Meet me in the Land of Hope and Dreams

Influences of the protest song tradition on the recent work of Bruce Springsteen (1995-2012)

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Word of thanks

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“Well if you can’t make it, stay hard, stay hungry, stay alive
*If you can... and meet me in a dream of this hard land”*
(Springsteen, “This Hard Land”, 1982)

Thank you, and I’ll see you further on up the road.

Michiel Vaernewyck

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Introduction

As Bruce Springsteen took the stage during the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Rock and Roll Hall Of Fame in 2009, he proclaimed “the roots of rock roll all the way back through Bob Dylan, through Hank Williams, through Pete Seeger, through Woody Guthrie, through Leadbelly, through the fathers of folk music”. Arguing for these songwriters’ relevance in a contemporary context, he claimed that

if you pick up the newspapers, you see millions of people out of work, you see a bloodfight over decent health care for our citizens and you see people struggling to hold on to their homes. If Woody Guthrie were alive tonight, he’d have a lot to write about. High times on Wall Street and hard times on Main Street.

As Springsteen mentioned in the introduction to the song, the American musical tradition builds upon generation after generation while staying true to the essence of those pioneers. Whether listening to Guthrie’s 1938 tale of economic depression “I Ain’t Got No Home”, Seeger’s 1955 anti-war “Where Have All The Flowers Gone” or Dylan’s 1965 rant to the bourgeois class “Ballad of a Thin Man”, the protest essence of these songs lives on and continues to inspire a considerate share of America’s songwriters today. In his career, now spanning almost 50 years, Springsteen has acted as a modern Woody Guthrie or Pete Seeger by portraying and criticizing American society. When asked about his music by CBS News’ Scott Pelley in a 2007 promotional interview regarding his anti-Bush album Magic, Springsteen replied that he tries to “chart the distance between American ideals and American reality”. It is that representation of the distance between American dream and American reality in Springsteen’s protest songs from 1995 to 2012, while influenced by the early folk and gospel protest song tradition, that will be the main subject of this dissertation.
From America’s early musical beginning, different genres such as folk music, but later also blues, jazz, rock, soul and many more, have played an important role in the emancipation of the country and its various distinct groups of inhabitants. Many of these innovative music styles concerned themselves with the nation’s socio-economic situation, speaking up to several minority groups who were trying to escape their tough lives and wanted to reach their own Promised Land. Throughout his musical career Springsteen has been involved with the portrayal and support of these underprivileged people in his country, a similar goal as that of those early American musicians and songwriters. From his earliest music in 1973 he managed to depict both small town America and the metropolitan concrete jungles such as New York City in his songwriting. He sympathized first and mostly with blue collar Americans who worked for minimum wages in the factories, for instance in 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, but later also would be concerned with minority groups such as South-Americans crossing the border into the States, homosexual and lesbian couples, the overall gender inequality and those discriminated on the basis of skin color. Hereby the songs, for instance with the wish for equality in “Land of Hope and Dreams”, speak up and strive for the rights of the 99% Americans and criticize the wrongdoing of the government accordingly. In the spirit of protest song pioneers like Seeger and Guthrie, Springsteen stated in the aforementioned CBS News interview, after being accused of being unpatriotic due to the criticism on President George W. Bush, that “silence is unpatriotic”.

Nonetheless, in publications regarding protest music in twentieth century rock ‘n’ roll, many names like The Animals, Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Marvin Gaye and Neil Young get mentioned, while very few sources make notion of Springsteen’s contributions to the contemporary protest genre. Ironically, one of his most striking protest songs, “Born in the U.S.A.”, gets mistaken even to this day for a patriotic song, although it blames the American government for neglecting their Vietnam army veterans. However, a considerate amount has
been written academically about the first part of his career and the aforementioned song in particular, yet it is a shame that the protest quality of his music does not receive a wider appeal in overall music history. In fact, it is only the albums from *Born to Run* (1975) to *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995) that receive any academic research, apart from some writing on *The Rising* (2002). Much authoritative authors and academics such as music critics Dave Marsh, Greil Marcus and Clinton Heylin devote their biographies and studies mainly to his most successful period and cover everything from 2002 to 2012 in just a few pages or hardly at all. Thus the following albums generally get widely ignored, not yet having obtained the cult status that for instance *Born to Run* enjoys. However, his protest songwriting is still committed to relevant and political themes and, as we will see, he manages to keep his songwriting on a relatively high quality level. The post-9/11 *The Rising* album, the anti-Bush records *Devils & Dust* (2005) and *Magic* (2007), the pro-Obama *Working on a Dream* (2009) and the economic crisis album *Wrecking Ball* (2012) would demonstrate this. Moreover, the release of a folk album in 2006, consisting of old traditional folk songs such as the Civil Rights anthem “Eyes on the Prize”, aptly dubbed *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, confirms his strong interest in this pioneer in particular. Along with an ever-evolving musical taste ranging from rock to folk, blues, gospel, soul and R&B, Springsteen continues to innovate his work although always going back to the “roots of rock”.

Although, as Harald Berings pointed out in his dissertation regarding hope and disillusion in Springsteen’s early work, there are basically two specific phases in Springsteen’s songwriter career (6), from which my dissertation will slightly deviate. Berings argues that thematically and contextually the reunion of Springsteen with his legendary E-Street Band on *The Rising* in 2002 introduces a new phase in his career, as the songs delivered a more hopeful approach after the very bleak *The Ghost of Tom Joad* in 1995 (Berings 6). However, ever since his much more personal take on love issues in the *Tunnel of Love* album in 1988 and the
subsequent nineties rock albums *Human Touch* (1992) and *Lucky Town* (1992), his songwriting slightly left the realm of politics and social reality that was common in an album as, for instance, *The River*. The *LT/HT* songs were now static and musically uninspired rock songs, lacking the fiery passion and intricate messages, which were now sounding happy and too easy-going.

As biographer Peter Ames Carlin argued, the music of the early nineties did not turn out to be his most socially involved, but the man himself became more overtly political throughout the 1990s with appearances at left-side fundraisers and other socio-political activities, not having interfered with certain actions earlier in his career apart from describing social reality in his songs (Carlin 410). This is the reason the once again political *The Ghost of Tom Joad* will also be included in this discussion, instead of starting with *The Rising* which marks the beginning of a ‘second phase’. Although Berings already analyzed the latter acoustic folk album – as many other academics such as Bryan Garman have undoubtedly done – the album’s place in Springsteen’s discography is contextually important in this dissertation about protest songs. Of course the two phase distinction with the rejoining of the E-Street Band at the end of the 1990s is a clear turning point in Springsteen’s career and certainly marks a certain change in style apparent in the new music.

Therefore, the way Springsteen portrays America’s social reality in his recent music from 1995 to 2012 will be the subject of this paper. This dissertation will determine how close he remains to the protest song tradition, which sparked his imagination by his discovery of Guthrie in the eighties, and find direct or indirect influences from specific protest folk and gospel music. I will first of all discuss the biographical aspects of the first part of his career, tracing his roots and early musical influences, including protest songs, that shaped him and his politics. This section will be based on the biographies and studies by Dave Marsh (*Two Hearts*), Marc Dolan (*Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ’n Roll*), Bryan Garman (*Ghost of History*) and Peter Ames Carlin (*Bruce*). Secondly, I will use R. Serge Denissoff’s collection of
essays *The Sounds of Social Change* on protest music and Garman’s study on Guthrie’s hurt song to determine the general characteristics of protest songs. Afterwards these characteristics will be applied to Springsteen’s later work from 1995 to 2012 and analyze the songs in their historical and album context. The presence of connections to the rhetorical and magnetic protest songs as well as the topical songs, hurt songs and freedom songs (see Chapter 2) will be addressed. Hereby I will also try to discover direct or indirect references to existing songs and influences by Dylan, Seeger, Guthrie or other protest singers. When possible I will incorporate analyses of Garman, Carlin or Dolan, although I am mainly drawing from my own close-reading segments and protest tradition characteristics which hopefully attribute some additional meaning and context to their work. The focus will mainly be on the lyrical quality of the songs, but will – if relevant – also include a short analysis of their musical characteristics.
Chapter 1: Bruce Springsteen: Shaping his career

Before researching the precise characteristics and pioneers of the protest song tradition, I will provide some more information about Springsteen’s own personal background that shaped the basic orientation of the subjects in his songwriting. Next, I will concisely describe the foundations of his politics in his early work and additionally explain how I will conduct my analyses.

Chapter 1.1: Growing up as the future of rock ‘n’ roll

Bruce Springsteen was born on September 23, 1949 in Long Branch, New Jersey. His father, an Irish Catholic factory worker and his Italian mother, working as a secretary, both raised the young Bruce. While, as songs such as “Independence Day” and “Adam Raised a Cain” attest, Springsteen had a difficult relationship with his stern and music-hating father Douglas, his mother Adele provided him with support and love throughout his life. Douglas Springsteen’s strict persona developed because of the grief caused by the death of his five-year old sister in a roadside accident (Carlin 1). Her death would take its toll on him and the family for many years to come, causing Springsteen to feel like he had to “replace a lost child” (qtd. in Carlin 9). Later marrying his first and only wife Adele Zerilli, Douglas Springsteen became father of the young Bruce in late September 1949. However, life continued to press down on the family, and especially on the father. He had many difficulties finding and keeping jobs to support his family, to the point they had to keep moving from house to house to ultimately end up at his parents’ home. For the rest of his life, these struggles would haunt him with periods of depression, unearthing frequent tensions between mother and father (Berings 12-13). While the difficult relationship with his father provided a lot of inspiration for his songwriting, the young Bruce found a beacon of love, hope and faith in his mother. She was the person who provided him with his first guitar, something which he commemorated in one of his most autobiographical songs “The Wish”. Her warmth and encouragement represented the good and peaceful in life,
while his father became the image of the harsh living standards of the embittered working class, both of which would return in his songwriting.

Growing up in the town of Freehold in New Jersey, Springsteen would have a hard time making friends. Living in a house where his father did not tolerate the rebellious nature of the young musician, who lacked any ambition at school or wanted anything at all besides music, the obligated Catholic upbringing did not help the matter. As Springsteen himself said to Dave Marsh, the tempestuous relationship with his father sparked the identification he had with his rock ‘n’ roll examples. Springsteen remembers talking with his father, although that simple conversation would quickly result in an accusing charge between the two. His father would ask “what I thought I was doing with myself, and we’d always end up screamin’ at each other. […] runnin’ down the driveway, screamin’ at him, tellin’ him, tellin’ him, tellin’ him how it was my life and I was gonna do what I wanted to do” (qtd. in Marsh 26). The dominative nuns in his Catholic school frequently picked him out as a victim, inciting “enough institutional fury to end more than a few of his school days in the principal’s office, where he waited for hours before Adele could come claim him” (Carlin 13). Being a shy and introvert young boy, he never was the popular kid in town, confessing himself to be a “loner, just to [himself], and [he] had gotten used to it” (qtd. in Carlin 13). In these circumstances Springsteen became intrigued and very quickly obsessed with rock music, which was delivering a much sought way out of the troubles adolescents were suffering from.

Rock ‘n’ roll provided to be the life transformation Springsteen was looking for. The raucous style and intense cries for freedom and independence in the lyrics revealed the power of music and words to inspire people, to make them think and convey an escapist route out of their life situation. Perhaps one of the most important phases was his love for and identification with the British band The Animals with Eric Burdon, as Springsteen often covered their hit song “It’s My Life” in his own concerts throughout the seventies (Marsh 26). Taking a closer look
at those song lyrics, the fascination and especially the identification with The Animals’ “It’s My Life” becomes clear:

It’s a hard world to get a break in
All the good things have been taken
But I know there’s ways
To make certain these days
Though I come dressed in rags
I will wear sable some day
[...]
It’s my life and I do what I want
It’s my mind and I think what I want (The Animals qtd. in Marsh 26)

Apart from the British invasion that overwhelmed the States, including The Animals and especially the Beatles’ version of “Twist and Shout”, Springsteen became enchanted by the magic of rock ‘n’ roll. Similarly, seeing Elvis Presley for the first time on The Ed Sullivan Show, the King was not only the impersonation of youth and big dreams of love and fame, but also a personification of the American dream itself. Presley’s story is a typical rags to riches one: as successful as he turned out, just like Springsteen he grew up in a rather poor family without any financial hope (Marsh 27). Stating in Marsh’s Glory Days, Springsteen admitted he became enamored with voices such as Roy Orbison’s and Presley’s because they “held out a promise that every man has a right to live his life with some decency and some dignity. And it’s a promise that gets broken every day, in the most violent way. But it’s a promise that never, ever dies, and it’s always inside of you” (qtd. in Marsh 36: Glory Days)¹. Not long after the romantic and bombastic Born to Run, Springsteen would start broadening his views to more carefully

¹ All Marsh quotes will be drawn from Two Hearts, instead this one is the only one from Glory Days or where noted.
envision the America he was living in into his songs. As he harkened back to his own family’s struggles, his working class ethic developed more strongly. His discovery of Woody Guthrie in his thirties did not only influence him musically, but certainly also politically, as we will see in the next chapter.

Chapter 1.2: Springsteen’s politics from 1973 to 1984 and the analysis of his work

Before starting to analyze any of Springsteen’s work, certain things have to be made clear to dismiss certain stereotypes about the history of his politics and my analysis. Ever since Ronald Reagan made the mistake of proclaiming “Born in the U.S.A.” to be a song that spoke highly of the way that his country was run, the hit single made Springsteen a super star. While a painful mistake on the president’s part, the error made sure that the unpatriotic meaning of the song became known to the general public. Because of the importance of this hit song and its history of misinterpretation, it is – maybe more than Born to Run – the one song people stereotypically associate Springsteen with. As President Reagan’s mistake shows, dealing with Springsteen’s politics is a risky thing and has led to frequent stereotyping.

Chapter 1.2.1: Springsteen as a protest singer (1973-1984)

Springsteen’s first albums, including Born to Run, were largely romanticized and escapist collections of songs. While Born to Run’s romantic escapism dominated Springsteen’s music with an optimist sense of the American dream, the following Darkness on the Edge of Town would reveal that this “social status is in part determined by social and historical forces that even the hardest working people cannot overcome” (Garman 74). Gradually, Springsteen started to immerse himself in literature and his country’s history when he started reading Steele Commager’s and Allan Nevins’s A Pocket of History of the United States of America around 1978, a largely optimistic take on his country’s history (Garman 71). Slowly discovering different types of music besides rock and hereby developing a political awareness, Springsteen
became more outspoken about his views during, for instance, the No Nukes concert against unsafe nuclear energy (Marsh 276). Nonetheless, he was the only artist who according to Marsh “didn’t make a statement on the issue in the concert program”, who additionally labeled him as an “extremely cautious man, and he’d always been extra careful not to speak out about issues he didn’t fully understand” (276)

His “working class hero” image got more apparent in songs where his storytelling about ordinary people’s struggles became more observant. For instance, the protest cries in the representation of blue collar workers during the recession period in *The River* (1980), the deep existential portrayal of the hard underbelly of America in *Nebraska* (1982) and the support for army veterans in 1985’s *Born in the U.S.A* (1984) all attributed to his association with the working class. By the time of *The River*, he started widening his musical taste by listening to country and folk singers such as Hank Williams and Johnny Cash at the end of the 1970s, as a result that their influence can be found in Springsteen’s own songs. For instance, “The River” from 1980 was based on “Long Gone Lonesome Blues” by Hank Williams, while the *River* album’s closing track drew its title and themes from Roy Acuff’s 1943 “Wreck On The Highway” (Marsh 233).

However, it should be noted that Springsteen did not initially think about becoming a protest singer, after all the main subject of this thesis. He did not even know the term, what it meant and who its most important representatives were. That would all change in the 1980s when he discovered Woody Guthrie. As Guthrie mentioned that folk music was the only genre that could effectively capture the people’s voice and their class struggle towards a positive societal change, this goal coincidentally was also part of Springsteen’s music, further strengthening Springsteen’s connection to Guthrie (Garman 69). He has never denied and has often confirmed the influence of protest singers as Guthrie, Seeger and Dylan both directly in interviews (such as the 2007 CBS interview) and indirectly during shows, performing covers
of a variety of Dylan, Seeger and especially Guthrie songs during the 1984 *Born in the U.S.A.*
tour. These folk covers usually were politically involved protest songs, like the mournful
Guthrie ballad “Deportees (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)” about a group of South-American hired
hands killed in a plane crash, the Steinbeck inspired “Vigilante Man” and the quintessentially
American song “This Land Is Your Land”.

Springsteen mentioned right before a performance of Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your
Land” from the Live 1975-1985 album that the song was written “as an answer to Irving Berlin
who just wrote ‘God Bless America’”. It is important to note that Springsteen could have easily
been singing the latter song, as Marsh pointed out, yet chose the ambiguity of Guthrie’s lyrics
that were wondering “if this land was made for you and me”, continuing to sing the song in
concert even when he left the states and performed it in Europe (279). By performing to people
unfamiliar with the semi-patriotic song, it hopefully provided some new meaning to people who
did not grow up with the tune and who did not see it as a cliché. The desired new and wide-
spread meaning of the song was mentioned by Springsteen during a Paris show: “This is an old
song about an old dream. It’s hard to think what to say about this song, because it’s sung a
whole lot in the States and it’s been misinterpreted a whole lot. It was written as a fighting song
and it was written, I feel, as a question everybody had to ask themselves about the land they
live in, every day.” (qtd. in Marsh 279). These thematic and musical influences inspired the
early work of Springsteen at first indirectly, but in the eighties more directly on the *Nebraska*
and *Born in the U.S.A.* albums.

Due to Guthrie’s influence, albums like *Nebraska* (1982) and *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984)
would harken back to the early nineteenth century’s musical tradition. *Nebraska* consisted out
of stark acoustic songs, whose characters all go through an alienation from their surroundings.
For instance, “Johnny 99” tells the story of a jobless mechanic who one day kills a man out of
desperation, while the title track would end without a resolution, with the narrator stating that
“there is just a meanness in this world”. Additionally, the rewrite of a Hank Williams song “Mansion on the Hill” unearths the difference between the high class and the working class (Garman 88). In the latter song, the mansion is surrounded by “gates of hardened steel”, which results in the “fruits of [the working class’] labor are transformed into the ornaments of wealth which segregate them from the comfort and success the mansion represents” (Garman 89). Overall, Garman notes that “Nebraska represents the history of class in the United States and places the social problems of the 1980s in the context of change over time” (91).

Eventually, the Born in the U.S.A. album would voice Springsteen’s disillusionment with the unpatriotic treating of Vietnam veterans. The rest of the album’s rock songs would reaffirm and establish Springsteen as a protesting working class hero: from the desperate hiding away from trouble in “Cover Me”, the superficially upbeat but surprisingly desperate take on getting nowhere in life in “Dancing in the Dark” and the realization of economic and cultural destruction that a father notices and relates to his son in the album’s closing song “My Hometown”, where “the foreman says these jobs are going, boys, and they ain’t coming back to your hometown”2. In the years 1973 to 1984, Springsteen has mainly concerned himself with his own working class surroundings. His political conscience did not truly exceed the borders of New Jersey or its inhabitants. With the following relationship albums such as Tunnel of Love and Human Touch/Lucky Town, it seemed like his political days had diminished. Nonetheless, the stark and broadened views on the dark side of American society would be a big part of Springsteen’s The Ghost of Tom Joad, which is where my analysis will begin.

Nonetheless, as mentioned before, Carlin claims that Springsteen showed more involvement with political events during the 1990s (410), but relatively speaking his engagement did not increase much at all. His affiliation with political movements stayed rather

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2 All Springsteen’s song lyrics are derived from his official website, www.brucespringsteen.net
on the superficial side, something that Dave Marsh elaborates upon. Stating Springsteen only took one real shot at mingling with a public controversy, the Dixie Chicks case in 2003, he pinpoints the careful blend with politics (xxiii). When in 2003 the Dixie Chicks got boycotted for uttering they were embarrassed to originate from the same state as President George W. Bush, Springsteen chose to support the group. Defending the in the States highly-regarded freedom of speech, Springsteen reacted in an open letter to the absurdity of the boycott. According to Marsh, this is “the hardest line Springsteen has ever taken on a public controversy” (Marsh xxiii). However, in recent times Springsteen’s political views have been put in the spotlight quite a bit, as he appeared at fundraisers and rally speeches of both John Kerry and both senator and president Barack Obama, campaigning for him with an acoustic set of songs in the 2008 and 2012 elections. It is this political affiliation that will appear in the songs of the more recent albums, which will be discussed accordingly.

Chapter 1.2.2: The analysis of Springsteen’s songs

While Springsteen definitely holds on to liberalistic views, and a political orientation that includes a “Democratic ideology, a Republican vocabulary, and a Populist delivery system” (Borick & Rosenwasser qtd. in Carlin 411), it would be wrong to consider every song character, just like the songs themselves, as an accusation of conservatives and right-wing government. One must thus avoid interpreting every song as critical of, for instance, the George W. Bush administration, but rather as a description of social reality in general. Based upon the songwriting during the first part of his career, it seems that Springsteen generally does not start writing a song out of any political view, hereby shifting and molding the story into what he believes to be the desired political ideology. Rather, he paints a vivid image of society at large and society in its micro context and draws conclusions out of those sketches of the times. Marsh confirms and adds to this by saying that “Springsteen intends to empower his audience, teach them to make up their own minds, not tell them what to think” (Marsh xx).
While it is easy to only describe the musical quality in the exploration of the songs on *The Ghost of Tom Joad, The Rising, Wrecking Ball* and others, the analysis of these songs will, as stated before, develop mainly on a lyrical level and not on a musical one. The historical context of origin of both the individual songs and the albums will be explored, along with the larger themes present and the way that the writing corresponds to the characteristics of the protest song on basis of theme, structure and word use. One should keep in mind that basically all of the recent songs are to be considered rhetorical protest songs, a term which will be explained in the next chapter, which is why I will not acknowledge this at every song, but rather name the less obvious connections to the earlier magnetic kind of protest songs (see Chapter 2). Lastly, one should note that my analyses do not represent a definite meaning of the songs, nor did I try to give a definite analysis of the protest songs in general. This dissertation means to give an overview of his later career, while nonetheless providing detailed analyses of the album’s centerpieces.

While the albums *The Ghost of Tom Joad* until *Wrecking Ball* have clearly defined messages and thematic approaches, there are several songs that did not originate in an album context, yet are important expressions of Springsteen as a protest song writer. Some tracks such as “Land of Hope and Dreams” as a powerful anthem about equality in America, and the controversial and powerful protest song “American Skin (41 Shots)” about police shootings did appear on live releases or compilation records. These will be analyzed in accordance with the project and time period they were written for and not if they appeared on an album where their thematic quality seemed out of place, such as compilations as *American Beauty*. When a song such as “Land of Hope and Dreams” does appear in an album where its thematic value fits the overall album’s themes, that song will be included in the discussion of that album. As stated above, not every album song will be analyzed. Songs as “I’ll Work For Your Love” on *Magic*, “Queen of the Supermarket” on *Working on a Dream* or “You’ve Got It” on *Wrecking Ball* do
not touch upon any political ground and will be – for the sake of completion – only mentioned, although not analyzed in this dissertation.

Now I will determine the characteristics of the protest song and try to find out what makes this genre of songs achieve their goal to change the injustice they are protesting against. Later, these structural and thematic characteristics will be applied to the Springsteen songs from 1995 to 2012.
Chapter 2: Characteristics of the protest song tradition

Apart from his songwriting filled with working class ethic, Springsteen is known for something much more: the lengthy and dynamic live shows. Since the seventies, Springsteen stood for the future of rock ‘n’ roll, as his now manager and music journalist Jon Landau famously exclaimed in 1975. Together with his history-makin’ E-Street Band, Springsteen filled stadiums all over the world delivering spectacular show marathons from three up to four hours. Not seldom people refer to these shows as a life changing experience, and – maybe closer to truth – a religiously moving celebration of rock ‘n’ roll music, uniting everyone from the first row, leaning with elbows on the stage, until the highest one in the furthest point of the stadium.

Taking a closer look at this unifying ability of music I will try to discover how it has always been a way of uniting a people, a medium to exchange sentiments and emotions. However, the most well-known outings of protest songs also prove to be the most radical, immediately associative with radical regimes such as communism or extremist left or right parties. While in part this is of course true, for Pete Seeger was a leftist activist, the protest themes of the rebellious rock ‘n’ roll music left the realm of protest folk music and started to more specifically address events in the history. The specific characteristics of both these early folk protest songs and later ones will be discussed in this chapter, along with examples that directly inspired and influenced Springsteen during his career. My findings will be based upon The Sounds of Social Change by R. Serge Denisoff. First of all, the function and goal of these songs will be determined. Secondly, I will distinguish certain types and subgenres of the protest tradition and explain their historical context as well.

Chapter 2.1: The function of protest songs

Protest songs in the U.S. have been used in a political or agitational context since the very beginning of music. Whereas the nineteenth century protest songs mostly covered poverty, the
Civil War and the accompanying slavery and its abolition, the twentieth century protest music would mainly be concerned with civil rights for African-Americans and women, the greedy politicians and anti-war sentiments, for instance against the one in Vietnam. The twentieth century’s most prolific protest songwriter is undoubtedly folk singer Woody Guthrie, writing about the unemployment during the Great Depression. Early songwriters such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger realized this protesting potential of music and song, even to the extent that they saw their guitars as weapons. Guthrie decorated his guitar “this machine kills fascists” and Seeger wrote on his banjo that “this machine surrounds hatred and forces it to surrender”.

From the start, protest songs have provided hope to oppressed groups of people, playing an important role in human rights and civil rights movements, feminist movement, gay rights and the sexual revolution and their outcome. In his essay “The Evolution of American Protest Song” R. Serge Denisoff argues that most early protest songs have firm roots in religion and gospel music, out of which even the Marxist movements got inspiration in using their protest music, drawing on the ancient notion of “them” versus “us” (15). Generally speaking, one could argue that the protest song is used for convincing someone of political or other revolutionary ideas, to incite or to arouse and to give the oppressed groups in society a voice by pointing at the problems in society. Peter Greenway gives a detailed definition of the nature and function of a folk protest song, in which he calls the protest tradition: “… the struggle songs of the people. They are outbursts of bitterness, of hatred for the oppressor, of determination to endure hardships together and to fight for a better life” (3). This definition can be easily applied to protest folk songs like Pete Seeger’s freedom song “We Shall Overcome” which provided hope and acted as a beacon of light to black citizens oppressed in the Civil Rights Movement, and Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War”, beckoning the protesters that their “death will come soon”. Greenway further adds that “[W]hether they are ballads composed on the picket line, they are imbued with the feeling of communality, or togetherness” (3). As we will see later, this sense
of togetherness does not only come out of the music but also the lyrics, as “We Shall Overcome” and “This Land Is Your Land” clearly are meant to be sung in union.

Chapter 2.2: Two types and their historical context

Although it is nearly impossible to give a precise overview of all the types of protest songs, we can distinguish several tendencies in the genre. Moreover, Denisoff distinguishes two broad varieties that cover various subgenres: the magnetic protest songs, dealing with rather a direct approach towards the oppressed and the oppressors, and, secondly, the rhetorical protest song, initially less politically involved and more refined, implicit and subtle. This section will also be based on Denisoff’s *The Sounds of Social Change*, unless noted differently elsewhere.

The purpose of magnetic protest is to rally people to a specific group, ideology or cause. Examples of these songs are the well-known “This Land Is Your Land” and “We Shall Overcome”, written to attract similarly oppressed people to join the fight. The former is more critical than the overly-patriotic “God Bless America” by Irving Berlin, while the latter became one of the most important anthems in the African-American Civil Rights Movement from 1955 to 1968. In these songs there is a “recurrent statement of political message”, such as the wish for equality and democracy in “This Land Is Your Land”, along with a frequent use of the word “we”, which in the case of “We Shall Overcome” is embedded in the repetition of the reassuring and hopeful title phrase (Denisoff 17). Another characteristic of these protest songs is that they feature an easy chorus, a steady and simple structure and a relatively small amount of chord changes, often not more than two or three. To make the communicating ability of these songs more fluent, the melodies frequently were used over and over again while just the lyrics changed. This created timeless tunes that people would be able to connect with more easily (Denisoff 17).
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe
We shall overcome, some day. (“We Shall Overcome”)

Denisoff mentions that this use of “we” repetition brings about not only “group solidarity” but also “group participation”, making this type of songs popular on strikes or rallies (17). For instance, the song featured prominently during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, when folksinger Joan Baez sang the song at the Lincoln Memorial to a crowd of hundreds of thousands. Lewis Coser, author of *The Functions of Social Conflict*, claims that “the negatively placed group must develop awareness that it is being denied rights to which it is entitled” (qtd. in Denisoff 17). The protest song here has to solve a pressing identity crisis of the oppressed group, such as the discrimination and abuse of African-Americans, and make up for some lost time and missed or denied chances of the past. The unifying ability of a song such as the earlier “We Shall Overcome”, lifted the Civil Rights protesters up out of the discriminating society by making them feel at home inside that group, all of whom shared the same struggles. Many of these magnetic protest songs thereby got written and performed in a period of massive change and revolutionizing actions of minority groups, thus becoming an important medium in such early organized movements. Springsteen based some of his songs on these magnetic songs by using lyrical excerpts and melodies of older traditional folk songs (or other genres) to achieve a timeless and connecting effect such as in “Land of Hope and Dreams”, as will be discussed later in the *Wrecking Ball* section. Moreover, folksinger Bob
Dylan frequently borrowed lyrics, style and complete melodies for his songs as well, although these songs themselves are more closely linked to the next type, namely the rhetorical protest songs.

The rhetorical song is less politically involved and does not offer a resolution like the magnetic ones do. It is this kind of song that exists in rock ‘n’ roll music today, offering a more nuanced view of protesting regimes, ideas or individuals than the very direct magnetic protest songs. Music had to evolve from the rigid song structures of folk music to the loose and revolutionary rock ‘n’ roll, without relinquishing its message. Denisoff explains that the rhetorical protest song, just like the magnetic type, takes a stand against problems in contemporary society (18). However, while magnetic songs tried to offer people a way out of their misery by means of hope and song, the rhetorical song acknowledges the problems yet does not offer any concrete solutions nor do they try to connect itself to some kind of social movement: they tend to stand on their own (18). Although having many characteristics of magnetic protest songs and appearing at rallies all over the States, nearly all of Bob Dylan’s protest songs can be considered rhetorical (18). The rhetorical genre would prove also to be the most popular and durable one and would evolve from folk into other genres such as rock ‘n’ roll and country music. As the name suggests, the music structure and the lyrics would become more sophisticated and varied, resulting in a greater commercial radio value and ensuring a mainstream audience that could enjoy the music without being explicitly linked to any direct political statement (18). Denisoff observes a “massive decline in magnetic songs, and a rise in rhetorical songs” between 1910 and 1964, after which the study’s findings stopped right before the “emergence of ‘protest songs’ on Top Forty or Boss Radio” around 1951 (18). Instead, only a social movement like the Civil Rights struggle in the South during the 1960s managed to keep the magnetic songs alive (18). Rodniztky argues that artists grew out of their folk protest roots and radio became substantially more commercialized and less political (qtd. in Denisoff 19).
However, Denisoff notes that there are still a lot of hidden protest songs in rock ‘n roll that do not show this on the surface, such as “Eve of Destruction” (19). He subsequently emphasizes the need for a contemporary definition of what a protest song means today.

The topical rock ‘n’ roll songs since the sixties until today show many characteristics of the rhetorical protest songs, but they lack the “notion of political action” (20) which was much more present in the early days of protest music with the magnetic variety. According to Robinson & Hirsch, contemporary themes of protest songs can be considered quite different themes with the “[glorifying] use of drugs, [the fact they] are anti-war, and generally critical of American society” (qtd. in Denisoff 19). For instance, the hippie movement and New Left culture of the sixties would introduce experimental and glorifying take on drugs, while the Vietnam War until the Gulf War would be critical of American government. This contemporary protest song is tied to the birth of a “new culture” according to Anthony Bernhard. Hereby he states that the lyrics “[serve] as a normative [guideline] for youth in the process of defining and establishing a new order” (qtd in Denisoff 20). The new protest songs were inspired by the rebellious nature of The Rolling Stones songs such as the suggestive “Let’s Spend the Night Together”, in which the nightly setting was seen as fairly ambiguous and scabrous. Also the Animals’ “We Gotta Get Out Of This Place” gave rise to a youth culture that rebelled against their elders’ authority by attempting to escape their misery. Lastly, Bob Dylan’s “Ballad of a Thin Man” criticizes a certain mister Jones, who represents the ever-controlling bourgeois class, by admonishing him that something is happening, yet he doesn’t know what it is. Henceforth, not many of those pre-modern protest songs and those these days sound like the magnetic genre.

**Chapter 2.3: Topical songs, anti-war songs, hurt songs and freedom songs**

Next to the very broad dichotomy of magnetic and rhetorical protest songs, there are a few specific subgenres to the protest song in general. Besides topical songs, a large share of protest songs since the nineteenth century are anti-war, such as Pete Seeger’s music. Secondly, Guthrie
was the pioneer of the hurt song after which the social movements such as the Civil Rights movement criticized racial discrimination and segregation in their so-called freedom songs. By no means this list of themes is definite or explained in exact detail, instead I will give a short overview of the most important recurring themes in protest music that are also relevant to Springsteen’s songwriting.

Firstly, one of the methods used in protest songs is the use of existing persons and events in topical songs. These people or events then become symbols of a certain cause, attitude or injustice. For instance, Bob Dylan frequently based his songs on stories he read in newspapers. His “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” describes the killing of Hattie Carroll by William Zanzinger, who only gets sentenced to six months in prison, while his later “Hurricane” would stand up for the wrongly convicted boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter who unlawfully spent twenty years in prison. Similarly, Neil Young’s “Ohio” addressed the Kent State shootings which resulted in the death of four and many wounded unarmed students who protested President Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia (Denisoff 23). Additionally, non-existent characters also perform regularly in protest songs. For instance, the title character in Bob Dylan’s “The Ballad of Hollis Brown” becomes a symbol of desperation in economically tough times, as he kills his family and eventually himself, while Woody Guthrie draws from Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* in his “Tom Joad”.

In addition, protest songs would also thematically range from subjects as war to racism in the early twentieth century. Especially the anti-war protest songs, especially fueled by the war in Vietnam, have marked a large share of the twentieth century protest music in the United States. In a nation where the freedom of speech continues to be a big part of American identity, the breaking of war from the Civil War to Vietnam was the subject of both much glorifying and criticizing. In recent history, the United States has answered to certain international conflicts with an act of war, ensuring that anti-war songs to this day are not uncommon. Throughout
music’s history, activist songwriters such as Bob Dylan with his “Masters of War”, and more importantly the pacifist Pete Seeger, were the main songwriters touching upon this subject. For instance, Seeger’s sixties songs “Bring Them Home”, “Where Have All The Flowers Gone” and “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” deal with the senselessness of war and blind following of authorities’ commands, the kind of blind faith that Springsteen would describe in “Magic”. For instance, Seeger’s tragic story told in “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” relates the command of a captain, who is dubbed a big fool, and who leads his platoon of soldiers through what he expects to be shallow water. The foolish hubris of the captain results in his untimely death as he disappears in quicksand in the end. The song is a strong metaphor for the nation’s leaders invading territory and taking needless risks, resulting in U.S. casualties that were easily avoidable. Lastly, a song from later years, appearing on Springsteen’s live box set 1975-1985, Edwin Starr’s “War” would also criticize the senselessness of taking civilians into war, delivering a powerful chant urging the crowd to repeat “War / What is it good for / Absolutely nothing / Say it again”.

Moreover, also topics such as class consciousness, with mainly a discrimination of the working class and in troubled times such as the Great Depression, would frequently be addressed. Just like Pete Seeger sung anti-war protest songs, Woody Guthrie would be the innovator of the hurt song. These songs, which are written in working-class language adapted to their subject, “express the collective pain, suffering, and injustice working people have historically suffered, and articulate their collective hopes and dreams for a less oppressive future” (Garman 71). When the state of Oklahoma was transformed into a so-called Dust Bowl due to frequent storms in combination with drought, Guthrie recorded his Dust Bowl Ballads. This album would voice the troubles and miserable living conditions that Guthrie was a first-hand witness to, experiencing the economic misfortune by travelling to California to find work himself. Songs such as “Pretty Boy Floyd” who gave to the poor (cf. topical songs), “I Ain’t
Got No Home” and “Dust Bowl Refugee” show their voicing of the working man’s troubles through character sketches, each with their own story. Additionally, Guthrie would be involved with Union workers whom he sympathized with as well, also resulting in songs as “Tom Joad” that showed their struggles.

Lastly, a topic Guthrie as well as Seeger and undoubtedly many other protest singers devoted their songs to, was racial discrimination, such as Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” criticized the frequent lynching of African-Americans. Guthrie would speak up against racial discrimination as he wrote “Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)”. This topical song relates the crash of a plane full of migrant workers, who in the newspapers subsequently were called ‘deportees’, not revealing any of the individuals’ names. By not releasing the names of the victims, it became clear that they were not seen as people, but rather as material losses for their work. An important subgenre to the protest music is that of the freedom songs, influenced by gospel and sung by those oppressed in the African-American Civil Rights Movement. The earlier discussed “We Shall Overcome” played an immense role in the African-Americans’ political consciousness, as did “Eyes on the Prize”, the spiritual “This Little Light of Mine” and the later “A Change Is Gonna Come” by soul singer Sam Cooke in 1964.

All of these themes and subgenres would be on Springsteen’s mind as well, as he frequently draws from these influences in his early and later work, as the former will be concisely evaluated here.

After the release of both *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* in 1992 there would be no immediate follow-up album with Springsteen’s new backing band. Instead, old friends were about to be reunited when Springsteen’s manager Jon Landau coined in 1995 that they “might want to record a few tracks with the band – the E Street Band” (qtd. in Dolan 305). The group of musicians came together to record a series of songs that would appear on the following *Greatest Hits* compilation. While most songs were famous hits and artistic highlights collected from earlier albums, songs as “Blood Brothers”, “Secret Garden” and “Streets of Philadelphia” would be new, or in any case newly recorded or previously unreleased. Right before starting work on what would become the *The Ghost of Tom Joad* album, “Streets of Philadelphia” was written and recorded in 1993 for the Jonathan Demme film *Philadelphia*, a movie about a HIV patient who goes through an alienation process in a largely prejudiced and homophobic society. The song would not only grant Springsteen an Academy Award, it also made him “the first heterosexual star to give voice to a gay person’s inner feelings” (Carlin 411). In the spirit of old protest songs that strived for racial justice, the song portrays the deterioration of and a look into the mind of a gay person who fell victim to a deadly disease. Instead of attacking the homophobic society directly, the rhetorical protest song uses this characterization to deliver a more refined criticism. Lamenting that he is “unrecognizable to [himself]”, the sick person hopes not to be ignored by his friends and family and left “wastin’ away on the streets of Philadelphia”. Psychologically the person breaks down steadily, claiming that “my clothes don’t fit me no more” and walking “a thousand miles just to slip this skin”. While gay rights are still a problematic issue in America, the writing of this rhetorical protest song has become a strong statement by a major recording artist who does not resolve the matter, but acknowledges the problem in society. As it turned out, the song proved to be another step in Springsteen’s commitment to fight for civil rights for every American, including those
communities that are somehow excluded from or discriminated by society. *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995) would broaden his social commitment by speaking up for the rights of an underprivileged group of Southerners migrating to the United States.

Now as a husband and father living in California, Springsteen would take frequent motorcycle trips, during which he met many people who each had their own story of hard times. It is with these stories that Springsteen connected instantly. As the nights grew dark, the Los Angeles underworld would come lurking with “dusty armadas of migrant workers on the hunt for jobs and […] nickel-and-dime drug runners” (Carlin 383). The fate and individual stories of these mainly Mexican migrant workers in Los Angeles, a city becoming more desperate every day, touched him profoundly. The city of angels proved to be a place where living conditions and social circumstances were “as if nothing had changed since John Steinbeck walked among the Dust Bowl migrants in the 1930s.” (Carlin 383). Springsteen became so intrigued with these individuals to the extent that he reportedly mentioned “They’re all me. It’s all me”, making a connection with his own “childhood isolation” (Carlin 383). With these immigrants’ stories in mind he started writing a new collection of songs, which provided a return to a political involvement after the self-reflective relationship albums *Tunnel of Love, Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*. By adopting California as his new hometown instead of New Jersey, Springsteen could not ignore the influx of immigrants from Latin America, with Mexico in particular (Dolan 315). These unaccustomed foreigners were discriminated and denied social security by “initiative-happy California voters”, resulting in disconcerted and reactions from many involved (Dolan 315). Released in 1995, many of the songs on *Tom Joad* are bleak and pessimistic tales, much like the *Darkness* and *Nebraska* albums that reach back to the protest hurt songs of Woody Guthrie. The return to political commitment also introduced a widened perspective with songs that were not only critical of injustice happening to U.S. citizens, a group whom Springsteen has sympathized with ever since *Darkness* in 1978, but would now also be
concerned with discriminated people from outside the States who wanted to be a part of the ever-advertised land of freedom.

Although Tom Joad’s storytelling is reminiscent of Nebraska, the protagonist is now a “man who tries to live in society, but knows that his presence in it is tenuous” unlike the earlier characters who were “solitary, alienated men” (Dolan 309). From the protest cry for justice in “The Ghost of Tom Joad”, the history of a steel industry’s collapse in “Youngstown” and the tragic fate of two underpaid and overworked Mexican brothers in “Sinaloa Cowboys”, Springsteen delivers a gloomy but firm statement about another dark side of American society. Because of its themes such as the economic crisis, the working class and racism fit the protest song tradition perfectly, Carlin would compare the album to a “postgrad version of Woody Guthrie’s folk journalism/commentary”, specifying that “Bruce focused his muse on charged storytelling” (386). He further adds that “anything that stood between the character’s voice and the listener’s ear was obviously in the way” (Carlin 386), hence the sober and bare musical quality of the songs. Again using a more refined way of storytelling to get his message across, the comparison to Woody Guthrie, with whom Springsteen became enamored in the eighties, continues nonetheless as the title track refers to John Steinbeck’s novel The Grapes Of Wrath and Guthrie’s own take on the story material. In this novel, the Joad family is forced to leave their Oklahoma home when the state got scourged due to frequent storms appearing in combination with heavy drought. This causes the state of Oklahoma to be engulfed in a so-called dust bowl, resulting in agricultural and economic disaster. The Joads subsequently travel to the state of California to find work and shelter and live a better life, although the son of the family, the on-parole Tom Joad, finds his dreams of the Promised Land in the West not that attainable. Confronted with many other groups of families looking for salvation, the dire situation becomes clear as the family slowly falls apart because of death and disagreement. Once the Joads are able to find work in the peach orchards, conflicts arise between the underpaid
workers and the big corporations exploiting the superfluous workers. The tenuous relationship between those in charge and those in need result in a catastrophe: Tom’s friend Casy – who was trying to unite the workers in a labor union – gets killed during a corporate strike on the workers, driving Tom into the vengeful killing of Casey’s attacker. Now a fugitive, Tom decides he cannot stay in the orchards with this blood on his hands. In a speech which is carefully represented in “The Ghost of Tom Joad”, he bids farewell to his mother while promising her he will live on as a defender and symbol of those in need.

Springsteen did not only feel connected to Steinbeck’s novel and the subsequent film adaptation by John Ford, the story also provided a link to his folk example Woody Guthrie, who wrote his Steinbeck-inspired “Tom Joad” appearing on his Dust Bowl Ballads (1940). The last line of Guthrie’s “Tom Joad” when he sings “Everybody might be just one big soul / Well it looks that a-way to me”, connects to the opening segments of Steinbeck’s novel, where Tom meets the preacher Casy, who is contemplating that everyone is part of this unique big soul (Garman 94). Through the sentiments of injustice, economic greed and the story’s protagonist as a symbol of hope, Springsteen’s Tom Joad album speaks up for the estranged South-American working class immigrants in Los Angeles in the 1990s. These sentiments are prominently present in the title song, which “spoke to the social discontents of George Bush’s New World Order that had persisted into the Clinton years” (Dolan 307). This New World order instituted by President George H.W. Bush was a plan to create an ideal order in society that protected the weak and the poor.

A new partnership of nations has begun, and we stand today at a unique and extraordinary moment. The crisis in the Persian Gulf, as grave as it is, also offers a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation. Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective—a new world order—can emerge: A new era—freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice and more secure in the
quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, east and west, north and south, can prosper and live in harmony.

[...]

A world quite different from the one we've known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak. (George H.W. Bush)

While sounding as an old traditional song due to its acoustic folk sound, the lyrics of the title track revealed that Steinbeck’s story was now represented in contemporary times. Garman sees this representation as Springsteen reconnecting “with the hurt song tradition and [strengthening] his cultural ties to Guthrie” (Garman 94). However, as it turned out soon after the Gulf War, this idealized order did not happen. Mentioned in an ironically mocking way in the song, the narrator bids the people “welcome to the New World Order”, although the lyric is being preceded by images of poverty, restlessness and alienation with men walking aimlessly around the railroad tracks, highway patrol choppers in the air flying over “hot soup in a campfire under the bridge” and with wandering families “sleeping in their cars in the southwest / No home no job no peace no rest”. The chorus then would reveal that the “highway is alive tonight”, first sounding as an uplifting thought, yet would be reduced when the narrator admits that “nobody’s kidding nobody ‘bout where it goes”. At the end of the chorus, the narrator sees no way out of his misery, explaining that he is still “waiting on the ghost of Tom Joad”.

The second verse introduces a preacher, reminiscent of Casy, who also seems to head towards a dead end in his life, lying in a “cardboard box ‘neath the underpass”. However, signaling a sense of combativeness, he proclaims that “the last shall be first and the first shall be last”, derived from the near-similar line in Steinbeck’s novel (Berings 54). Uttering he has
got a “one-way ticket to the promised land”, the firing of a gun in the next lyric reveals that death may be that ticket to a better place, revealing the hopelessness of the situation (Berings 54). The catharsis of the song would come in the third and last verse, in which Tom Joad’s famous ending speech gets referenced in the song.

Now Tom said "Mom, whenever there's a cop beatin' a guy

Wherever a hungry newborn baby cries

Where there's a fight 'gainst the blood and hatred in the air

Look for me Mom I'll be there

Wherever there's somebody fightin' for a place to stand

Or a decent job or a helpin' hand

Wherever somebody's strugglin' to be free

Look in their eyes Mom you'll see me. (The Ghost of Tom Joad)

While more closely tied to Ford’s film version of Tom’s speech, the narrator explicitly emerges in this last verse, in which Springsteen “invoked the work of prior artists whom he admired” (Dolan 319). Ford’s version of this speech does not mention any other characters, while Steinbeck mentioned Casy, which makes the speech a little more coherent (Berings 54). Springsteen’s reinterpretation of the speech reveals an even more pessimistic view than Ford’s and Steinbeck’s, since Springsteen only makes mention of the “struggle and the hurt”. The more pessimistic view would connect to Guthrie’s take on the song, strengthening Springsteen’s ties to this kind of hurt song, in which the characters’ stories criticize the oppression they are suffering from. This borrowing aspect also relates to the magnetic protest song tradition, which conceives new songs building upon themes, lyrics or tunes of older songs. This places “The Ghost of Tom Joad”, and Springsteen’s intentions, firmly into this tradition.
Wherever little children are hungry and cry,
Wherever people ain't free.
Wherever men are fightin' for their rights,
That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma.
That's where I'm a-gonna be. (“Tom Joad” by Woody Guthrie)

With “The Ghost of Tom Joad” setting the mood for the songs to come, the more self-reflective “Highway 29” and “Straight Time” flow into the tragic story in “Sinaloa Cowboys”. Together with “Balboa Park” and “The New Timer”, the song relies on Springsteen’s distinctive character studies which greatly attribute to the rhetorical aspect of these protest songs. The character-driven hurt song relates the misfortune of two Mexican brothers, Miguel and Louis, who traveled to California and subsequently became involved in drug trafficking. Although their father utters his dismay for the racist bosses in charge, he says that “for everything the north gives, it exacts a price in return”. Nonetheless, the two brothers decide to find out what life has in store for them.

You could spend a year in the orchards
Or make half as much in one ten hour shift
Working for the men from Sinaloa
But if you slipped the hydriodic acid
Could burn right through your skin
They'd leave you spittin' up blood in the desert
If you breathed those fumes in (“Sinaloa Cowboys”)

The South-American workers are set to work in dangerous circumstances with chemicals capable to mutilate skin. As a result, they are being disposed of once no longer able to work. Although the money tempts them, as they make “half as much [more] in one ten hour
shift” than in a year in the orchards, the unsafe circumstances result in Louis’ untimely death. One night in winter, their “shack exploded”, after which his brother Michael “kissed his brother’s lips and placed him in his grave”. A similar story appears in “Balboa Park” where a Mexican migrant worker is forced into a shady business in order to survive. For instance, these “services of the border boys” get employed by “men in their Mercedes” until they “end up with the poison in their blood”, suffering the same fate as the brothers in “Sinaloa Cowboys”.

The dark storytelling would continue with the defiant “Youngstown”. With Dale Maharidge’s Journey To Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass serving as a guide, “Youngstown” is written as a historical narrative of the economic collapse in Youngstown, Ohio where “the city’s unemployment rate approached 30% in the early 1980s” (Maharidge 35). The historical structure “identifies and critically questions the role the state plays in advancing interests of big business” (Garman 97), as the poor were no match for the state’s leaders’ greedy decisions. Starting in “eighteen-o-three” with the mining business, the town provided munition during the Civil War “that helped the union win the war”. In the next verse, the narrator’s father joins the industry after coming back from fighting in World War Two. However, the mining town has been reduced to a heap of rubble, with the narrator expressing an accusative line towards the people in charge in the following verse. These “big boys” let the industry collapse themselves at the expense of the local economy, instead of the industry getting destroyed by external forces threatening in wartime.

Well my daddy come on the Ohio works
When he come home from World War Two
Now the yard's just scrap and rubble
He said, "Them big boys did what Hitler couldn't do"
Yeah these mills they built the tanks and bombs
That won this country's wars
We sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam
Now we're wondering what they were dyin' for (“Youngstown”)  

In 1980, “more than 10,000 jobs had left the Youngstown area, and the federal government provided little assistance to a community that helped build the country’s infrastructure and gave their children to military service” (Garman 98). The last lines of the second verse also stress the government’s neglect of these people who sacrificed life and family for their country, a disillusionment Springsteen would repeat similarly on Magic’s “Last to Die”. Contrary to the more sophisticated nature of the rhetorical protest songs, the last verse takes a strong accusing stance towards those who discriminated the workers. In perhaps one of Springsteen’s angriest verses, the narrator expresses the belief that even from the Monongahela valley to the Mesabi iron range, the “story’s always the same”. Working hard for those in charge, the workers ultimately get discarded as blunt tools “once I made you rich enough, rich enough to forget my name”. The narrator’s desperateness culminates in the nihilist last verse where, just like in “The Ghost of Tom Joad”, death might be the only solution to escape. Expressing he does not want a “part of heaven / I would not do heaven’s work well”, the narrator instead prays that the devil comes to take him into the “fiery furnaces of hell”.

Just like in “Sinaloa Cowboys”, the story in “Galveston Bay” reveals accounts of racism. The latter song does not tell the story from the perspective of any South American immigrant, but rather from that of the Vietnamese. Describing a feud between Texan fishermen and Vietnam refugees, this last group tried to settle down along with the Texans, yet they were not greeted with a warm welcome. After fighting “side by side with the Americans”, the Vietnamese Le Bing Son takes his family to the States and becomes a fisherman in Galveston Bay because “it reminded him of home”. The other character in the song however, the Texan Billy Sutter, also works the same fishing grounds and used to fight side by side with Le Bing Son. Springsteen draws parallels between these different people that nonetheless are more alike
than they would think: for instance, before casting their fishing nets into the water they both kiss their sleeping child goodbye. Nonetheless, this fishing rivalry results in hate crimes against the Vietnamese out of the idea “America for Americans”, with Springsteen even namedropping the racist “Texas Klan”. Le managed to defend himself in an attack by shooting the Texan aggressors, ultimately deemed an action of self-defense. When Le did not get sentenced for this incident, it leaves Billy Sutter with a taste for revenge. One night the narrator describes Billy waiting at night to assault and kill the outlandish rival, only to change his mind when he put “his knife into his pocket, took a breath and let him pass”. By namedropping the Ku Klux Klan, “Springsteen calls attention to the deep racism that continues to pervade post-Civil Rights Act America, and illustrates that many working-class whites have historically made people of color the scapegoats for their economic woes” (Garman 102). The grim tale about racism does leave a notion of hope at the end, evoking a little optimism on a very bleak album.

This notion of hope would also appear in the California-inspired “Across the Border”. It is one of the few non-protest songs on the album that evoke the escapism and romanticism of the earlier Born to Run (1975). While all the songs on Tom Joad offer a nihilist account on society, here the narrator softly tells his loved one that “We’ll leave behind my dear / The pain and sadness we found here” and assures her that “someday we’ll drink from God’s blessed waters / And eat the fruit from the vine / I know love and fortune will be mine / Somewhere across the border”. While songs like “Dry Lightning”, “Across the Border” and “My Best Was Never Good Enough” seem like the thematically unfitting songs on the record due to their personal and self-reflective love themes, the last rhetorical song still holds some political value. As Garman notes, the proverb-filled and humorous closing track “My Best” “ridicules the promises offered by the work ethic, upward mobility, and respectability, but, perhaps more importantly, criticizes a popular culture that largely distorts the history of working people” (Garman 104).
Interestingly, although unfamiliar with Pete Seeger at the time, Springsteen’s lyrical approach to the mainly Spanish-speaking subject matter would draw connections to this protest singer. Seeger recorded the Cuban traditional “Guantanamera” in support of the country in the Cuban missile crisis, singing the entire song in Spanish to identify with that group of people. A similar approach appears on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. Living in California where the influx of Hispanic people was undeniable, Springsteen would expand his vocabulary with certain Spanish words, such as “the work that the *jueros* wouldn’t do” in “Sinaloa Cowboys” and the sighing and loving remark “I’ll dream of you my *corazón*”. Although a lot less outspoken than the full-Spanish song that Seeger recorded, it nonetheless shows Springsteen’s dialectal identification with this group of underprivileged citizens in his hurt songs.

Although Springsteen initially tried to describe social reality much like Woody Guthrie did in his time, the topical songs of *The Ghost of Tom Joad* paradoxically did not fit the times at all, as the 1990s were a period of economic boom where social problems like unemployment were declining steadily (Dolan 321). Springsteen could on the one hand be seen as an artist who in reality was not that connected to contemporary society, but on the other hand also as capturing “a larger, as yet unarticulated truth about his time, about the ways in which the victories won by his generation during the last two decades were built in many ways on hope, sand and irredeemable debt” (Dolan 323). In this way, the songs served as a reminder of the troubles and sacrifices of those that helped make the country become what it is now.

In conclusion, the *Tom Joad* album is Springsteen’s powerful and convincing return to political songwriting. As far as both music and songwriting are concerned, the album is firmly grounded in the protest song tradition. With the tribute to Woody Guthrie as a guide, Springsteen is concerned with the economic crisis, injustice and racism in his narrative-driven folk songs which provide a rhetorical account of these themes in the frequent character sketches. Furthermore, the musical accompaniment is very sober, with only a few chord changes in every
song, connecting them to the rather simple magnetic songs. Up until 1995, *The Ghost of Tom Joad* was undoubtedly one of the starkest and pessimistic portrayal of American reality of his entire career.
Chapter 4: The Reunion Tour: Living in your American Skin (1999)

After *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Springsteen would reunite with the E-Street Band for the 1999 Reunion/Revival Tour. With no immediate plans to release a full E-Street album, Springsteen and the band tried out some new songs in the studio around 1998-1999 before the tour would kick off in Europe. As soon as the Reunion Tour commenced in Europe, Springsteen and the band would introduce a few new songs to their live audience. Without a new album in sight, the decision to play some newly written songs such as “American Skin (41 Shots)” and “Land of Hope and Dreams” was not a commercial move, but rather motivated politically. The political climate with George W. Bush and the U.S.’s earlier involvement in the Gulf War called for one of Springsteen’s activist songs. Whereas “41 Shots” will be analyzed here, “Land of Hope and Dreams” will be discussed in the section on *Wrecking Ball*, the album in which the song has a stronger thematic function.

Like most topical songs by Guthrie, Dylan and Seeger, the powerful “American Skin (41 Shots)” was written in 2000 and covers an event in American history which sparked a lot of public controversy, after which the topical song based on the event would receive its own share of that controversy: the New York City Police’s lethal shooting of the young and innocent African-American Amadou Diallo. As Carlin describes in *Bruce*, the police were looking for a suspect of rape and were confronted with the immigrant boy on his doorstep. The Guinean Diallo did not fully grasp the English language, so he reached into his pocket to reveal his identification papers. However, mistaking the wallet for a gun, one police man started shooting. Due to what was probably blind panic, the other officers opened fire as well, resulting in a total of forty-one shots of which nineteen hit the target (Carlin 402). It should come as no surprise that Springsteen, who had always openly advocated for racial equality (as his frequent on-stage embraces with his African-American E-Street member and saxophone sidekick Clarence Clemons playfully exemplified), wanted to react to the event.
While the first verse depicts the perspective of a police officer trying to grasp the reality of what he has done (“You’re kneeling over his body in the vestibule / Praying for his life”), the second verse describes a mother instructing her – supposedly colored – son what to do when encountering a policeman. In a heartfelt advice from mother to son, she urges the boy to always be polite when stopped and questioned by an officer, never to run away and always to keep his hands in sight. The pre-chorus of the song builds up while detailing the circumstances of Diallo’s death, wondering “Is it a gun / Is it a knife / Is it a wallet / This is your life”. In the last segment the focus shifts from an individual to a more collective representation of the tragic drama. Dolan mentions that “all his life, Springsteen had believed in and preached a biracial America” (357), a wish that this song makes explicit in the closing lines of the last verse. Indeed, everyone, of every race or background, is according to Springsteen’s song “baptized in these waters / And in each other’s blood”. By stressing the word “we”, reminiscent of the old magnetic protest songs encouraging collective action and solidarity, Springsteen tries to unite the different racial groups in the country under one name: American. Opening and closing with a trance-like repetition of “41 shots”, the protest song reveals the racist environment that the United States still was for colored citizens such as African Americans and certain Hispanics. Condemning this, the narrator proclaims that “you can get killed just for living in your American skin”.

“41 shots, and we'll take that ride
'Cross this bloody river to the other side
41 shots, I got my boots caked with this mud
We're baptized in these waters (baptized in these waters)
And in each other's blood (and in each other's blood)” (“American Skin”)

Even before the song was actually performed in New York City, or before most outraged people actually heard the song apart from its disconcerting song title, “the song [became] by
definition an antipolice rant” (Dolan 358). That Springsteen received messages from individuals and official instances asking him not to play the song, demonstrates the influential power of music and exposes the fear of the police department (Dolan 359). Thus, when the band played the tour’s final shows in New York City’s Madison Square Garden, the city whose police force would most directly be ‘attacked’. greeted Springsteen not with chants of his name, but rather commenced booing when the song was played. With one of these live performances included on the Live in New York City album and getting its first studio release on 2014’s *High Hopes*, the song continues to inspire. A few years later, when Springsteen’s country seemingly needed the healing power of music to cope with a national disaster, he reassembled the E-Street Band in the studio to deliver their first joint album since 1984’s *Born in the U.S.A.*, the post-9/11 album *The Rising*. 

In the early morning of September 11, 2001 the United States of America would suffer one of the hardest setbacks in its history when the first of four hijacked planes flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. After a second flight collided with the South Tower only some fifteen minutes later it became clear to the nation that the crashes were no coincidence. Not long after the attacks, it was revealed that Muslim fundamentalist Osama Bin Laden was behind the attacks, resulting in a growing hate and distrust of the Middle-East. What would follow was days, weeks and months of picking up the pieces and mourning the departed. The sight of the smoldering heap of burning dirt from the Jersey side must have struck Springsteen. It was around that time that, as he himself puts it, “some kid rolled his window down and said, ‘Hey man, we need ya.’” (qtd. in Dolan 367). Without a doubt the plea did not only refer to the potentially cathartic power of Springsteen’s live shows, but also expressed the wish for new music that would specifically address the disaster. This new music appeared on The Rising (2002), a collection of fifteen songs that, according to Yates, consists of three themes. The first theme is the attacks themselves, the second the aftermath of the disaster and the third the healing sense of hope for the future (Yates 34). A watershed moment for the nation thus ushered in a new phase in Springsteen’s career, his first E-Street Band album since 1984’s Born in the U.S.A. While The Rising contains a few light-hearted songs such as “Waitin’ on a Sunny Day” and ”Mary’s Place”, the lion’s share of the album consists of grief-stricken songs such as “Into the Fire”, “Nothing Man” or “You’re Missing”, some of which, for instance “My City of Ruins”, are laced with hope. Although hardly any of the songs directly address the 9/11 tragedy, they most definitely function as part of a certain healing process as many of them are influenced by a religious gospel atmosphere, such as in a freedom protest song as “We Shall Overcome”. Contrary to Tom Joad, the album does not have a theme centered on any kind of indictment of government misconduct. Instead the music provides a solemn take on comforting the nation. In
the songs concerning loss or hope there may not be a direct form of protest, yet there are some subtle moments in the lyrics that do seem to take a stance politically, and are thus reminiscent of the rhetorical protest songs because of their more refined and veiled criticism. For instance, there is the wish for the peaceful relations between people of different nations in the romantic “Worlds Apart” and the disapproving of vengeful actions in “Lonesome Day”, although they are never made explicit. This implicitness suggests they are semi-topical songs, representing American reality after 9/11, without ever explicitly mentioning the disaster itself. While protest music typically centers on a certain problem or sense of inequality in a particular society, it also deals with reuniting a divided people suffering from the same kind of sorrow. The characters in the songs all are conflicted because of the tragedy that happened to them, their friends or family members, sharing a connection with the, although different, struggles that Woody Guthrie described in his working class hurt songs. Through the Rising songs – inspired also by the collectively sung magnetic protest songs and freedom songs – the people could regenerate hope for a better life, and that aspect of protest songs is exactly what is at work in the gospel-influenced The Rising.

The opening track “Lonesome Day” immediately evokes the album’s themes of coping with the loss of a loved one. Although the narrator thought he knew everything there was to know about his beloved, now that he is confronted with his or her loss he has to admit he “didn’t know that much”. Severely down-hearted because he has to go on alone, he tries to soothe himself by saying he will be alright “if I can get through this lonesome day”. The second verse introduces the wish for revenge, a feeling that many Americans must have felt after the 9/11 attacks: the notion of “a little revenge and this too shall pass”. However, the third verse introduces a critical reflection upon this emotional reaction. Marsh interprets the line “Better ask questions before you shoot” as a clear warning against this action, stating that you have to
“recognize that [revenge] won’t work” (Marsh 675). Retaliating against foreign countries, who would act as a scapegoat, is subtly and rhetorically disapproved of in this song.

“Better ask questions before you shoot.
Deceit and betrayal's bitter fruit.
It's hard to swallow, come time to pay,
That taste on your tongue don't easily slip away.
Let kingdom come, I'm gonna find my way,
After this Lonesome Day. (Lonesome Day”)

Influenced by the exact moment of the attacks, “Into the Fire” is written from the perspective of a firefighter, rushing up the stairs or diving into rubble to save who could be saved. As Springsteen said, “the picture I couldn’t let go of was the emergency workers going up the stairs as others rushed down to safety” (qtd. in Dolan 367). In many cases the firefighters died, taking the place of the ones they saved, their lovers left behind sighing “I need your kiss, but love and duty called you someplace higher / Somewhere up the stairs, into the fire”. The repetition in the next section of the song functions as a collective prayer, much like the early magnetic protest songs and gospel songs. As Dolan specified, Springsteen “may have been trying to write something deliberately anthemic, something with which an audience could easily sing along” (Dolan 367). The self-sacrificing rescue worker becomes a symbol of hope, in which the narrator prays that his strength, his faith, his hope, his love might be passed on to the rescued victims or the families of those that did not survive.

“May your strength give us strength
May your faith give us faith
May your hope give us hope
May your love give us love” (Into the Fire)
Other songs such as “Worlds Apart” and “Paradise” try to find common ground between the United States and the Islamic countries, whose relationship was now tense and who were both trying to find solace. “Worlds Apart”, supported by a mix of Western and mainly Eastern musical vibes, delivers a similar reference. Describing a love relationship between a Muslim and a Westerner, the friends - or lovers - fail to connect when “neath Allah’s blessed rain we remain worlds apart”. Without condemning the supposed perpetrators and their actions, the song acts as a “modern variation of *Romeo and Juliet* in the divide between the Western World and the Middle East” (Carlin 415).

Sometimes the truth just ain't enough
Or is it too much in times like this
Let's throw the truth away we'll find it in this kiss
In your skin upon my skin in the beating of our hearts
May the living let us in before the dead tear us apart (“Worlds Apart”)

With the political climate of prejudice and blind hate making peaceful relations between these two cultures impossible, the truth of the situation was probably just too soon to grasp or, as the narrator states, “too much in times like this” to avoid stereotyping the Islamic countries. The song hereby hopes that love and mutual understanding is possible between those who are still alive “before the dead tear us apart” by not being able to see past the stereotypes created by the attacks. In conclusion, Yates states that Springsteen “humanizes the effect through the interracial couple as he recounts their struggle to be together in a time when anyone associated with Islam is seen as the enemy” (Yates 38). Another identification with the non-American side returns in “Paradise”, detailing the last moments of a Middle-Eastern suicide bomber. The verses describe the person going to the crowded marketplace, watching the people pass who would no longer be there only moments after: “I hold my breath and close my eyes / And I wait for paradise”. In the second verse, “Springsteen […] equates the bomber with the mourner who
can’t let go” (Marsh 674). These lyrics allude to someone mourning among the Virginia hills that have “gone to brown”, probably following the loss of a loved one by such an action. The third verse reveals that the narrator searches for peace in the eyes of the lost one, yet they are “empty as paradise”. However, although it is unclear which character speaks these words it is clear that the paradise is indeed empty. As rhetorical protest songs, they are not overtly political but, just like “Lonesome Day”, draw subtle conclusions from their characterizations and storytelling.

The centerpiece of the album is undoubtedly “The Rising”, a song about “reciprocal redemption” and unifying “all the communal good that Springsteen sought to do with his work in the last three years, both on the revival tour and in his attempts to write about the recent crisis” (Dolan 372). “The Rising” again identifies with a firefighter rushing up the stairs to do his duty, almost as a follow-up to “Into the Fire”. The opening lines evoke the image of the rescue worker surrounded by smoke, who is losing track of “How far I’ve gone, how high I’ve climbed”. Relating the circumstances of that day, he describes how he left his house with “bells ringing” and arriving at the sense “on wheels of fire”. However, the strength of the song lies in the communal singing during the chorus, in which the listener gets invited to “come on up for the rising”. Here the focus shifts from a rescue mission to a praying moment, in which the narrator preacher-like tries to gather the community on its feet again. This ties to Springsteen’s preaching attitudes in concerts during the revival tour in the lengthy “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out” and would culminate in this song on the record, using both “Catholic imagery and acquired Pentecostal revival” (Dolan 372). Followed by a wordless chant of the melody, the singing evokes the same feeling of togetherness and strength that was characteristic for the Civil Rights Movement freedom songs. Dolan would call the song “in many ways Springsteen’s finest work song. It’s about getting up in the morning and doing your job, whatever it is, and how you draw
the strength to do it well from the community that you hope to help with your labor.” (Dolan 372).

“Come on up for the rising
Come on up, lay your hands in mine
Come on up for the rising
Come on up for the rising tonight” (“The Rising”)

Finally, the closing track of the album delivered an elegiac and hopeful ending. The mournful ballad “My City of Ruins” was so aptly titled and engaged in such evocative storytelling that many watching the fund-raising television show, on which it appeared just days after the tragedy, believed it to be written right after the tragedy struck. However, the song was actually penned some time earlier as a desolate portrayal of what had happened to Springsteen’s hometown Asbury Park (Carlin 367-368). Much like he did on the more upbeat “Mary’s Place”, where there is nothing left to do but “drop the needle and pray”, the crooning gospel atmosphere of “My City of Ruins” reveals the narrator praying for the faith “with these hands, Lord, with these hands”. The religious imagery throughout the record reaches a peak in this ultimate last prayer to overcoming a loss, first based upon the decline of Springsteen’s own Asbury Park, but then inextricably connected to the 9/11 disaster.

The first verse describes the apocalyptic state of his hometown, where the “Church door’s thrown open / I can hear the organ’s song / But the congregation’s gone”. The second verse reveals the hopelessness that lives among the civilians where there are “young men on the corner like scattered leaves” and the buildings all display “boarded up windows”, based in a bare city landscape with “empty streets”. The first sense of hope and resurrection comes with the powerful sing-along bridge segment, where the narrator drives the listener into communal singing by repeatedly chanting to “come on [and] rise up”. Having built towards this unifying sentiment, the narrator urges the audience to rise up collectively, not to battle the enemy, but
rather their own feelings of grief. Just like “The Rising” and “Into the Fire” the song shows strong connections to the magnetic protest songs and freedom songs, featuring a repetitive prayer-like structure with these recurrent encouragement of hope and action. Additionally, the third verse reveals not a communal loss, but a very intimate and personal one.

Now's there's tears on the pillow
Darlin' where we slept
And you took my heart when you left
Without your sweet kiss
My soul is lost, my friend
Tell me how do I begin again?
My city's in ruins

My city's in ruins (“My City of Ruins”)

This personal perspective connects with the feelings of the victims’ families who were now left with a gaping hole in their lives, making it hard to carry on. The verse makes an identification with the narrator possible, especially the compelling question how to begin again now that tragedy struck their hometown. On what would be a grief-stricken and emotional album, the closing song allows for redemption: one day the people will overcome the tragedy, as long as there is hope in their hearts and there is faith to believe in a better tomorrow.
Chapter 6: Feel a Dirty Wind Blowing: *Devils & Dust* (2005-2006)

After 9/11, President George W. Bush started his Global War on Terrorism and invaded Afghanistan in 2001, hoping to overturn the terrorist organization al-Qaeda along with its leader and perpetrator behind the 9/11 attacks Osama Bin Laden. Bush’s military plans continued in 2002 when in his State of the Union Address he spoke of an “axis of evil”, including Iran and Iraq, and subsequently invaded the latter country on suspicion of the possession of weapons of mass destruction. Ultimately, the Bush administration made sure that “the House of Representatives and then the Senate voted to give the president an unprecedented blank check in dealing with Iraq” (Dolan 375). Springsteen, touring the world with *The Rising*, followed the political developments closely. When the world press reported that America was bombing the Iraqi city of Baghdad in 2003, Springsteen could no longer just stand by and watch. “I knew that after we invaded Iraq I was going to be involved in the [2004] election,” he told *Rolling Stone* publisher Jann Wenner” (Carlin 418). Feeling he and the American people paid the price for the Iraq invasion, Springsteen concludes that this war on terrorism “has [not] made America safer.” (qtd. in Carlin 418).

Springsteen started to openly criticize the war while on tour in 2003 supporting his *The Rising* album. He once again performed Edwin Starr’s “War” when tensions in the conflict were running high on the suspicion of weapons of mass destruction (Dolan 376), and he proclaimed that “playing with the truth” is not the American way, conclusively stating that “demanding accountability from our leaders and taking our time to search out the truth… that’s the American way” (qtd. in Carlin 419). While he had always been very cautious about articulating his political preferences, the strategy of the Bush administration persuaded him to choose sides. Having met the 2004 democratic presidential candidate John Kerry some twenty-five years earlier, Springsteen immediately decided to join the campaign delivering promotional concerts all over the country with such rallying songs as “The Promised Land” and “No Surrender”
When many months after Springsteen wrote the title track of his next album *Devils & Dust*, President George W. Bush got re-elected, Springsteen set to work on a new collection of songs. “Devils & Dust” would saw the seed for this collection of folk and country tracks that reminded of both the *Nebraska* and the *Tom Joad* records. Although lacking a common theme, the *Devils* songs return to the style of these two acoustic folk albums, and contain the kind of character sketches that had featured prominently in a large part of Springsteen’s career. In Carlin’s words, the album was a return to the “lonesome houses and the sad-eyed souls living within” (421). The songs’ stories reach back to the American rhetorical and magnetic protest song tradition, as they draw on acoustic folk sound, American West imagery and American working-class characters, evoking the setting of Guthrie’s early *Dust Bowl Ballads* and hurt songs.

A stark anti-war rhetorical protest song, “Devils & Dust” depicts the fears and doubts of American soldiers involved in the Iraq war. Accompanied by acoustic guitar and harmonica, it was presumably written the first year of the second war between the U.S. and Iraq. Set in the desert, the song describes a soldier going through an existential crisis. Although seemingly ready to defend himself and to eliminate the enemy, he is unsure of whom to trust in the desolate land. As his finger is on the trigger, he is looking into his friend Bobbie’s eyes where he sees only “devils and dust”. Mentioning to Bobbie that “home’s a long, long way from us”, the narrator tries to find faith and reassurance in God to make sense to him about the things he is doing. In a line that is probably derived from the title of Bob Dylan’s 1964 “With God on Our Side”, the narrator states that God is there for him, although the desolate setting reveals his doubts are stronger than faith in God.

I got God on my side
I’m just trying to survive
What if what you do to survive
Kills the things you love
Fear’s a powerful thing
It can turn your heart black you can trust
It’ll take your God filled soul
And fill it with devils and dust (“Devils & Dust”)

In order to survive in wartime the soldier sometimes must perform actions that seem to deprive him of his humanity. The fear that is in his heart takes over and fills it with what he calls the devils and dust, which represents his moral corruption in wartime while trying to survive in a desolate desert wasteland. His faith is tested again in the next verse after Bobbie’s death. The narrator has dreams about him in “a field of blood and stone”, where the “blood began to dry / The smell began to rise”. After that, the second chorus changes the perspective from a first person singular to a first person plural, and states that “we got God on our side”. This is a connection to the early protest songs, the “we” trying to establish togetherness and to involve the audience in the struggle. The third verse also reveals a communal wish that adds more protest qualities to the song, as “Now every woman and every man / They want to take a righteous stand”. Their wish is to find “the love that God wills / And the faith that He commands”. In conclusion, the soldier is unsure of what moral values rule the land and what moral values he should strive for, because when he looks “inside [his] heart / There’s just devils and dust”. Another interpretation of its meaning is coined by Dolan, who calls the song one of the more unique songs about the U.S. conflict with Iraq, stating that there is “no enemy combatant in this song, neither the caricatured and interchangeable Muslim villains of the right nor the Bush-and-Cheney-led ‘idiots’ of the left” (380). Instead, there is an introspective look into the mind of the narrator and his friend Bobbie which for Dolan is the “real conflict” in the songs, namely “the war at home with its two Americans looking at each other in close quarters
and finding each other increasingly unrecognizable” (380). Dolan here refers to the country’s estrangement away from its ideals of freedom and peace, which are now severely questioned now the American people are once again sent to war.

Apart from the title track, there are few songs in the album that are of the same protest nature. The album lacks a linear thematic progression that might be due to the fact that most tracks were written many years before the album’s release. For instance, “The Hitter” and “Long Time Coming” were written and performed around the time of the Tom Joad tour, while the title track “Devils & Dust” would have been written in 2003 (Carlin 421). A couple of songs are self-reflective songs about love and fatherhood, thematically in the vein of the Human Touch/Lucky Town albums. “All The Way Home”, for instance, a song about a man having failed his loved one and trying to win her confidence again and the self-reflective “Long Time Coming”, about failing as a father figure (“Feel another one kickin’ inside / I ain’t gonna fuck it up this time”), do not touch upon any political ground, nor do they have obvious protest song characteristics. Nonetheless, the characters in these rhetorical protest songs, as well as in the touching story of a mother and her son in “Black Cowboys”, the Biblical story of “Jesus Was An Only Son”, the heartbreaking narrative in “The Hitter” and the sexually controversial “Reno” all have something in common: they are brooding with conflict and disappointment, trying to fix the bygone relationships with their families and find their own way in the world. This rhetorical approach, setting the mood for the entire album, may very likely reflect Springsteen’s dejection as President George W. Bush would govern his country for the next four years.

For instance, the controversial “Reno” relates the story of a desperate man, looking for some enjoyment and distraction from his misery, who visits a prostitute in a motel room near the Central Mexican River, thinking it will give him “all I’d ever need”. Yet quickly the narrator acknowledges that “somehow all you ever need’s / Never really quite enough”. Upon making
love to her, the narrator reflects upon the woman Maria’s remark that it will be the best night he will ever have, stating “It wasn’t the best I ever had / Not even close”. This failure to connect to people or experiences, signals his disillusionment and tiredness with life.

One of the stronger narrative and character-driven songs, “Black Cowboys,” tells the story of Rainey Williams, growing up around the Mott Haven streets in the Bronx in New York City. That it is an unstable and dangerous place for a child to grow up in speaks from the line he “ran past melted candles and flower wreaths” that were adorning the pictures of many “young black faces / Whose death and blood consecrated these places”. The criminal environment with “stray bullets” flying past makes Rainey’s mother want to keep him inside and protect him, like the mother in “American Skin (41 Shots)”. Having found a man “whose business was the boulevard”, Rainey’s mother Lynette declines into trouble, ultimately “getting lost in the days”. Rainey, who has read the books about the black cowboys of Oklahoma range and the Seminole scouts fighting the tribes of the Great Plains, decides to leave his deteriorated mother to find a better life for himself. “The Hitter”, another narrative song, which had already been performed during the Joad tour, tells the story of a fighter who returns to his mother after years of earning his money entertaining people while fighting. In the end, he only has one request for her, which is to “just open the door and let me lie down for a while”. In the same musical vein of the Tom Joad album, the gentle acoustic guitar strum contains only three chords, strengthening a structural link to the straightforward magnetic songs.

The sorrowful closing song of the album, “Matamoros Banks” harks back to the rhetorical protest nature of The Ghost of Tom Joad. As Springsteen himself states in the album’s liner notes, the song relates to the many illegal immigrants trying to cross the border.

Each year many die crossing the deserts, mountains, and rivers of our southern border in search of a better life. Here I follow the journey backwards, from the body at the
river bottom, to the man walking across the desert towards the banks of the Rio
Grande.

Although touching upon the same fate of Southerners like “Sinaloa Cowboys” did, “Matamoros Banks” reveals a love story behind the misery. Reminiscent of the hopeful *Joad* track “Across the Border”, the beloved of the deceased immigrant longs for his kiss, along with a “touch of your loving fingertips”. Sharing the same resurrection theme as *The Rising*’s “Further On Up the Road” with the lover asking to “meet me on the Matamoros Banks”, the song is a reflection upon love and death while it indirectly also gives a voice to the many immigrants that, due to the U.S. immigration policy, try their luck by entering the country illegally. Just like in *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Springsteen would incorporate Spanish words in his hurt songs, evoking not only a more picturesque and authentic setting in his songs, but also an identification with the lonesome characters from the small towns on the U.S. border. For instance, in “Reno” he mentions *vaqueros* (which he translates in the liner notes as ‘cowboys’) and the following lines in “Silver Palomino”.

> Our mustaneros [=mustangers] were the very best, sir
> But they could never lay a rope on her
> No corral will ever hold
> The silver palomino
> In my dreams bareback I ride
> Over the pradera [= prairie] low and wide
> ‘Cross the scrub desert floor
> I’d give my riata [= rope] and spurs
> If I could be forever yours
> I’d ride into the serrania [= sierra] where no one goes (‘Silver Palomino’)


Overall musically denser and more melodic than its acoustic predecessors, the songwriting of *Devils & Dust* does not match the quality of the storytelling and of the lengthy character sketches in the dark folk tales on *Nebraska*. But the album does establish Springsteen once more as a successor of Woody Guthrie with his hurt songs, rekindling the flame of folk music which he discovered in his thirties, he assumes the role of commentator on the society of his time. His brooding tales of desperation and hopelessness rhetorically function as metaphors for the same sentiments that were present in American society around 2005, and which would be strengthened with Springsteen’s *Magic* album in 2007. Upon being awarded the 2006 Grammy for Best Rock Vocal for the title song “Devils & Dust”, Springsteen came on-stage to perform the song solo and acoustically, shouting at the end to “bring ‘em home”. A reference to the title of a protest folk song that Pete Seeger popularized in the early sixties, the shout does not only attest Springsteen’s familiarity with folk music, but also his strong belief in that music’s relevance in modern times.

The folk and country songs of *Devils & Dust* may have inspired Springsteen to get back to the core of his country’s musical history, as only a year later he recorded and released an album of traditional folk and gospel songs, *The Seeger Sessions: We Shall Overcome*. In 1997, Springsteen had been asked to record a song with a group of folk musicians for a tribute album for activist folk singer Pete Seeger (Dolan 340). Unfamiliar with Pete Seeger’s music, Springsteen “headed to the record store and came back with an armful of Pete Seeger records”, and later stated that their “wealth of songs, their richness and power […] changed what [he] thought [he] knew about ‘folk music’” (qtd. in Dolan 340).

*The Seeger Sessions: We Shall Overcome* did not originate from a political motivation. Instead, the joyful music-making was an escapist way of turning away from the political tension in the country (Dolan 396). However, each song had its own specific early twentieth-century background and was often fueled by political sentiments. Many songs were probably included
in the album’s track list exactly because of their still-relevant political ideas. As Carlin mentioned, the “early songs, the ones about work and slavery and the outsized characters who wielded the axes, hammers, picks, and guns that built America’s identity, if not the nation itself, never left Bruce’s imagination” (423). As such, the music is tied to the story Springsteen tried to tell throughout his career, trying to speak up for the rights of the underprivileged in his country. Indeed, Springsteen must have considered the songs strikingly topical when unflattering news reports and images about the “neglect and destruction along the Gulf Coast” and the “federal government’s fumbling response to Hurricane Katrina in the fall of 2005” (Dolan 396) reached the American people.

For instance, the Irish folk song “Mrs. McGrath” takes an anti-war stance, relating the story of a son returning home from overseas, having lost both legs due to a cannonball hit in the war. “My Oklahoma Home” evoked Guthrie’s Dust Bowl Ballads, delivering a fiery story of hurricanes sweeping the land and ridding the people of any financial hope when their home was “blown away”. The album also included humorous folk songs such as “Old Dan Tucker” and “Froggie Went A-Courtin’” and character-driven songs as “John Henry” and “Jesse James” which provided a lighter side to the political songs as “Erie Canal”. Perhaps the most historically activist song on the album – apart from the gospel title track “We Shall Overcome” – is the powerful Seeger song “Eyes on the Prize”, as it provided a recurrent political message and a collective wish not to give up the fight for racial equality during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s.

The only thing I did was right
Was the day we started to fight
Keep your eyes on the prize
Hold on (“Eyes on the Prize”, on We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions)
Apart from the aforementioned “Bring ‘Em Home” and the children’s song “Buffalo Gals” the bonus edition of the record also featured Springsteen’s “American Land”, inspired by Pete Seeger’s own musical rendition of Andrew Kovaly’s poem “He Lies in the American Land”. Creating an entirely original folk song out of Seeger’s rendition, he includes the first lines as he sings “What is this land America, so many travel there / I’m going now while I’m still young – my darling meet me there”. As he portrays the immigrants’ visions of the land of milk and honey, the narrator claims that there are “diamonds in the sidewalk” and beer that “flows through the faucets all night long”. While these visions were probably on many immigrants’ minds, the imagery signals a naïve sense of idealization of the Promised Land, which results in an ironic approach to the American land he is singing about. To this day a concert favorite, the reworking of Seeger’s song once again confirms Springsteen’s devotion to act as a spokesman for his generation in the tradition of pioneers as Pete Seeger.

“Ah, my God! What is the land of America?
So many people travelling there
I will go too, for I am still young
God, the Lord will grant me good luck there” (“He Lies in the American Land”, Pete Seeger)

The subsequent Seeger Sessions tour did not feature the E-Street Band, but instead travelled the world with a large group of folk musicians. In addition to traditional songs, Springsteen also incorporated a few of his own songs into the tour, reworked to fit into the folk picture. Audience favorites as “Growin’ Up” and “Blinded by the Light” from his first album would feature prominently, as did the more recent “My City of Ruins” and “Long Time Comin’”, along with a new song that would end up on the next album. That song, “Long Walk Home”, depicts a changed nation through the eyes of a person returning to his hometown after many years, yet finding his birthplace diminished due to unemployment and bankruptcy. As a
powerful metaphor for what happened to the country during the Bush presidency, the song would be the starting point for the *Magic* album. In contrast to the *Seeger Sessions* album, which was filled with non-original Springsteen songs, *Magic* would provide Springsteen’s own perspective on what had happened in the country since the invasion of Iraq began.

It had been nearly five years since the recording of *The Rising* when Springsteen decided to get back to work with the E-Street Band to create one of his most politically ambitious records of his career: *Magic*. A prime example of mainly rhetorical protest songs, most of the album’s anti-war songs reveal their political awareness indirectly by acknowledging problems in a more implicit way. Moreover, because of their commercially appealing rock treatment, the songs were able to be frequently broadcasted on radio and enjoyed separated from their political meaning (cf. *Born in the U.S.A.*) (Denisoff 18). The album sprang from Springsteen’s earlier written song “Long Walk Home” and continued Springsteen’s denouncement of President Bush’s administration that began with *The Rising* and gradually evolved into a more resilient approach with *Devils & Dust*. Heavily affected by the New Orleans disaster, where Hurricane Katrina resulted in heavy material and personal loss, Springsteen became more disillusioned with how the country was run and how similar national disasters were coped with (Carlin 425). Subsequently, the songs Springsteen wrote around 2007 all condemned the government’s neglect for those in need.

As Carlin pointed out and Springsteen elaborated upon, the new songs on *Magic* dealt with the failure of the government by portraying a “broken romance” (425). Springsteen explained that “the best of my music that has social implications functions like that […] They reach for your heart first, speak to your soul, then they get in your bloodstream, move through the rest of your body and into your mind.” (qtd. in Carlin 425). *Magic* certainly featured a lighter side with love songs such as “I’ll Work for Your Love”, “You’ll Be Comin’ Down” and the sweet summer song “Girls In Their Summer Clothes”. However, the lion’s share of the album consisted of politically inspired songs, signaling Springsteen’s estrangement from his country’s original ideals. This strong feeling would appear in songs such as the aforementioned “Long
Walk Home”, the post-election day ‘romance’ in “Livin’ In The Future” and the John Kerry inspired “Last to Die”.

*Magic* opens with the hard-rocking “Radio Nowhere”, introducing the album’s theme of estrangement. Trying to find his way home, the narrator explicitly talks of a “last lone American night”, identifying the album’s setting as an American one. Searching for a “world with some soul”, he desperately seeks some connection by asking the world if there’s “anybody alive out there”, because in the current society he does not seem to be able to find any authentic connections. The R&B pop song “Livin’ in The Future” reveals a more political stance by using the earlier “romance” approach to rhetorically imply a political meaning. Springsteen commences the song with the break-up between the protagonist and his lover. Subsequently, the narrator retrospectively realizes that “what I knew had come”, ever since he kissed her and tasted ominous blood on her tongue. While superficially still a break-up song, the second verse reveals something more complex. There, the narrator looks back to the first day they met, which was – not surprisingly – when he “woke up on election day”. Picturing his lover as a femme fatale with boot heels “clickin’ like the barrel of a pistol spinnin’ round” and appearing under ominous circumstances such as a “dirty sun” and “sky of gunpowder”, Springsteen connects this story to the re-election of George W. Bush. While there initially was a sense of attraction, the dark signs were now omnipresent (Carlin 425-426). The second chorus, as did the first, reassures us not to worry, because “we’re living in the future / and none of this has happened yet”. The “we” again evokes a collective call to sing along and share in the sentiments of the song.

The earth it gave away

The sea rose towards the sun

I opened up my heart to you

It got all damaged and undone
My ship Liberty sailed away
On a bloody red horizon
The groundskeeper opened the gates
And let the wild dogs run (“Livin’ in The Future”)

The song’s bridge section builds further upon the ominous signs on this Election Day, stating that the “ship Liberty sailed away”. The presents of a ship called “Liberty” now connects the song undeniably to Bush’s re-election. The last verse once more reveals the narrator’s desperateness, as he hears the sinking sound “of somethin’ righteous goin’ under”. The only thing the narrator and the audience are left to do is pretending to live in the future, where all of this misery is non-existent. Interpreted as a “state of denial” (Carlin 426), the sentiment offers an escapist way out of the narrator’s grief (Carlin 426). The introduction to this song that Springsteen delivered on 28 September 2007’s Today Show, resulted in a direct and daring political rally that possibly alienated some people in the audience or watching at home. As recorded in Dolan’s biography, the speech went as follows:

Over the past six years we’ve had to add to the American picture: rendition, illegal wiretapping, voter-suppression, no habeas corpus, the neglect of our great city New Orleans and her people, and an attack on the Constitution and the loss of our best young men and women in a tragic war (Springsteen qtd. in Dolan 412).

The next song, the harmonica-driven “Gypsy Biker” reportedly “absorbed the misguide hometown jubilation that Bruce had cut from ‘Long Walk Home’” (Dolan 407). More straightforwardly political, the song tells the story of the homecoming of a gypsy biker after he fought in the Iraq war. However, the family suffers an emotional blow as the soldier gets sent back home in a coffin. At the end of the last verse, the narrator reflects upon the dead, stating that to them “it don’t matter much ‘bout who’s wrong or right”. The more refined and rhetorical comment on government’s wrongdoing is in this line, which alludes to the senselessness of war.
Upon introducing the title song “Magic” to audiences on the album’s tour stop in East Rutherford, New Jersey on October 10 2007, Springsteen talked about the “Orwellian moment” American society lived in, where “things that are true are made out to be lies and things that are lies are made out to be true”. At the end of his speech he remarked about the song’s title: “it’s not really about magic… but it’s about tricks”. A short, semi-acoustic track, “Magic” reveals a musical connection to the early Guthrie protest songs, while using the metaphor of a magician to symbolize the government’s manipulation, connecting it to the rhetorical tradition. Taking the perspective of a magician manipulating his audience, the song draws parallels between the magician’s tricks and the government’s. After performing tricks such as making a coin disappear and being thrown shackled into a river, the magician advises the listener to “Trust none of what you hear / And less of what you see / This is what will be”. In the end, the next stanza is another warning to the audience. If they volunteer to be cut in half by the magician, they will forfeit their freedom without realizing it. This freedom, which makes up for a huge part of America’s identity, is now “Driftin’ like a ghost amongst the trees”.

I got a shiny saw blade

All I needs' a volunteer

I'll cut you in half

While you're smiling ear to ear

And the freedom that you sought's

Driftin' like a ghost amongst the trees

This is what will be, this is what will be (“Magic”)

While the Magic tracks discussed so far are purely rhetorical protest songs, the album also contains an example of a rhetorical protest song with connections to the earlier magnetic songs: the gloomy “Last to Die”. In this song, on contrary to the others, there is a direct and overt political statement that almost cannot be ignored by the audience, as the narrator
repeatedly asks “who will be the last to die for a mistake”, referring to the government’s misstep of invading Iraq. This straightforward and recurring statement ensures the connection to the early magnetic songs, as does the link to John Kerry’s 22 April 1971 testimony regarding the handling of the catastrophic Vietnam War as he wondered about how you could ask someone to be the last person to die in a war (Dolan 407). Moreover, the song’s approach is reminiscent of other inquiring songs such as Bob Dylan’s “Blowing in the Wind” where the narrator wonders “How many deaths will it take till he knows / That too many people have died”. Another indirect link can be found with the Seeger song “Where Have All the Flowers Gone”, alternating the sudden disappearance of “flowers” with that of “young girls” and ultimately “soldiers”. The Seeger classic concludes with the observation that these soldiers are “gone to graveyards, every one,” before culminating in the final questioning of “when [they will] ever learn”. While these songs might not have been a direct influence on Springsteen, their thematic protesting approach is very similar. Like many of the anti-war songs on Magic, “Last to Die” is set in an apocalyptic world in which a couple with their kids in the backseat of their car try to outrun the danger. The situation is dire, even to the extent that they “don’t measure the blood we’ve drawn anymore / We just stack bodies outside the door”.

“Who'll be the last to die for a mistake
The last to die for a mistake
Darlin' your tyrants and kings form the same fate
Strung up at your city gates
And you're the last to die for a mistake” (“Last to Die”)

Next, the narrator in “Long Walk Home” experiences alienation from his own birthplace, as he wanders through his old hometown. Talking to The New York Times’ A. O. Scott, Springsteen said that the protagonist experiences that “the things that he thought he knew, the people he thought whose ideals he had something in common with, are like strangers. The
world that he knew feels totally alien. I think that’s what’s happened in this country in the past six years”. The song’s chorus laments that “It’s gonna be a long walk home / Hey pretty darling, don’t wait up for me / It’s gonna be a long walk home”. The narrator’s estrangement is further specified when he is found walking past Sal’s grocery and the barbershop on South street, where he “looked in their faces / They were all rank strangers to me”. “Long Walk Home” may well have been inspired by the Stanley Brothers’ “Rank Strangers”, in which “the singer returns after a long absence to his boyhood home in the Blue Ridge and finds there not one familiar soul” (Marsh 373), and with which Springsteen’s song shares some lines. Whereas both songs even share a song lyric, the connection seems almost impossible to deny.3

Everybody I met seemed to be a rank stranger

No mother or dad, not a friend could I see

They knew not my name and I knew not their faces

I found they were all rank strangers to me (“Rank Strangers”, qtd. in Marsh 373)

While certainly a rhetorical protest song in its more implicit political approach, by borrowing tunes and lyrics the song seems connected to the magnetic protest song tradition.

Subsequently, while the veterans’ hall in “Long Walk Home” is standing “silent and alone”, the diners has been “shuttered and boarded with a sign that just said ‘gone’” as a result of the economic troubles. However, there is a notion of hope because everybody has “a reason to begin again”. Although the society in the inhabitants’ minds is still a place where “nobody crowds you and nobody goes it alone,”, the times have changed it for the worse. Represented in the American flag, the song’s last verse identifies the United States’ ideals, which

3 Interestingly, Marsh earlier connected the Stanley Brothers’ “Rank Strangers” to the nihilism in Nebraska’s “Reason To Believe” (373).
Springsteen subtly suggests that they have been ignored. The flag on the courthouse represents certain “things [that] are set in stone”, namely “Who we are, what we’ll do and what we won’t”.

My father said "Son, we're lucky in this town,
It's a beautiful place to be born.
It just wraps its arms around you,
Nobody crowds you and nobody goes it alone
You know that flag flying over the courthouse
Means certain things are set in stone
Who we are, what we'll do and what we won't (“Long Walk Home”)

The album’s closing track, “Devil’s Arcade”, again tells a story of friendship and love in wartime, similar to the narrator and Bobbie’s struggle to survive in “Devils & Dust”. Like “Devils & Dust”, Magic’s closing track also portrays a soldier dying in, supposedly, the Iraq war. The song states that “heroes are needed, so heroes get made”, after which the soldier is lying in the blue-walled ward, lying “adrift with the heroes of the devil’s arcade”. As the aforementioned “Gypsy Biker” did, “Devil’s Arcade” alludes to the senselessness of war and the belief that love (“A body that waits […] for the beat of your heart”) will overcome death.

Additionally, the 2014 American Beauty EP contains an important outtake of the Magic album: “Hey Blue Eyes”. At first sight a love song, Springsteen’s comments on the song reveal it is “one of [his] darkest political songs”.

Written during the Bush years, it’s a metaphor for the house of horrors our government’s actions created in the years following the invasion of Iraq. At its center is the repressed sexuality and abuse of power that characterized Abu Ghraib prison. I feel this is a shadow we as a country have yet to emerge from.
Together with songs as “Worlds Apart” and “Paradise”, “Hey Blue Eyes” is one of the few Springsteen songs concerned with the American government’s relationship with the people on the other side of the conflict. The song opens with the holding of a committee “of treason and lies”, with “double speak and sedition then somebody dies”. From then on, the song would allude to a love story, with the narrator sweetly singing to the heavenly “blue eyes”. However, the following lyrics reveal something more ominous.

She says, ‘In this house we've abandoned history, in this house there are no laws
Just the false taste of paradise and then the fall
In this house the guilty go unpunished and blood and silence prevail
Here the dead remain nameless, the nameless remain jailed’ (“Hey Blue Eyes”)

The last line of the verse refers to the government’s cover-up operations. The ruthless treatment of war prisoners is strongly and metaphorically condemned by the narrator, stating that in that house “our sons and daughters are spilled like wine”. The later most striking lyric in the song “tonight I’ll have you naked and crawling at the end of my leash” is direct reference to the torture and abuse practices that occurred in Abu Ghraib, specifically in one of the pictures that the press sent around the world. While generally depicting gruesome torturing of prison inmates, one of the photographs showed soldier Lynndie England dragging a prisoner around who was tied by a leash. Ultimately, in the last line the narrator ironically suggests not to worry about those in charge. He calls them “the landlord dining with his criminal friends”, stating that they will “have the bags packed and be long gone before the real fucking begins”. Serving as a severe indictment of government’s war actions – and again influenced by the “romance” plot to imply a political stance – the song certainly ties into the sophisticatedly structured rhetorical protest songs.

One of his more commercially successful releases, Springsteen’s Magic incorporates a heavy indictment on the Bush administration. One of his stronger protest releases since The
*Ghost of Tom Joad*, the album often subtly and implicitly disapproves of Bush’s policy, while some tracks speak blatantly against the President. The connection to specific protest folk songs is less clear here, but contain admirable examples of rhetoric protest songs and, above all, has a strong thematic connection the anti-war protest songs going back to the nineteenth century. Luckily for Springsteen, the soon to be elected Barack Obama would provide a new hope for him and his country.
Chapter 8: It Feels So Far Away: *Working on a Dream* (2009)

With the Presidency of George W. Bush coming to an end, Springsteen would again attempt to get the right person in the White House. Coincidentally, the African-American senator Barack Obama seemed to have the potential to pull his country out of its current state of misery. According to Dolan, there was a certain chemistry between the two “rockstars”, since Obama’s message frequently sounded like Springsteen’s “Land of Hope and Dreams” (see *Wrecking Ball*), along with his wish to get “a new wind blowing” (417). This he uttered in his “A More Perfect Union” speech about racial equality in America, which Dolan interprets as Obama’s own “even more insightful version of ‘American Skin’” (Dolan 417). Upon endorsing the senator, Springsteen considered the candidate anticipating “the America I’ve envisioned in my music for the past 35 years”, further stating on one of many political rallies that the songwriter spent his entire creative life “measuring the distance between [the] American promise and American reality. I believe senator Obama has taken measure of that distance in his own life and in his work” (qtd. in Dolan 418). Coming right out of the *Magic* tour, Springsteen decided to record some tracks he wrote around that same time that did not fit on the *Magic* record. Not long after that, he and the band started to work on a new album that would appear coincidentally with Barack Obama’s presidency and would break with the earlier bleakness of *Devils & Dust* and *Magic*.

In early 2009 the album, now named *Working on a Dream*, got released worldwide and would feature twelve songs that ranged from rock to pop, gospel to blues and soul. With the title track especially written with the new president in mind, the album quickly got viewed as a pro-Obama statement. However, aside from its title track the album offers little political activism, and certainly no songs of protest. While one of the more varied and unfortunately incoherent works Springsteen released, most of the songs tie in to the self-reflective themes of earlier love albums. For instance, the album offers the eight-minute cowboy epic “Outlaw Pete”, 
the playful and corny ode to a cashier girl in “Queen of the Supermarket” and the reflection upon love and relationships in “This Life” and “Kingdom of Days” and the tribute to the departed E-Street organist and accordionist Danny Federici with “The Last Carnival”.

“Working on a Dream” resulted in one of his most hopeful and upbeat political songs. Not only does the song use the dream imagery that has been part of Springsteen’s regular song vocabulary since the seventies, it may also refer to one of history’s most famous speeches by Martin Luther King. Ever since his “runaway American dream” in “Born to Run”, his reworking of the Elvis Presley song “Follow That Dream” during the eighties and the 1999 Springsteen song “Land of Hope and Dreams”, the concept of a “dream” defined what his music was about: working on and dreaming of a better future. More strikingly, during the solo acoustic Devils & Dust tour Springsteen would generally close off each show with a cover of Suicide’s “Dream Baby Dream” on pump organ, providing an elegiac end to each performance. Carlin would interpret this as dreaming “about the horizon, and yet wide awake to the sawtooth realities of daily life and the arc of his own life” (423). More importantly, the title also refers to the famous speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. The Civil Rights Movement activist preached “I have a dream” in Washington on August 28, 1963, as he was envisioning a place where citizens were able to live peacefully together without any racial segregation laws. With Barack Obama, the first African-American president in the history of the United States, King’s dream seemed to be closer than ever.

I'm working on a dream
Though sometimes it feels so far away
I'm working on a dream
And how it will be mine someday (“Working on a Dream”)
Having been played throughout 2008 during the Obama rallies, the song “trudges the same path trod by all those other determined Springsteenian laborers, only this time it doesn’t lead anywhere beyond the formless dream cited in the title” (Carlin 434). Whereas the protagonist in “Born to Run” drives off into the sunset with a beautiful girl on the back of his motorcycle, the narrator in “Working on a Dream” just hopes his dream will one day be realized. While historically connected to the Civil Rights Movement, the connection to the magnetic protest songs becomes stronger as Springsteen played “Working on a Dream” at the 2009 Superbowl with the help of the Joyce Garret Singers, drenching the song in a rhythmic gospel mood (Carlin 437) and as a result involving group participation of the audience in the singing.

The following Working on a Dream tour, although in support of a non-political album, would nonetheless still be influenced by protest folk music. As had been the case during many tours since 2006, Springsteen’s reworking of Seeger’s “American Land” would show up in the encores, the song often being preceded by Stephen Foster’s “Hard Times (Come Again No More)” (Dolan 432). The Foster song’s mentioning of “hard times” would – in true protest song tradition – be borrowed to provide the pre-chorus ending Springsteen’s “Wrecking Ball”. Written at the last shows of the tour in 2009, the song was a tribute to New Jersey’s Giants Stadium, just days before being demolished. While functioning as an upbeat rock song about mortality and trying to survive in hard times, this view would turn out to be the centerpiece of Springsteen’s next album in 2012.

After the mournful passing of organist Danny Federici in 2008, tragedy struck again in 2011 as 69-year old E-Street saxophonist Clarence Clemons suffered a stroke, passing away only a few days later. Earlier the previous year, Springsteen had started work on a new album that manager Landau told Carlin was a “summary, or perhaps a modern iteration, of themes Bruce had explored throughout his career” (qtd. in Carlin 451). Around that time, the world was still recovering from its financial hangover when the economic crisis broke out in 2008. Armed with angeriness and resilience in the vein of the Occupy movement, Springsteen set out to write a new collection of songs that would on one hand take arms against the 1%, the capitalist Wall Street government that plunged the nation into crisis, but on the other hand would provide a hopeful and healing perspective on the 99% of Americans who bear the consequences. Inner and outer conflicts such as the loss of faith as opposed to material losses would also connect to heavy personal casualties, mainly inspired by Springsteen’s own feeling of mortality after losing his blood brother Clarence so suddenly. The eventual *Wrecking Ball* album draws mainly from folk, gospel and country influences with its roots firmly planted into the protest song tradition. Springsteen would remark to Carlin that the new album “connects to *The River*, and *Tom Joad* and *Darkness*. Thematically it connects to a lot of my music in my past. But now we’re headed to the next stand of trees.” (qtd. in Carlin 452). While *Magic* indeed was filled to the brim with fiery anti-war rock songs, they were mainly rhetorical protest songs and not that similar to the magnetic ones. *Wrecking Ball* would reveal closer ties to the traditional songs, by for instance evoking Depression-era imagery in songs such as “Shackled and Drawn”, “Jack Of All Trades” and “Death to My Hometown”. Also the opening track “We Take Care of Our Own” would connect to the magnetic protest music, just like gospel-flavored tracks as “Rocky Ground” and “Land of Hope and Dreams”. Ultimately, the uplifting “Wrecking Ball” and “We Are Alive” provided some cheeriness and joyous resilience.
Although the work-related songs are in the majority, a sense of personal loss echoes throughout the *Seeger Sessions* inspired songs. However, with the superficial connections to the early magnetic protest tradition in mind, we have to realize that these contemporary folk songs act as a metaphor for our times instead of Guthrie’s time, which makes them rhetorical in their approach.

“We Take Care of Our Own” evokes the communal feeling of togetherness and joint power, with a recurrent political statement in the chorus and the use of “we” in that statement. Filled with patriotic imagery, the song questions recent American events, and as a result recalls much of the same approach that fueled “Born in the U.S.A.”. After years of economic crisis the narrator tries to find a way out of the depression by “knocking on the door that holds the throne”. Furthermore, the narrator seems lost in these times where “good hearts turned to stone” and “the road of good intentions has gone dry as a bone”, before launching in “we take care of our own”. The statement can be interpreted in two ways: first as a statement that we do take care of our own people ourselves whenever higher powers in Washington do not help us, or the second ironical interpretation that we, the people as well as the nation’s leaders, simply do not, tying in to the estrangement that was a big part of a song as “Long Walk Home”.

From Chicago to New Orleans
From the muscle to the bone
From the shotgun shack to the Superdome
There ain't no help the cavalry's stayed home
There ain't no-one hearing the bugle blown
We take care of our own
We take care of our own
Wherever this flag's flown
We take care of our own (“We Take Care Of Our Own”)
Incorporating the New Orleans disaster, the lyrics reference the weak reaction to the local damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. Although willing to wage war overseas for land and oil, but not capable of supporting their own people, the song states that “the cavalry stayed home”. Ultimately, the narrator not only asks himself where are “the eyes with the will to see” and the “hearts that run over with mercy”, but he also wants to find the “work that will set my hands [and] my soul free”. Springsteen’s anti-war focus of the recent years now again makes room for work ethic sentiments reminiscent of *Born in the U.S.A.* and *Darkness*. Involved in a worldwide economic crisis - although with Obama’s plans for peace on the horizon - Springsteen shifts his focus to the country’s financial state. The patriotic imagery, along with the ironic “wherever this flag’s flown”, is probably derived from the old patriotic song “America the Beautiful” by Katharine Lee Bates, based on her poem “Pikes Peak”. Just like in “Long Walk Home”, these lyrics recall the old ideals of the nation by confronting the listener with Springsteen’s lost “promise from sea to shining sea”.

America! America!

God shed His grace on thee,

And crown thy good with brotherhood

From sea to shining sea (“America the Beautiful”)

In what would be the first of many songs on the record attacking the greedy bankers, “Easy Money” draws parallels between the same greed at work in Guthrie’s and Seeger’s time and the grubbiness in society these days. Accordingly, the song is about those in charge and who subsequently “tore the whole thing down” (qtd. in Carlin 451). In many conversations between Carlin and Springsteen regarding *Wrecking Ball*, the singer once again relied on the one lyric from *Magic*’s “Long Walk Home”, stating that America used to be a place where “Nobody crowds you / Nobody goes it alone” (451). With that in mind, he told Carlin that throwing morals away and surrendering to the easy money “should be addressed, and there
should be some outrage” (qtd. in Carlin 451). The criminal narrator in the song – reminiscent of the killers in “Nebraska” – ensures that “There’s nothing to it mister / You won’t hear a sound / When your whole world comes tumbling down”. It is the first of many outings against the “fat cats” who play with working people’s lives.

Another working man’s song as “Shackled and Drawn” takes overall sentiments from those early gospel or folk songs such as “How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?”. Throughout the percussion-heavy song, resembling a steady working rhythm, the fruit of a long day’s work is heavily idealized to resemble the clear-focused sing-along magnetic protest songs. With the narrator stating that he always loved the “feel of sweat” on his clothes, the dirty work shirt becoming a symbol of freedom. Building on this idealization, he proclaims that a shovel in the dirt “keeps the devil gone”. In the choruses the narrator mournfully chants the song title but also urges to “pick up the rock, son, carry it on” as he exclaims desperately what a poor boy is to do in “a world gone wrong”.

Gambling man rolls the dice, workingman pays the bill

It’s still fat and easy up on banker’s hill
Up on banker’s hill, the party’s going strong
Down here below we’re shackled and drawn

[...]

Shackled and drawn, shackled and drawn
Pick up the rock son, carry it on
What’s a poor boy to do but keep singing his song
I woke up this morning shackled and drawn (“Shackled and Drawn”)

As the greedy bankers enjoy a life that is “fat and easy”, these gambling men roll the dice and the working man ends up with a high price to pay. Additionally to the fact that the
“world [has] gone wrong” in the chorus, one verse also refers to what a poor boy is to do “but keep singing his song”. If not a subtle reference to traditional songs such as “How can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live” or “How Can I Keep From Singing?”, it is surely one that is historically reminiscent of the many similar desperate working songs. Moreover, its word use is heavily reminiscent of Guthrie’s 1961 “I Ain’t Got No Home”. Comparing Guthrie’s lyrics to both “Easy Money”, “Shackled and Drawn” and the rest of the banker-related songs reveals striking overlaps, connecting to the tradition of borrowing tunes or lyrics from other songs to achieve a more timeless and enduring effect.

Rich man took my home and drove me from my door

[...]

I mined in your mines and I gathered in your corn

I been working, mister, since the day I was born

Now I worry all the time like I never did before

'Cause I ain't got no home in this world anymore

Now as I look around, it's mighty plain to see

This world is such a great and a funny place to be;

Oh, the gamblin' man is rich an' the workin' man is poor,

And I ain't got no home in this world anymore. (“I Ain’t Got No Home”)

Next on the album and in the same vein of the previous songs, “Jack of All Trades” relates a story of a man who is trying to make ends meet and fix whatever needs fixing in his family with his bare hands. While musically not the most direct protest tune, the song borrows a lot of the earlier Americana imagery. Again using the idealization of work (“I take the work that God provides”), the jack of all trades reassures his loved ones that things will work out. The verse where the “hurricane blows” recalls some of Guthrie’s Dust Bowl Ballads, as do the
lyrics where the couple “stood the drought, now we’ll stand the flood”. Launching into a new explicit attack on Wall Street, the jack of all trades says the banking man “grows fat” while the working man “grows thin”, before acknowledging these things have happened and “will happen again”. Hope, however, is the central theme of this song, where the hard-working jack of all trades is certain that “there’s a new world coming” as opposed to the protagonist in a Guthrie song who mourns that “[he] ain’t got no home in this world anymore”. However, the desperate times are able to amount to desperate measures as the jack of all trades would “find the bastards and shoot ‘em on sight”.

Now sometimes tomorrow comes soaked in treasure and blood
We stood the drought, now we’ll stand the flood
There’s a new world coming, I can see the light
I’m a jack of all trades, we’ll be all right
[...] If I had me a gun, I’d find the bastards and shoot ’em on sight
I’m a jack of all trades, we’ll be all right
I’m a jack of all trades, we’ll be all right (“Jack of All Trades”)

In what is perhaps the most authentic-sounding protest song on the album, “Death to My Hometown” borrows Celtic folk style to deliver an up-tempo attack on the capitalists. The song uses similar historic Civil War imagery as the narrator admits that “no cannonballs did fly”, “no shells ripped the evening sky” and “no dictators were crowned”. However, instead of taking over the town with brute force, the intruders used a silent approach for this reaping, as the “marauders raided in the dark” and subsequently brought death to the town. As was the case in “Jack of All Trades”, the narrator acknowledges that those criminals will always be around, urging the listener to always be ready for when they would arrive. Interestingly, the last chorus
shifts from “my hometown” to “our hometown”, revealing another link to the older protest song tradition.

So, listen up my sonny boy, be ready when they come
For they’ll be returning sure as the rising sun
Now get yourself a song to sing
And sing it ’til you’re done
Sing it hard and sing it well
Send the robber barons straight to hell
The greedy thieves who came around
And ate the flesh of everything they found
Whose crimes have gone unpunished now
Who walk the streets as free men now

They brought death to our hometown, boys
Death to our hometown
Death to our hometown, boys
Death to our hometown (“Death to My Hometown”)

After the energetic row of songs opening the album, “This Depression” reveals a more introvert reflection upon the personal consequences of the crisis. With the title possibly referring to both Guthrie-era crises such as the 1930s Depression period, the narrator reveals he’s never been “this low”, having his “faith shaken but never hopeless”. This sense of grief and misery, yet inspired by hope, returns in the title track “Wrecking Ball”. Introduced and written in 2009 as a farewell song to New Jersey’s Giants Stadium, the song would acquire another meaning with the death of Clemons in 2012. The theme of loss could be easily attributed to the aging process that the now 63-year-old Springsteen must have felt personally, but also to
the already angry protest themes of the disastrous economic crisis. Possibly this is the reason why Springsteen saw a strong metaphor in the crushing bluntness of a wrecking ball, with the narrator holding ground and uttering self-assuredly to “bring [it] on”. Urging the listener to bring up a toast and shout from the top of their lungs, the narrator of the song assures us that “tonight all the dead are here”, evoking the themes of overcoming a personal loss of a loved one, much like the album’s closing track “We Are Alive”. The song’s bridge section includes the hopeful and determined plea to keep holding on in these hard times, after which the buildup of the last chorus acknowledges once again that these times of hardship come and go, but will come again.

Hold tight to your anger
Hold tight to your anger
And don’t fall to your fears

[…]

Hard times come and hard times go and
Hard times come and hard times go
Yeah, just to come again (“Wrecking Ball”)

Drenched in a gospel mood, “Rocky Ground” could have been a song of the Civil Rights movement, as the Biblical imagery and overall musical structure evokes a strong feeling of togetherness and shared hardship when sung. By stressing the word “we” in the chorus line “We are travelling over rocky ground, rocky ground”, it invites the listener to collectively sing along to create a shared feeling of struggling for independence. Just like the quintessential protest and Civil Rights song “We Shall Overcome”, the collective grief gets transformed into a collective hopefulness as the lyrics tell the story of a shepherd protecting his flock of sheep which is seemingly in danger. Moreover, the track opens with a sample of musicologist Alan Lomax’s 1942 gospel recording of “I’m A Soldier in the Army of the Lord” by The Church of
God in Christ Congregational, as stated in the album’s liner notes. This explicit connection to this musical and cultural history again shows Springsteen’s connection to the borrowing tradition of the magnetic protest songs. With a dangerous flood coming, the narrator urges the shepherd to “tend to your flock or they will stray”. The flock of sheep, hence the people, need to be guided righteously, as the song warns the pastor for the coming judgment day, stating that “before we cross that river wide / The blood on our hands will come back on us twice”. The title’s rocky ground functions as a metaphor for hardship through life, upon which the narrator ensures us there is a new day coming, again sharing a connection with the hopeful Civil Rights songs.

Rise up shepherd, rise up
Your flock has roamed far from the hill
The stars have faded, the sky is still
Sun’s in the heavens and a new day is rising (“Rocky Ground”)

The next to last song on the album, a song of nearly fourteen years of age finally receiving a studio release, fits the album themes perfectly despite its pre-Obama age. Evoking such songs as Guthrie’s “This Train (Is Bound for Glory)”, the British patriotic song “Land of Hope and Glory” and even explicitly using pieces lyrically and musically from Curtis Mayfield’s gospel-fueled “People Get Ready”, Springsteen’s “Land of Hope and Dreams” is filled with train imagery. However, although the train motif frequently occurs in classic rock music, it would not be based on that genre, but is a “deliberate rewrite of the gospel song ‘This Train’, most indelibly sung in the 1940s by Sister Rosetta Tharpe” (Dolan 354), later performed by Woody Guthrie as well. Dating back to the year 1999, the song is centered on the themes of revival, hope and equality. Although Tharpe’s “This Train” only wants morally good people on the road to the Promised Land, Springsteen changes this message deliberately (Dolan 354). Closing the song with gospel chants, the singing alternates the recurring “this train” with those
specific groups of people who are invited to come on board that train. Hereby Springsteen’s train is one for all people and not only those who are morally good, as he invites saints as well as sinners, losers and winners, whores and gamblers, lost souls, fools and kings. As Dolan put it, the song embraced “neither condemnation nor license but rather forgiveness toward human frailty” (354). Whether or not that meaning is the one at work in the *Wrecking Ball* album is up to debate. Since the song certainly wanted to address inequality during the Reunion tour, the death of Clarence Clemons – delivering his very last solo on the 2012 studio version of the song – might have revealed the song to be more personal than it used to be. Ultimately, another link to the early magnetic tradition is again the borrowing of other songs’ lyrics or melody in other ones. “Land of Hope and Dreams” features not only an excerpt from Curtis Mayfield’s gospel song “People Get Ready”, but also integrates a section of Mayfield’s lyrics into the song.

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People get ready there's a train comin'
You don't need no baggage, just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
You don't need no ticket, just thank the lord (“People Get Ready”)

When “Land of Hope and Dreams” reaches its climax, Springsteen evokes the lyrics of Mayfield’s song while evoking Guthrie’s and Tharpe’s version of “This Train” as well.

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Come on this train
People get ready
You don’t need no ticket
All you gotta do is just get on board
Aboard this train (studio version “Land Of Hope and Dreams” on *Wrecking Ball*)

In 2008 Springsteen had chosen to support presidential candidate Barack Obama by dedicating “Working on a Dream” to him and by playing a few songs at various political
rallies throughout the United States. In 2012, he chose to endorse the then-elected President Obama once more, despite the release of his criticizing *Wrecking Ball* album. This time around, Springsteen included – among those uplifting songs as “No Surrender” and “The Promised Land” – *Wrecking Ball* songs such as “We Take Care of Our Own” and “Land of Hope and Dreams”. Signaling the truthfulness of Springsteen’s ‘train for everyone’, he delivered a speech in Madison, Wisconsin on November 5, 2012, the day before the elections and right before launching in the appropriate “Land of Hope and Dreams”.

For the last 30 years I’ve been writing in my music about the distance between American dream and American reality. I’ve seen it from the inside and the outside as a blue collar kid from a working class home in Freehold, NJ, where my parents struggled often unsuccessfully to make ends meet. […] The American dream and American reality, our vote tomorrow is the one undeniable way we get to determine the distance in that equation. You hear a lot of talk about things that are different now [since Obama’s presidency]. Things aren’t any different now, they’re just realer (sic). It’s crunch time now. The president’s job, our job, yours and mine. Whether you’re a republican, a democrat, an independent, rich, poor, black, brown, white, gay, straight, soldier, civilian, [our job] is to keep that hope alive, to combat the cynicism and the apathy that’s out there.

The album’s closing track, “We Are Alive”, provided a commemorative ending to an album filled with characterizations of economic hardship and loss. Relating a historical narrative, a semi-topical song, the song serves as a memorial for all the railroad workers, immigrants and protesters who either died or were killed in America’s history. Taking the perspective of a railroad worker who was “killed in Maryland in 1877” and subsequently a supposed protester who was “killed in 1963 one Sunday morning in Birmingham”, reveal connections to historical occurrences such as the killing of students during the 1963 Birmingham
campaign against segregation. The themes of hope and resurrection appear in the song’s chorus, which argues that the dead are not really gone, as they inspire us all day long. Additionally, the song delivers the same combativeness that is apparent in the whole album. As the song takes one last stand to come together, hope and fight for a better world, it proves to be a fitting conclusion to the album.

We are alive
And though we lie alone here in the dark
Our souls will rise
To carry the fire and light the spark
To fight shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart (“We Are Alive”)

After the rather incoherent and apolitical collection of songs that was *Working on a Dream*, *Wrecking Ball* would return to the same combativeness and anger that fueled much of *Magic*. While this time not anti-war, but with a focus on the economy and class consciousness, Springsteen would harken back to a lot of the magnetic protest songs and the origins of American music. With an ultimate wish for equality, “Land of Hope and Dreams” ensures the audience that “Dreams will not be thwarted / Faith will be rewarded”. 


Conclusion

From 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town* to 1984’s *Born in the U.S.A.*, Springsteen’s music has focused on working-class characters and has been inspired by protest singers such as Woody Guthrie, mainly in albums as *Nebraska*. The American characters in Springsteen’s music all reveal they are stuck between their dreams and the reality of the world they live in, having had confrontations with the limitations of society. However, since 1995’s *The Ghost of Tom Joad* Springsteen began to broaden his societal views by speaking up for the rights of Mexicans crossing the border into the States. These expanding views culminated by 2012 in “Land of Hope and Dreams”, where every American was welcome to board the freedom train. By integrating subjects such as war, racism and the modern Great Depression in his later musical career, Springsteen aligns himself with the tradition established by influential singers as Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan and most recently Pete Seeger.

He subsequently draws from both the magnetic and rhetorical protest song tradition, using topical songs, Guthrie’s hurt songs and Seeger’s freedom songs as templates for his own music. Additionally, Springsteen constantly copies and includes old folk standards, exemplifying his connection to this protest song traditional aspect. His protest songs did not reach a culminating point in 1984’s *Born in the U.S.A.*, instead the albums starting around 1995 would introduce one of his most politically activated periods of his career. Drawing not just from rock and roll as he mainly did from 1973 to 1984, with the exception of the folk record *Nebraska*, Springsteen would also expand his musical views. This results in songs that are heavily influenced by rock, folk, country and gospel while using songs from the early twentieth century protest song tradition. In conclusion, Springsteen’s later period still shows many resemblances to the aforementioned types and subgenres of protest music.
Unlike earlier Springsteen records, *The Ghost Of Tom Joad* is no longer fixed exclusively on the New Jersey blue collar workers, but attests to Springsteen’s broadened political focus as it speaks up for the rights of South-American immigrants crossing the border and working dangerous jobs for little or no pay. Drawing mainly on Woody Guthrie’s notion of the hurt song, which expresses the hardship of working-class people, Springsteen uses his characteristic character sketches to portray individuals of flesh and blood. These characterizations are also part of the more subtle politics of the rhetorical protest song tradition, such as the two brothers in “Sinaloa Cowboys” and in the racist feud between an American and Vietnamese fisherman in “Galveston Bay”. The historical narrative, a prime example of a topical song, of what happened in Youngstown, Ohio in “Youngstown” reveals his economic concern. The use of Spanish words in the songs such as *jueros* in “Sinaloa Cowboys”, intensifies the link with the people described in the songs and allows identification with them to occur more quickly. Also using the musical qualities of Guthrie’s protest songs, the recordings all reveal bare and stark musical accompaniment of an acoustic guitar and harmonica. Based upon Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, “The Ghost of Tom Joad” fights for social justice and draws connections to Guthrie’s take on the same material. This borrowing from and general harkening back to earlier protest songs such as Guthrie’s “Tom Joad” is reminiscent of the traditional aspect of the magnetic protest songs.

In the brief gap between *The Ghost of Tom Joad* and *The Rising*, Springsteen released “American Skin (41 Shots)”, a song in which the recurring political statements connect to the directly politically activated magnetic protest songs. Furthermore, the song relates a specific event in American history, so it ties in with the tradition of topical protest songs as well. Building on Woody Guthrie’s hurt song and the gospel-influenced freedom songs for *The Rising*, Springsteen uses the hopeful and collective healing quality of protest songs to get his message of hope after 9/11 across. While the songs are mainly rhetorical, not expressing the
kind of straightforward political attacks that characterize Tom Joad, Springsteen nonetheless subtly refers to and disapproves of any plans for retaliation by the government such as in “Lonesome Day”, “Worlds Apart” and “Paradise”. The healing power of freedom songs comes to pass in prayer-like anthems as “Into the Fire”, “The Rising” and especially the closing track “My City of Ruins” where the gospel-mood and repetitive communal singing reveals a link to the magnetic protest songs and Pete Seeger’s “We Shall Overcome”.

*Devils & Dust* reintroduces acoustic folk in the vein of *Nebraska* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, and features one of Springsteen’s many anti-war songs to come. “Devils & Dust”, about the existential crisis of a soldier in wartime, refers to the Iraq war and is a perfect example of the more refined approach to protesting, characteristic of the rhetorical songs. The rest of the album includes character sketches in songs as “Black Cowboys” and “The Hitter” that do not seem to take a political stance, yet feature conflicted and disappointed characters which reflect Springsteen’s own disillusionment with how his country was run. Expressing a return to the themes at work in *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Springsteen uses American West imagery along with the same Spanish words to make the identification with the song’s characters more potent. Inspired by a tribute track he had to write for Pete Seeger, Springsteen gathered a group of folk musicians in search of the roots of his country’s folk and gospel music, recording *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*. Around this time, his fascination for Guthrie would be joined by his love for Pete Seeger as he even reworked Seeger’s “He Lies in the American Land” into an original Springsteen song.

The *Magic* album would then bring Springsteen’s anti-war protest songs to a higher level by delivering a collection of rock songs influenced by pop and R&B, mixing subtly written rhetorical protest songs without any immediate political message (“Magic”, “Long Walk Home”, “Livin’ in The Future”) and more straightforward political songs (“Last to Die”) that recall the earlier magnetic ones. Using the story of a romance which symbolizes his country’s
relation to President George W. Bush in “Livin’ in The Future” and the manipulating magician’s tale in “Magie”, Springsteen utters critique on the Bush administration in a more implicit way than, for instance, the straightforwardly accusing “Last to Die”, which was based on John Kerry’s anti-Vietnam speech. Influenced by the twentieth century country song “Rank Strangers”, Springsteen uses its themes and even its lyrics to write “Long Walk Home”, a song about the estrangement of a man with his old home.

With the election of President Barack Obama, Springsteen would again find hope, resulting in the uniquely optimistic Working on a Dream album, in which the gospel-influenced title track reveals strong ties to the freedom songs of the Civil Rights Movement, not in the least to Martin Luther King’s speech during the March on Washington. Wrecking Ball, containing a mix of folk, country, rock and gospel, would reach back to the early American musical traditions. With Springsteen’s writing about marginalized characters suffering from economic setbacks, the songs have strong affiliation with Woody Guthrie’s hurt songs and the corresponding magnetic protest songs. While “We Take Care of Our Own” stresses the we-perspective of the song, along with a recurrent political statement that we take care of our own wherever this flag is flown, working man songs as “Easy Money”, “Shackled and Drawn” and “Death to My Hometown” are concerned with the Wall Street bankers who neglect the working man. These songs are not only musically similar to the early folk songs, but also show lyrical connections to, for instance, Guthrie’s “I Ain’t Got No Home”. Using the “Wrecking Ball” as a metaphor for hardship, Springsteen tries to provide a hopeful way out of the working man’s everyday misery by the contemporary freedom song “Rocky Ground”. The Biblical imagery and the collective chanting of the “we are travelling over rocky ground” refer to both the Civil Rights Freedom Songs and the magnetic protest songs. Ultimately, the wish for racial and moral equality in “Land of Hope and Dreams” shows affiliation with songs as Guthrie’s “This Train (Is Bound for Glory)”. 
If there were doubts of Springsteen’s recent political affiliation and connection to the twentieth century protest song tradition, this dissertation hopes to have proven that the albums from 1995 to 2014 do harken back to that early music. At 64 years old, the “blue collar kid” has grown up to still act as the voice of working class America. The recently-released *Wrecking Ball* received three Grammy nominations and proceeded in a worldwide tour from 2012 to 2014 that would bring the power of music and the album’s message of hope to countries worldwide. As the United States, just like the rest of the world, remain vulnerable to national and international conflicts, it is likely this protest trend will continue in Springsteen’s music. As the wars in Syria, the conflict with North-Korea, Russia’s involvement in Ukraine and many internal and economic conflicts continue to play a role in American society, Springsteen will always find something to write about on a forthcoming album. Until that day, Bruce Springsteen continues to invite all the American people to work on and dream of a better tomorrow.
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