road
Nowhere to run ain't got nowhere to go

How does Springsteen use descriptive imagery with these lines?

Born in the U.S.A., I was born in the U.S.A..
Born in the U.S.A., I'm a long gone daddy in the U.S.A..
Born in the U.S.A., born in the U.S.A..
Born in the U.S.A., I'm a cool rocking daddy in the U.S.A..

Why does Springsteen end the song this way?

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Provide two examples of each literary device in use and interpret what you think the author means.
2. Tone describes the author's attitude towards a subject, while "mood" is how the reader feels. How would you describe the mood of "Born in the U.S.A.?" Which lyrics do you think are the most powerful in achieving that mood?
3. Could the Vietnam War itself be a metaphor for something else in this song? If so, what?
4. Why do you think "Born in the U.S.A." is sometimes thought to be a patriotic anthem? Should it be considered patriotic? Explain.