

# ASBURY PARK PROMISED LAND

THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF

# BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

MUSIC AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

## OVERVIEW

Music has been a part of human culture since prehistoric times. From the national anthem to rock anthems, music brings Americans together. Rhythms, familiar choruses, and song verses can unite people of various backgrounds with a sense of their shared history and culture. How has music, including Bruce Springsteen's, shaped Americans' understanding of our shared history? In this lesson, students will trace the ways musicians have responded to events on a national scale and furthered political dialogue among citizens. They will also compare music in countries where governments respect freedom of speech with those that don't.

## RELATED ACTIVITIES

- **Sing for Your Rights!**  
Learn about how the Constitution and Bill of Rights protect the rights of musicians.
- **Born in the U.S.A.: Music as Political Protest**  
Analyze Springsteen's use of irony and metaphor in this song that is more complex than it might first appear.
- **Debate It!**  
Role play two First Amendment scenarios and decide where you stand!



## TEACHER NOTES

### LEARNING GOALS

Students will understand:

- Music can be a powerful form of expression about political and social issues.
- Music is a widely accessible means by which individuals can understand themselves within a historical narrative.
- In countries where government does not respect freedom of speech, musicians can be persecuted for expressing their views.

### EXTENSION

#### *Music and Governments Around the World*

*“Whoever would overthrow the Liberty of a Nation, must begin by subduing the Freedom of Speech.”*

– Benjamin Franklin, 1722

Citizens in countries that protect individual freedom of expression often take it for granted that people everywhere can express political views. However freedom of speech is relatively rare in the world. In the many countries where people can be imprisoned for speaking out against government, songs of political protest are absent. Additionally, there may be a glut of patriotic songs which children are forced to learn and sing in school.

What actions have totalitarian governments around the world taken to suppress the right of individuals to criticize government? How does this lack of freedom affect the ways citizens can shape and even understand their history? Have students contrast freedom of expression in music in the United States with other countries with less freedom. Students may wish to research:

- The current state of freedom of speech and press in countries such as Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, the People’s Republic of China, and others.
- Events associated with musicians who have been banned at one time in China, including Miley Cyrus, Jay-Z, Oasis, and Bjork.
- “Patriotic” songs in North Korea.



## MUSIC: SHAPING OUR HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Music has been a part of human culture since prehistoric times. And from the national anthem to rock anthems, music brings Americans together. Rhythms, familiar choruses, and song verses can unite people of various backgrounds with a sense of their shared history and culture.

### BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

Bruce Springsteen's music has struck a chord with Americans looking to find meaning in their personal experiences of growing older and seeking fulfillment. His music also speaks to Americans coping with political and social crises of the last 40 years, including the September 11 attacks and the consequences of wars and economic transformations on America's middle and working classes. In these ways, Springsteen personifies the musician as a teller of stories about the aspirations, emotions, and values that make us human and that help us understand our own experiences.

The America of Bruce Springsteen is complex. His songs are often double-edged: sometimes they appear to celebrate their subjects, while at the same time they condemn or mourn them. His musical landscape is often bleak. *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978) told of broken dreams, and *Nebraska* (1982) featured the stories and struggles of ordinary, blue-collar Americans, often told in first-person and often with stark and dismal imagery.

Yet Springsteen clearly celebrates that identity which people receive from the places they grow up. Our hometowns, in his music, are part of what makes us who we are. "The Promised Land," he said, was about "how

we honor the community and the place we came from." In "My Hometown" he contrasts the pride he believed he should feel for his hometown, with the ways the town is being left to die:

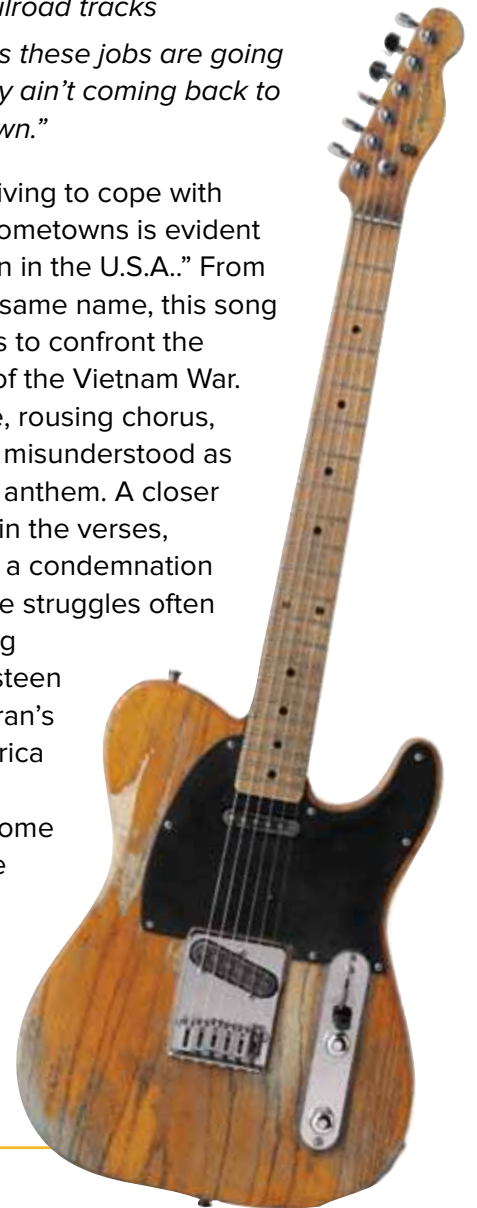
*"Now Main Street's whitewashed  
windows and vacant stores*

*Seems like there ain't nobody wants to  
come down here no more*

*They're closing down the textile mill  
across the railroad tracks*

*Foreman says these jobs are going  
boys and they ain't coming back to  
your hometown."*

This theme of striving to cope with changes in our hometowns is evident in his single "Born in the U.S.A." From the album of the same name, this song forced Americans to confront the emotional scars of the Vietnam War. With its repetitive, rousing chorus, the song is often misunderstood as a purely patriotic anthem. A closer look at the lyrics in the verses, however, reveals a condemnation of the war and the struggles often faced by returning veterans. Springsteen sings of the veteran's return to an America that holds few opportunities, "Come back home to the refinery / Hiring man says 'Son if it was up to me'..." Without a refinery job, the character





of Springsteen's song closes, "I'm ten years burning down the road / Nowhere to run ain't got nowhere to go." Explaining his lyrics, Springsteen later said, "when you think about all the young men and women that died in Vietnam, and how many died since they've been back—surviving the war and coming back and not surviving—you have to think that, at the time, the country took advantage of their selflessness." (*Rolling Stone*, Issue 436, December 6, 1984)

Springsteen continued to confront national struggles with his 2002 album, *The Rising*. The album is regarded as a series of reflections on the terrorist attacks of 2001, even though some of the songs pre-date the attacks. Springsteen performed "My City of Ruins," which he wrote in November 2000 about his hometown of Asbury Park, on a post-9/11 telethon. Many saw the song with its haunting lyrics take on a new, broader meaning. The album's title song, "The Rising," seems to be about both an individual firefighter, as well as a nation struggling to make sense of the senseless.

Springsteen's music highlights the role of the musician in helping us make sense of human longings, including those for relationships, hope, and meaning. He released *We*

*Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* in 2006. This album of folk music contained no original music, but rather Springsteen's renditions of traditional songs of American identity and struggle. Over his entire career, Bruce Springsteen has shown that the language and feelings of music often overlap with conversations about politics.

How does music shape our identities and understanding of shared history? What is the tradition in the United States of musical commentary on matters of American identity and politics, and how does Bruce Springsteen fit into that larger musical tradition?

## THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

As soon as the United States came into being, songs were written about the struggle for independence. The first political songs go back to the American Revolutionary era. John Dickinson of Pennsylvania wrote "The Liberty Song" in 1768, which is considered the first American patriotic song:

*"Then join hand in hand,  
brave Americans all,  
By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall...  
To die we can bear,  
but to serve we disdain.  
For shame is to Freedom more  
dreadful than pain."*

The Revolutionary War lasted from 1776 until the defeat of British forces in 1781. Throughout this time, much music focused on the wrongdoings of King George, the evils of tyranny, and the prospect of freedom for British subjects living in the colonies. Dr. Joseph Warren, a member of many pro-independence organizations including the famed Sons of Liberty, participated in both legislative and military battles against King





George. Before dying at the Battle of Bunker Hill, Warren wrote this war ballad set to the tune of the British Grenadiers.

*"Torn from a World of Tyrants,  
beneath this western Sky,  
We form'd a new Dominion,  
a Land of liberty;  
...God bless this maiden Climate, and  
thro' her vast Domain,  
Let Hosts of Heroes cluster, who scorn to  
wear a Chain..."*

## SLAVERY

Songs with political significance were not limited to military subjects. In the 18th and 19th Centuries, Abolitionists used music to convince people of the injustice of slavery. "Oh Freedom" is a Civil War Era song with repetitive lyrics that emphasize freedom above all else. Despite its influence, historians do not know who authored it.

*"Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom  
over me  
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in  
my grave  
And go home to my Lord and be free  
No more mourning, no more mourning, no  
more mourning over me..."*

"Oh Freedom" transcended its period: more than a century later during the Civil Rights movement, musicians would reach back to the abolitionist era for inspiration. Joan Baez sang "Oh Freedom" in the 1963 March on Washington.

We know from oral histories and slave narratives that music was an important feature in slave life. Enslaved people found hope and the strength to persevere in spirituals (religious songs). Field workers would often sing together to make group tasks easier to



perform, as well as to pass the time during tedious work. As they had no right to own property, enslaved people could not publish their own works, but music remained a source of private reflection and self-expression. This musical legacy has been inherited by many modern musicians, black and white.

## WORLD WAR II

During World War II, many musicians continued to construct a narrative of patriotic Americans willing to die for freedom by reaching back to the Revolutionary War period. World War II occurred at a time when millions of Americans were gaining easy access to music through radio—which was quickly becoming the most popular media forum in the country. Songs from this period, including the famous "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B" by the Andrews Sisters, often conveyed patriotic or nationalistic sentiments.

"There's a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere," written in 1942 by Paul Roberts, continues the narrative of patriotic Americans fighting for freedom by invoking the valor of American heroes like George Washington, Ethan Allen, and Nathan Hale. This wartime



rally song conveyed honor, courage, and self sacrifice in an appeal from a crippled man requesting to fight in the war.

*"Can't the U.S. use a mountain boy like me?  
God gave me the right to be a free  
American,  
And for that precious right I'd gladly die."*

## THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

Drawing on the struggles of African-American ancestors over a century earlier, Civil Rights era activists re-imagined cherished abolition hymns and songs from the 19th century for their harrowing struggle for legal and political equality in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Civil Rights era music was influenced by African folk and gospel genres, and was frequently used to make political statements and boost the morale of fatigued protesters.

Sam Cooke wrote "A Change is Gonna Come" in 1964 after speaking with sit-in demonstrators in North Carolina. The song became a hit and came to represent the essence of the Civil Rights movement.

*"I was born by the river in a little tent  
Oh and just like the river I've been  
running ever since  
It's been a long, a long time coming  
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes  
it will..."*

Like other songs in this genre, "Eyes on the Prize" has origins that pre-date the Civil Rights movement. Traditionally referred to as "Gospel Plow," the song alludes to the struggles African-Americans faced, including unjust imprisonment, discrimination, and conviction to the cause of freedom.

*"Got my hand on the freedom plow  
Wouldn't take nothing for my journey now  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!"*

Bruce Springsteen recorded "Eyes on the Prize" in *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*.

## THE VIETNAM WAR

Songs about the Vietnam War, unlike much music from earlier wars, tended to be strongly critical of the war. The Vietnam War raged on for nearly twenty years. The conflict led to large numbers of casualties and the United States's prolonged involvement led to protests throughout the nation. It was during this period that the modern protest song truly came to fruition.

"Blowing in the Wind" was written by Bob Dylan in 1963. The song quickly gained traction and was soon covered by many notable artists including Janis Joplin and Peter Paul & Mary. Its references to cannonballs and death evoke a strong anti-war sentiment and have contributed to it being labeled a protest song.

*"How many times must the cannonballs fly  
Before they're forever banned?  
...How many deaths will it take till he  
knows  
That too many people have died?"*

Debuting in 1969, Credence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" tells a story from the perspective of a soldier drafted into service in Vietnam. The lyrics critique the ways that prominent individuals from wealthy and powerful families seemed to be exempted from the draft more often than people of limited means.

*"It ain't me, it ain't me  
I ain't no Senator's son...  
Some folks are born silver spoon in  
hand...  
I ain't no millionaire's son, no, no..."*



Written a decade after the Vietnam war ended, Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." revealed the emotional scars of Vietnam. Again using first-person perspective, the song took on meaning both personally and politically: it shared the experience of a man who fought in the war and returned; at the same time it forced listeners to confront the question of whether the nation failed in its responsibilities towards those who serve in the military.

*"Come back home to the refinery  
Hiring man says "Son if it was up to me"...  
I had a buddy at Khe Sahn  
Fighting off the Viet Cong  
They're still there, he's all gone..."*

## THE COLD WAR

The Cold War had already begun when United States involvement in Vietnam ended in 1973. The Cold War was a period of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. This period characterized by military escalation on both sides and the fear of "mutually assured destruction" via nuclear action.

Sting's "Russians," released in 1985, criticized the leadership of Soviet Premier Khrushchev and U.S. President Reagan, and condemned the idea of war itself: "There's no such thing as a winnable war, it's a lie we don't believe anymore."

In contrast to Sting's "Russians," Lee Greenwood's "I'm Proud to be an American" took on a more traditionally patriotic tone. Written in 1984, the song echoed themes from the Revolutionary War and World War II, praising American freedom (implicitly contrasted with life under the totalitarian government of the Soviet Union). The song took on new meaning for many Americans in 2001 after the September 11 terrorist attacks, much as Springsteen's "My City of Ruins" had done.

Bruce Springsteen has continued to write songs addressing and protesting national issues including police brutality and racial profiling ("American Skin (41 Shots)"), the Iraq War ("Last to Die"), and the federal government's response to hurricane Katrina ("We Take Care of Our Own").

## CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What common themes do you observe between songs about war? What connections can you draw between music from the Revolutionary War and World War II? How about between Vietnam, the Cold War, and more modern conflicts?
2. What historical events and trends can you think of that could have contributed to a change in the general character of war songs after World War II?
3. What common themes do you observe between songs about struggles for legal equality?
4. How has music, including Bruce Springsteen's, shaped Americans' understanding of our shared history?