Fans say Springsteen lyrics affirm 'right' values

George Will

What I did on my summer vacation:

My friend Bruce Springsteen... OK, he's only my acquaintance, but my children now think I am a serious person. I met him because his colleague Max Weinberg and Max's wife Rebecca invited me to enjoy Max's work, which I did. He plays drums for Springsteen, who plays rock and roll for purists, of whom there are lots. For 10 shows in New Jersey, he recently sold 16,000 $16 tickets in the first hour, all 202,000 in a day. His albums can sell one million copies on the first day of release.

There is not a smidgen of androgyny in Springsteen who, rocketing around the stage in a T-shirt and headband, resembles Robert DeNiro in the combat scenes of "The Deerhunter." This is rock for the United Steelworkers, accompanied by the opening barrage of the battle of the Somme. The saintly Rebecca met me with a small pouch of cotton — for my ears, she explained. She thinks I am a poor specimen, I thought. I made it three beats into the first number before packing my ears.

I may be the only 43-year-old American so out of the swim that I do not even know what marijuana smoke smells like. Perhaps at the concert I was surrounded by controlled substances. Certainly I was surrounded by orderly young adults earnestly — and correctly — insisting that Springsteen is a wholesome cultural portent.

For the uninitiated, the sensory blitzkrieg of a Springsteen concert is stunning. For the initiated, which included most of the 20,000 the night I experienced him, the lyrics, believe it or not, are most important.

Today, "values" are all the rage, with political candidates claiming to have backpacks stuffed full of them. Springsteen's fans say his message affirms the right values. Certainly his manner does.

Many of his fans regarded me as exotic fauna at the concert (a bow tie and double-breasted blazer is not the dress code) and undertook to instruct me. A typical tutorial went like this:

Me: "What do you like about him?"

Male fan: "He sings about faith and traditional values."

Male fan's female friend, dryly: "And cars and girls."

Male fan: "No, no it's about community and roots and perseverance and family."

She: "And cars and girls."

Let's not quibble. Cars and girls are American values, and this lyric surely expresses some elemental American sentiment: "Now mister the day my number comes in/ I ain't never gonna ride/ in no used car again."

Springsteen, a product of industrial New Jersey, is called the "blue-collar troubadour." But if this is the class struggle, its anthem — its "International" — is the song that provides the title for his 18-month, worldwide tour: "Born in the U.S.A."

I have not got a clue about Springsteen's politics, if any, but flags get waved at his concerts while he sings songs about hard times. He is no whiner, and the recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful affirmation: "Born in the U.S.A."

His songs, and the engaging homilies with which he introduces them, tell listeners to "downsize" their expectations — his phrase, borrowed from the auto industry, naturally. It is music for saying good-bye to Peter Pan: Life is real, life is earnest, life is a lot of work, but...

"Friday night's pay night, guys fresh out of work/ Talking about the weekend, scrubbing off the dirt . . ./ In my head I keep a picture of a pretty little miss/ Someday mister I'm gonna lead a better life than this."

An evening with Springsteen — an evening tends to wash over into the a.m., the concerts lasting four hours — is vivid proof that the work ethic is alive and well. Backstage there hovers the odor of Ben-Gay: Springsteen is an athlete draining himself for every audience.

But, then, consider Max Weinberg's bandaged fingers. The rigors of drumming have led to five tendonitis operations. He soaks his hands in hot water before a concert, in ice afterward, and sleeps with tight gloves on. Yes, of course, the whole E Street Band is making enough money to ease the pain. But they are not charging as much as they could, and the customers are happy. How many American businesses can say that?

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Bruce Springsteen: Singing America's song.