

Come Home, America

Rock and Roll in Middle Age

by Bill Kauffman



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Unanesthetized amputation cannot be more painful than enduring—no, “endurin”—a Bruce Springsteen monologue about “growin’ up.” Stopping a concert dead in its tracks, he’ll mumble and stammer and “uh, like” his way through a tortured and tortuous tale peopled with Wild Billy and Sloppy Sue and, best of all, “there was this guy.” He shoots for Jack Kerouac describing Dean Moriarty but sounds more like a 13-year-old from North Jersey imagining the lives of the freaks he saw in Greenwich Village on a school trip last fall.

But sometimes he gets it right, as at a show in Greensboro, North Carolina, some years back. “I used to think that once I got out of my hometown [Freehold, New Jersey], I was never goin’ to come back. But as I got older, I’d come home off the road and get in my car and drive back into town. . . . I realized that I would always carry a part of that town with me.” He then lit into “My Hometown,” an aching ballad about a young couple contemplating a move from their decaying Northeastern city to the Sunbelt.

Bruce Springsteen, the next Dylan in the 70’s, the oversold American avatar in the 80’s, has fallen fast and hard as rock-and-roll stars do. The double album he released in 1992 after a five-year silence sunk to the nether regions of the charts. It yielded one lame single, “Human Touch,” which never broke through the rap-dominated ice. Critics, heretofore adoring, have turned on Springsteen with bile and condescension, like the high-school geek made good who pulls into a service station

and gloats as the broken-down quarterback washes his windshield. (Never underestimate the lingering effect of high-school slights. The witty buffoon David Lee Roth, former lead singer of Van Halen, once said that the reason most rock critics like the angry poindexter Elvis Costello is that most rock critics *look* like Elvis Costello.)

The most common complaint, aired by the most common of critics, the compulsively unreadable Jon Pareles in the *New York Times*, was that “for Springsteen the only community that is left is his family.” He’d constructed “a fortress for a family man, a defense against . . . rootlessness and moral ambiguity.” The man who declared, on his breakthrough album *Born to Run*, “it’s a town full of losers and I’m pullin’ out of here to win” had withdrawn to a fastness impervious even to the great god television, which, “in the blessed name of Elvis,” he’d blasted to bits with a .44 magnum in “57 Channels (And Nothin’ On).”

Springsteen’s America, which once stretched from the Jersey turnpike to “a rattlesnake speedway in the Utah desert,” has contracted to a dimension the size of his household. He has a wife and kids, and the rest of the world can go to hell. This is true of all the best aging mainstream singer-songwriters: John Mellencamp, Bob Seger, Don Henley. “Lather was 30 years old today; they took away all his toys,” trilled Grace Slick of the 60’s psychedelic rockers Jefferson Airplane, and though Gracie herself keeps singing into her fifth decade, Lather’s parents had a point.

Rock and roll is music of the open road (though Kerouac himself much preferred jazz); cars rank second only to girls as the poet’s [*sic*] muse. This is the Whitman/Thomas

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Wolfe/Beat/Huck and Jim rafting down the Mississippi America, the country of yea-singing exuberant cowboy loners like the one Sal Paradise met in a Nebraska diner. As Bill Carter of the English band Screaming Blue Messiahs understood: "I think driving is the last form of freedom—I'm surprised the government lets you drive at all." (With the autophobic Al Gore and his censorious wife Tipper in the saddle, the SBM nightmare has arrived.) Anyway, Neil Young insists that it's better to burn out than to fade away, and fortysomethings who watch their speedometers ought to consider another line of work.

Rock and roll is and has always been "conservative-anarchist," as *Rolling Stone* perceptively terms James Hetfield, leader of the wildly popular Metallica. For teenagers, it is about free-swinging against the Organization Men you want desperately not to grow up to be; by the time you hit your mid-30's, you realize that Men in Grey Flannel Suits run this world, that "goin' to Katmandu," as Bob Seger daydreams, is not an option, and that trying "to fill this house with all the love that heaven will allow," as Springsteen sings, is a noble enough deed. The bridge between rebellion and contented domesticity is where most of the good stuff is found.

Rock is also the only medium through which young uneducated Middle American white kids can tell the world what they're thinking. The major rock factories are run by older educated non-Middle American guys, which is why most of what we hear on the radio is confected garbage. ("Hang the DJ," demanded Morrissey of the Smiths, but the executives at Columbia and Epic are more deserving of the rope.)

If a kid is too honest he'll be whipped in the public square for hate crimes, as was Axl Rose of the notorious (and, by working- and middle-class white kids, beloved) Guns n' Roses. Rose made the mistake of eschewing Baby I Love You boilerplate and writing the autobiographical "One in a Million," a song recounting his reaction, as a scuzzy teenager from Lafayette, Indiana, upon alighting in the Los Angeles bus depot:

Police and niggers
That's right! Get out of my way
Don't need to buy none of your gold chains today
.....
Immigrants and faggots
they make no sense to me
they come to our country
and think they'll do as they please
Like start some mini Iran
or spread some f---ing disease
.....
I'm just a small town white boy
just trying to make ends meet
.....

When I was in my early 20's I made a similar journey, circumnavigating the country by bus. I slept in stations and ate in soup kitchens and wrote execrable poetry. I remember the station in Los Angeles, its rank air of menace and debauchery, in which I found a certain raffish charm. I thought I was an outlaw, lying in the gutter and looking at the stars. I was never a metal-head or racist but I understand Axl Rose, and if I hadn't had the elemental frankness educated out of me I'd have said the same things as I bounded from the bus into that panhandling, purse-snatching man-swarm.

John Mellencamp, a kind of cut-rate Midwestern Spring-

steen who hit his stride in the mid-80's and surpassed his model, made a series of albums about life in a hinterlands Indiana that was adrift somewhere between the idyllic world of *Hoosiers* and the Doritos and Old Milwaukee world of ratty sofas sagging under the heft of washed-up jocks and cheerleaders paralyzed by their postadolescent failures and blinded by the blue flicker of the television. "I was born in a small town," sang Mellencamp. "My parents live in the same small town." My job is so small town, provides little opportunity." Mellencamp later acted in and directed a movie, *Falling from Grace* (1992), in which he plays a famous singer returning to his Indiana hometown. His blonde dream Southern California wife (Mariel Hemingway) mocks his "hick-town fantasies" and so, eventually, did the city-slicker critics once the brief Common Man Rock fad of the 80's died and Mellencamp decamped to the remainder bins.

Mellencamp's kindred soul Springsteen mourned his Freehold: "Main Street's whitewashed windows and vacant stores / Seems like there ain't nobody wants to come down here no more / They're closin' down the textile mill across the railroad track / Foreman says these jobs are goin' boys, and they ain't comin' back to your hometown."

You can't help but snicker when you read these lyrics. John and Bruce are loaded—John has a Hilton Head mansion, Bruce bought a \$14 million Beverly Hills estate. Bruce has pretty much relinquished his Working Class Hero role: he had a quickie marriage to and divorce from an airhead model (though he redeemed himself by marrying an ugly Italian-American girl); he fired his band, several members of which go way back to the Asbury Park days; he no longer lives in his fabled New Jersey. Mellencamp, trapped by his image as John the good-hearted scrapegrace from Seymour, Indiana, pleaded pathetically to *Esquire* in 1992: "You could do me a favor and tell people I'm not the keeper of small towns. I grew up to be the guy I hated as a kid. I'm a cliché."

The thing is, he's not. Neither is Springsteen. They tell the truth, in their prosaic Dairy Queen American way. The only help-wanted listings in my local paper that pay well (\$20,000 plus per annum) are for government work: cook at Attica Prison, assistant to the Genesee County manager. Really good jobs—say, superintendent of Batavia schools—won't even be advertised locally, on the assumption that we are Ph.D.-less morons incapable of overseeing the education of our own fourth-graders. A man who bakes potatoes for "Son of Sam" is paid double what the woman behind the counter at the local diner makes. A K Street shyster takes in a quarter of a million representing foreign governments. And you tell me you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction?

The younger political consultants pour over rock lyrics with the misguided diligence of a subliterate, born-again, reformed tart combing her daughter's English class copy of *Slaughterhouse Five* and counting the f-words. Reagan's flunkies sought to co-opt Mellencamp and Springsteen and were rebuffed. Indeed, Springsteen, the night after being praised publicly by Ronald Reagan in the fall of 1984, dedicated "Johnny 99," his narrative of a laid-off autoworker robbing a liquor store, to the President. (Johnny Cash later recorded the tune, and the circle was unbroken.)

Norman Podhoretz, who could politicize a Little League game, read the lyric sheet to *Born in the U.S.A.* and concluded that "these lyrics could have been written in the 1930's by

a left-wing folksinger like Woody Guthrie—who, as it happens, is one of Springsteen's heroes." Well, Woody Guthrie wrote a few good songs, notwithstanding his affection for Uncle Joe Stalin, and as an Oklahoma vagabond he knew more of American life than, say, your very average pale Manhattan polemicist.

One of the mysteries of Bill Clinton's presidency is how so shrewd a pol could adopt so aggressively vapid a theme song: Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow," with its relentlessly upbeat and maddening refrain. An English band, a jejune song: perfect for the boy whose upbringing means so little to him that he allowed his media doctors to graft a phony hometown with a felicitous name—Hope—over his real one, Hot Springs. Given the nakedly calculating nature of the Clintons' marriage, the better Fleetwood Mac theme would have been "You Can Go Your Own Way / Don't Go Away."

The people to whom Clinton pitched his campaign, if not his presidency, were Middle Americans very much like the audience country singer Dwight Yoakam wants: "cowboys in Odessa, Texas, the guy that works in some plant outside Tulsa, the guy working for Rockwell or Lockheed out in the San Fernando Valley, the guy who lives in Bakersfield." Yoakam calls them "the rightful heirs" to this country, a sentiment strikingly similar to Ross Perot's notion of the common folk as the "owners" of the country.

Yoakam is the unfallen Springsteen of country music. He is a self-conscious mythographer, a middle-class boy from Columbus, Ohio, who idealizes his grandfather Luther Tibbs (a name better than any fabrication), a miners' union organizer in Kentucky. Dwight moved to Los Angeles with a guitar and a border-state twang; he wrote lean fiddle and steel-guitar songs with a hard edge, sort of like Hank Williams Sr. if Hank had grown up listening to the Rolling Stones. He played in Southern California's punk clubs. He represented the purist end of the then-burgeoning "cowpunk" movement, a tremendously fruitful spasm in which several fine bands (Green on Red, Blood on the Saddle, Lone Justice, Jason and the Scorchers, Long Ryders) recast contemporary American life in the language of the frontier legends and Western movies that were dying before we were even born. They knew, as the Long Ryders sang, that "you just can't ride the boxcars anymore," but they saw hoboes and prospectors and white Indians on the streets of Santa Monica and in every Thunderbird-reeking wino slumped outside a Davy Jones's Locker. Yoakam shared the punks' defiance, their energized blend of rambunctious bohemianism and reactionary longing for some lost American golden age. He loathed Nashville and its spangled pimps and courtesans: I saw him at a little punk club in about 1986, and he spoke darkly of killing Kenny Rogers.

You can guess the rest. His independent recordings attracted the attention of Warner Brothers, and they took on the maverick. Maybe they broke him, maybe not. He has cut a number of very good songs, including the deracine anthem "I Sang Dixie," about an old Southerner dying on a Los Angeles barstool. His latest release, *This Time* (1993), finds Yoakam, like Springsteen, in retreat, usually to the sodden haven of the nearest barroom. He has been cited for "misogyny and prejudice" by Pareles of the *New York Times*. He calls himself a libertarian, and he denounces motorcycle helmet laws. He's made his peace with the country music establishment: he appears regularly on *Nashville Now*, where he is about as incendiary as Minnie Pearl. He dated Sharon Stone for a while, but

who can blame him?

Yoakam blazed the path for the "new traditionalists," a hokey moniker for the austere counterrevolutionaries who ripped the rhinestones off the Nashville establishment in the 1980's. That Nashville has spent the 90's carefully reembodying them is not Dwight's fault.

Even more obstreperous is Steve Earle, a Texas hellion and unvarnished spokesman of working-class whites whose best and harshest songs about the yearnings and discouragements of hick Americans are the apparent, sometimes even worthy, heirs to a rural realist tradition that can be traced straight back to E.W. (*The Story of a Country Town*) Howe and Joseph (*Zury, The Meanest Man in Spring County*) Kirkland and Hamlin (*Main-Travelled Roads*) Garland. When he is good he is very good indeed:

There ain't a lot that you can do in this town
You drive down to the lake and then you turn back
around
You go to school and you learn to read and write
So you can walk into the county bank and sign away
your life.

I work at the fillin' station on the interstate
Pumpin' gasoline and countin' out-of-state plates
They ask me how far into Memphis, son, and where's
the nearest beer
They don't even know that there's a town around here.

Where Springsteen romanticized working-class life in a way that appealed to the smart, upwardly mobile, but sentimental sons of bus drivers and janitors, Earle, in his unromantic—dare we say resentful—way, speaks directly for those who are not going to rise above (abandon) it by going off to college and marrying a girl who reads books and listening to songs extolling the Common Man on a state-of-the-art CD player. Again, I quote extensively from Earle:

I got a job but it ain't nearly enough
A twenty thousand dollar pickup truck
Belongs to me and the bank and some funny talkin'
man from Iran
I left the service got a G.I. loan
I got married bought myself a home
Now I hang around this one horse town and do the best
that I can
.....
Been goin' nowhere down a one-way track
I'd kill to leave but there ain't no turnin' back
Got the wife and the kids and what would everybody
say
My brother's standin' on a welfare line
And any minute now I might get mine
Meanwhile there's the IRS and the devil to pay

He concludes, "I was born in the land of plenty now there ain't enough," and whether that's true or just whining amidst abundance (almost every person I know who's on relief has cable TV), it speaks to that disabling fear, the anticipation of catastrophe, that's made us a nation of cowards on couches, taking no chances. "I prefer adventure to security," Charles Lindbergh said, and we are so much his opposites that we ad-

mire Dwight Yoakam merely for having the guts to ask Sharon Stone out.

Earle is a working-class Americanist, and thus an outlaw. (He did a killer live version of Springsteen's "State Trooper" that ranks among the highlights of my leaning-against-the-wall-holding-a-beer-and-dripping-ennui nightclub days.) He calls himself "somewhat to the right of Attila the Hun," and he hated Reagan for firing his brother, an air traffic controller. Then again, the outlaw changed a word in his signature song, "Guitar Town," for reasons that cannot have been good. "Everybody told me you can't get far, with 37 dollars and a Jap guitar." In the radio version "Jap" became "cheap." Welcome to the New World Order, Steve.

The new traditionalism petered out, and as country has become the official music of white America it has again exsanguinated itself. Yoakam still has a Top 10 hit now and then, and Steve Earle kicks around the club circuit, but Boss Cash Register crowns Garth Brooks, the pudgy geek from suburban Oklahoma who admits to cutting his eyeteeth on Journey, Dan Fogelberg, James Taylor, Billy Joel, and Kiss—the worst schlock of the 1970's. He's more Bobby Brady than Okie from Muskogee. His Oklahoma is not Merle Haggard's or Woody Guthrie's, and that's okay, but Brooks's Soonerism melts into Michael Jackson's "We Are the World" universalism so that it's indistinguishable from Jackson's Gary, Indiana. "We shall be free," Garth croons in his Godawful anthem of political correctness, but it is the "free . . . free-fallin'" that Florida panhandler Tom Petty understands to be the fate of all those poor lost Southern California kids growin' up in an affluence more heartbreakingly impoverished than 50 Pensacola trailer parks.

"Maybe it ain't exactly heaven but it's certainly part of my dreams," the Long Ryders sang of Alabama. There have been plenty of good cocky regional bands appealing to local pride: Lynyrd Skynyrd praise "Sweet Home Alabama—where the gunnah's true," and yes, that's George Wallace these long-haired dope-smokers were feting; Missouri's the Rainmakers, whose chief influences were Hank Williams and Stephen Foster, imagine rafting down the Mississippi with favorite sons Mark Twain, Chuck Berry, and Harry Truman; Steve Forbert dreams of going home to Laurel, Mississippi, where at least "I know exactly what I'm going to find."

But for every kid out there pumping his fist at invocations of his own sweet home there are 20 longing to "put 'er on that interstate and never look back," as Steve Earle sings. The familiar is boring and narrow and uninspiring, while under the palm trees skins tan from the sun that never sets. As the coquettish L.A. punkette Belinda Carlisle of the Go-Go's sneered at a nation of pimply-faced girls in Parma tract-houses:

This town is our town
It is so glamorous
Bet you'd live here if you could
And be one of us

This is what Angelenos really believe, and it's probably true.

The record conglomerates tolerate parochialism, as long as it can be used as a marketing strategy. Mellencamp—a perpetually ticked-off white-trash autodidact—was advertised as a Morning in America songster, which is why Reagan's trolls tried to buy him off. Springsteen, an admirer of Sergio Leone's

spaghetti Westerns who wanted to paint his own America on a broad canvas with the inspired laboriousness of John Dos Passos, was hyped as a feel-good bombaster of "USA! USA!" stadium rock. They sold a lot of records, but now they are aging and bitter and reclusive. They were Americanists of the old sort, patriots of solidity and flesh and dirt, marketed as and by patriots of the new sort—of abstraction and America as an idea, not a real place.

Across the sea we also find dissenters from the New World Order. Morrissey, the celibate Oscar Wilde of postpunk England, has lately been crucified for his haunting "We'll Let You Know":

We may seem cold
Or we may even be
The most depressed people you've ever known
At heart, what's left, we sadly know
That we are the last truly British people you'll ever
know
We are the last truly British people you will ever know.

With the pony-tailed execs and MTV directors and Gap posers as the face rock and roll presents to our trading partners in the New World Order, is it any wonder that Russian nationalists hate our guts and want to immunize the mother country against our poison? But Americanists understand that the images on a television screen are not America. John Fogerty, leader of the great (if precipitation-obsessed) Creedence Clearwater Revival, explained how he remained a patriot even through Vietnam: "First thing I thought was the Grand Canyon and my friends and neighbors—and the people all across the country. The people in power aren't my country any more than a bunch of gangsters are my country." LBJ and Nixon and Ford and Carter and Reagan and Bush and Clinton won't stop the rain. Ten thousand Fogertys might.

But I am getting too old to ken it anyway. Bob Seger may sing "come back baby, rock and roll never forgets" to all those "sweet sixteens turned 31," but the pride of townie Ann Arbor is a relic whose fine unpretentious strummings are heard in more elevators than nightclubs these days.

For a high-school graduation present last year I took a young friend to a concert by the punk band Social Distortion. (Okay, so I'm not the world's best role model.) The band consists of aging punks whose faces and smells are redolent of 47-year-old men in undershirts living on seventh floors of fetid high-rises on decaying Baltimore blocks. I wanted to hear ancient chestnuts like "Mommy's Little Monster," which, when they got around to it, singer Mike Ness introduced with a grudging "here's one for the old school." It was like a rock band at a wedding reluctantly playing "Moon River" so the wrinkled coots can dance their one dance. I got a beer and counted the rings in my trunk.

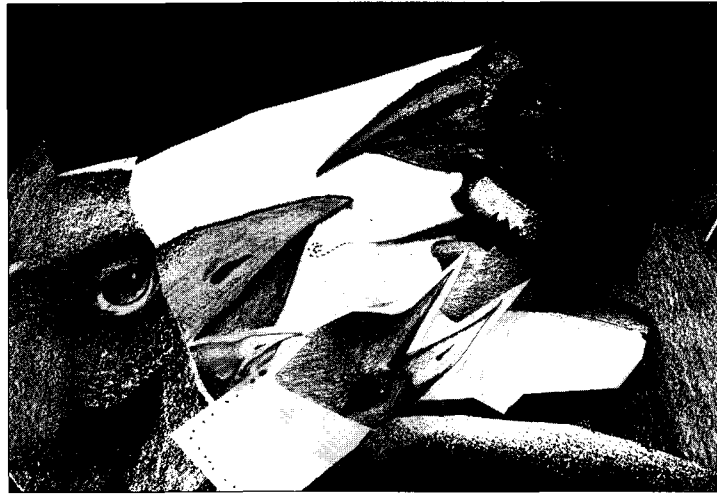
Rock and roll belongs to the young. Americanists—ghetto blacks, turnip-truck whites—will keep sprouting, and the record conglomerates will keep swallowing and spitting them out. "So you wanna be a rock-and-roll star?" the Byrds asked. Fine: "sell your soul to the company" and in return "the girls will tear you apart." But not everyone signs on the dotted line. We can only hope that the coming generations are, as Emerson hailed his successors, "stiff, heady, and rebellious." With the Springsteens locked in the storm cellar, hatches battened, youth must be served. Kick it over, kids. You have nothing to gain but your American birthright.

Degrade and Fall

by Christine Haynes

Among a people generally corrupt, liberty cannot long exist.

—Edmund Burke



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Sade: A Biography

by Maurice Lever

Translated by Arthur Goldhammer
New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux;
626 pp., \$35.00



I was reading Arthur Goldhammer's translation of Maurice Lever's *Sade* as the Senator Packwood scandal raged on, and although I wouldn't want to draw any unwarranted comparisons between the two *bonhommes*, the parallels between *Ancien Régime* France and contemporary America are unmistakable. Debauchery reigns in the corridors of power in the United States today as freely as it did in 18th-century France, and it is the smell of corruption, more than any detail about the marquis de Sade's ignominious life, that remains with the reader of Lever's forthright and spirited biography. (Goldhammer's translation, while it leaves out some useful notes and appendices regarding family histories and genealogies, is lively and readable.)

Sade reads like a novel. Lever employs a "synoptic" rather than "linear"

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method, which allows for a three-dimensional picture of the man, and he mixes serious analysis with sarcastic and ironic comments that at times make his tale almost farcical. Take, for instance, this description of Sade's introduction to his uncle's library, which included licentious works like the abbé Jacques Boileau's *History of the Flagellants, in which the good and bad uses of flagellation among the Christians are pointed out*:

Boileau dwelt at length on the ways in which flagellation could excite the senses and discoursed learnedly on the grave question of whether it was better to discipline oneself on the back or on the buttocks. He also mentions numerous cases in which the whip stimulated *furia amorosa*. Pleasure through suffering: there was a precept [Sade] would not soon forget.

Or this account of Sade's efforts to evade the police:

To avoid being recognized, he had donned the cassock of . . . a priest. In this same disguise he traveled down the Rhône as far as Mar-

seilles. The journey went well except for one minor incident, which must have delighted [Sade]. While crossing the Durance, the ferry's rope broke and the craft drifted in the current for some time. Thinking that their final hour had arrived, the passengers threw themselves at the feet of the "cure" to make their last confession.

Donatien Alphonse François de Sade (1740-1814) descended from a long line of Provençal nobles supposed to have originated with the magus Balthasar. Donatien's father, Jean-Baptiste Joseph François, comte de Sade, was an illustrious libertine who left Provence to make a name for himself at the court of Louis XV but eventually returned home, ostracized and broke. Although he was born in Paris, the marquis was sent to Provence at an early age to live with his uncle, the abbé de Sade—"the very type of libertine priest." Returning to Paris to attend the prestigious Collège Louis-le-Grand (where, Lever speculates, he may have encountered flagellation and sodomy), the marquis began a successful, albeit short, military career at the age of 14.

Upon his discharge at the end of the