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Beyond blood brothers: queer Bruce Springsteen

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Abstract

Bruce Springsteen's body of work contains a striking number of songs with homoerotic or queerly suggestive content. Moreover, his live performances often push the limits of the homosocial, 'queering' onstage relationships through everything from lingering kisses with the late saxophonist Clarence Clemons to intimate microphone sharing with guitarist and real-life best friend Stevie Van Zandt. In this paper I trace Bruce Springsteen's consistent performative engagement with queer desire over the course of his 40-year career through a close reading of both lyrics and performance (including onstage, and in video and still photography). I examine how Springsteen's queer lyrical content and performative acts contrast critically with dominant readings of his hypermasculine, 'all-American' image, and suggest that Springsteen's regular deployment of homosocial and homoerotic imagery in both lyrics and performance – far from being an exception to his more mainstream persona – actually constitute a kind of queer aesthetic vital to, and consistent with, his artistic vision of love and community.

Introduction

In the liner notes to his 1995 *Greatest Hits* compilation, Bruce Springsteen describes 'This Hard Land' as containing one of his favourite last verses. The verse opens with:

Hey, Frank, won't you pack your bags
And meet me tonight down at Liberty Hall
Just one kiss from you, my brother
And we'll ride until we fall

It goes on to describe the narrator's plan for the two heroes to run away together, sleeping by the rivers and in the fields and, all else failing, meeting 'in the dream of this hard land'.

'This Hard Land' is one of many Springsteen songs that deploy queerly suggestive imagery and content. Likewise, Springsteen's onstage behaviour regularly incorporates elements of what could be construed as a queer aesthetic, from his lingering kisses with the late saxophonist Clarence Clemons to his intimate microphone sharing with guitarist and real-life best friend Steve Van Zandt.

Yet despite such evidence of a queer aesthetic in Springsteen's music and performance, there has been a remarkable silence around his queerness in popular discourse. This paper does not seek to label Bruce Springsteen's sexual orientation, but rather to 'out' the queer body of his songs and performance. While a few key

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scholars – Martha Nell Smith, Bryan Garman and Jim Cullen – have brilliantly illuminated specific aspects of Springsteen's queer lyrics and performance, this is the first study to examine queerness as a consistent, key component to the aesthetics of his career-long musical exploration. I begin with a close reading of representative lyrical content from each of three significant periods of his musical career and then read photographs and videos of his live performances as queer texts.[1] Bruce Springsteen's queer aesthetic is especially fascinating, I argue, precisely because he is known in most discourse as a performer who epitomises conventional stereotypes of masculinity (and indeed its close cousin, American patriotism). I suggest that the dissonance between Springsteen's famously 'All-American', hypermasculine image and his sustained artistic commitment to performing a queer aesthetic successfully calls into question larger assumptions about the valorisation of masculinity in rock 'n' roll more generally.

The world of rock is a prime example of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as a 'carefully regulated' homosocial landscape in which male bonding is glorified but homosexuality has historically been disparaged or ignored.[2] Each component of the rock universe is dominated by men, from artists to producers, critics to audiences. While waxing poetic about the skills and charm of certain iconic masculine rock heroes, many (male) writers of popular rock history have simultaneously played an important role in valorising the male homosociability of rock and 'straightening out' artists who venture over the line into the homoerotic in ways that threaten to destabilize this history. Is it possible that a key component of this compulsive heteronormalisation in rock 'n' roll is an attempt on the part of rock commentators to justify their own infatuation with other men to an audience that shares this same slippery obsession? As gay rock critic John Gill muses cheekily, 'Most rock historians probably had at least one hand in their pocket playing with their marbles while they wrote' (Gill 1995, p. 89).

In the 1995 television documentary by Andrew Solt Productions, *The History of Rock 'N' Roll*, for example, neither gender nor sexuality is mentioned in 10 hours of painstaking interviews and footage. This supposedly comprehensive narrative paints rock as an inevitably masculine, naturally heterosexual art form, no questions asked. The one-hour segment entitled 'The 1970s: Have a Nice Decade', for instance, discusses glam rock and disco without ever acknowledging the theatrical gender play and sexual transgression central to both subgenres. Constructing a narrative about the contribution of glam and disco to the downfall of rock 'n' roll, the 'Have a Nice Decade' segment includes as 'Exhibit A' a clip of the openly gay Village People performing the disco classic 'YMCA'. Rock's near-death experience is then quickly followed by a happy ending: footage of Bruce Springsteen's rousing, sweaty, guitar-pumping performance at the 1979 'No Nukes' concert, in which, with the exuberance of an exorcist, he saves rock 'n' roll from the glittery fingernails of the sordid 1970s.

The History of Rock 'N' Roll's narrow telling of rock's story marginalises an important legacy of queer voices and, as is of particular concern to this paper, the queer voice of an artist touted as the poster child of masculine heteronormativity in rock 'n' roll for nearly four decades. Far from exclusively glorifying heterosexuality and embodying an uncritical, uncomplicated form of popular masculinity, a deeper investigation of Bruce Springsteen's body of work will reveal that his music and performance returns again and again to themes of deep love between men, love that frequently occupies the liminal space between brother

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and lover, a romantic 'darkness on the edge of town'. It is time to set the record (un)straight.

Springsteen's songs with queer lyrics closely parallel the broader thematic and musical directions of his work during each period of his career. These songs can be roughly divided into three categories: (1) narrative songs that describe gender-deviant and sexually-deviant characters and behaviour; (2) songs that express first-person brotherly love for – and homoerotic intimacy between – men; and (3) songs that, in a few notable cases, describe romantic relationships with men in the first person.

'All them golden-heeled fairies': homosexuals and gender misfits in Springsteen's early music

The first period of Bruce Springsteen's music, written and recorded roughly from 1972 to 1975,[3] is his most experimental, exploring many musical styles in a big blast of mutinous fun. Words spill out of his mouth in a half-mumbled, explosive and poetic description of a fast life on the down and out. The soon-to-be-named E Street Band spills along with him. Both the lyrics and the playful music itself express a loving affection for – and deep identification with – the misfit bad boys of the Jersey Shore. Springsteen's action-packed stories of seedy boardwalk and alleyway culture contain an entire cast of glorified rebellious troubadours – including some suggestively queer ones. In fact, almost half of the tracks on his first two albums, *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* and *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, both released in 1973, contain queer characters.[4]

'Lost in the Flood', for instance, describes the 'Wolfman fairies dressed in drag for homicide', while in 'Fourth of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)', 'The boys in their high heels, oh their skins are so white'. The description of these stiletto-stacked boys may refer to Italian Americans down from New York City who have not yet gotten their summer tans, but just as likely they are transvestites with powdered faces. While the character of Sandy is addressed as a girl, the gender neutrality of the name leaves open the possibility of a male interpretation. A further gay overtone is added in some performances of the song that describe Hell's Angel's 'losing their desire' for Sandy and the assumed-to-be-male singer.

'Wild Billy's Circus Story' contains several descriptions of queer encounters. 'Behind the tent the hired hand tightens his legs on the sword swallower's blade', the song goes, and later:

> The strong man Sampson lifts the midget little Tiny Tim
> Way up on his shoulders, way up
> And carries him on down the midway past the kids, past the sailors
> To his dimly lit trailer

The song ends with the male circus ringleader provocatively inviting a little boy from the audience to join the circus. Of 'Wild Billy', Springsteen writes, 'It was … a song about the seduction and loneliness of a life outside the margins of everyday life. At twenty-four, already having spent a good deal of time on the road, for better or worse, that was the life I wanted to live' (Springsteen 1998, p. 26).

In 'Spirit in the Night', a gang of six boys and one girl go off together for a night of teenage pleasure at Greasy Lake. Wild Billy (the same one from the circus?), G-Man, Hazy Davy, Killer Joe, Crazy Janey, Janey's 'mission man' and the (again

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assumed-to-be-male) narrator get sauced on a bottle of wine and some dust that Wild Billy shook 'out of his coonskin cap'. As the night progresses, the gathering of friends 'dance all night to a soul fairy band' and the narrator and Crazy Janey end up making love in the dirt. While this heterosexual coupling occurs the other boys indulge in sensuous pleasure as well:

Now the night grew bright and the stars threw light on Billy and Davy
Dancin' in the moonlight
They were down near the water in a stone mud fight
Killer Joe'd passed out on the lawn
Well Hazy Davy got really hurt
He crawled into the lake in just his socks and a shirt

The song's orgiastic mayhem does not need to say explicitly just what sort of dancing and fighting Billy and Davy were engaged in that caused at least one of them to lose his trousers. Springsteen biographer David Marsh interprets the important feeling of 'Spirit in the Night' to be 'the spirit of unity, whether sexual or otherwise' between its teenage rock 'n' roll heroes. He adds, 'The only authority on the scene is the bond of friendship and trust that holds these people together' (Marsh 2004, p. 65). For these male characters, the line between friends and lovers is blurry, a textual tension that Springsteen returns to repeatedly over the course of his career.

'Incident of 57th Street' tells the story of Johnny, a youthful hoodlum of Spanish Harlem, caught in a dilemma between his feelings for a gang of street boys and those for a girl. 'Puerto Rican Jane picks him up, but Johnny's torn between his love and his partners in crime' (Marsh 2004, p. 92), which he views with equally romantic eyes. As Springsteen traces the developing courtship of Johnny and Janey he returns again and again to the intimate friendships of the street boys, who after a run-in with the police at the end of the second verse 'left the corners, threw away their switchblade knives and kissed each other goodbye'. To further complicate matters, Johnny offers to take Jane to his idea of Eden, which is populated by drag queens:

I want to drive you down to the other side of town where paradise ain't so crowded,
there'll be action goin' down on Shanty Lane tonight
All them golden-heeled fairies in a real bitch fight
Pull .38s and kiss the girls good night

While these kisses may simply refer to the Puerto Rican cultural customs of the characters, the repeated usage of the phase 'kiss each other goodbye/goodnight' could also indicate both the quasi-romantic intimacy among gang members and also the idea that Johnny has to leave this life behind. But in the end Johnny gets to have it both ways: he promises to meet Jane tomorrow on Lover's Lane, but in the meantime exits for a night with the 'romantic young boys' (a phrase echoed at a high pitch by the E Street Band, sounding like an angelic choir). Springsteen (1998, p. 26) describes 'Incident' as the first song in a lifelong musical exploration of the search for redemption.

Each of the songs discussed above describes a cast of heroes in a group setting. Even when the songs are about the first-person narrator, that narrator is out with the crowd. In *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*, Jim Cullen writes, 'Perhaps the most striking characteristic of Springsteen's first three albums is the intensely social quality of his settings: his characters are almost always in groups, a kind of pack mentality characteristic of young males … Indeed, there's an almost erotic subtext animating many of these encounters' (Cullen 2005, pp. 125–6). An

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overarching atmosphere of male-to-male intimacy remains potent even when a heterosexual coupling dominates the central storyline of the song, as is the case with 'Spirit in the Night' and 'Incident on 57th Street'. In these present-tense stories, Springsteen's inclusion of gay and gender transgressive characters as part of the scene seems casual, and in this way Springsteen normalises queerness, to whatever extent his glorified bunch of misfits can be considered normal.

However, if for the most part Bruce Springsteen's queer characters in these early-period songs are simply honoured as part of the gang, one notable song articulates an ambivalent relationship to homosexuality and transgenderism. Unlike the nonchalance of the songs already discussed, 'Mary Queen of Arkansas' suggests a tension in the first-person narrator's feelings about a queer character.[5] On his debut album (1973), and in fact the first song Springsteen recorded at Columbia Records, 'Mary Queen of Arkansas' describes the first-person male narrator's uncertain romantic relationship with a transvestite. Perhaps following in the footsteps of the 1970 hit 'Lola', Springsteen takes on a level of complexity and commitment not present in the Kinks' carefree storyline of a drunken barroom frolic. Circus imagery pervades the song, implying that both the narrator and Mary have multi-layered identities. Mary is both female and male, mother and father, lover and boss, Catholic deity, and perhaps prostitute and pimp as well. The narrator struggles to place himself in relation to this complex figure who is 'not man enough for me to hate or woman enough for kissing', yet whose 'soft hulk is reviving'. Throughout the song Mary both pulls the narrator close and pushes him away: 'I don't understand how you can hold me so tight and love me so damn loose'. Or conversely, the narrator is both attracted to Mary and mortified by him/her. By the end of the song, however, the narrator has invited Mary to run away with him to Mexico, indicating that he wants to continue their relationship even as he tries to 'start all over again clean'.[6]

Among fans, 'Mary Queen of Arkansas' is often adamantly considered Springsteen's worst song. Although lyrically and musically similar to many other songs of the same era, fans are quick to single out 'Mary' as a failure.[7] While the group settings and simultaneously heterosexual plots of Springsteen's other early queer works normalise the transgressive characters – or at least blur them for fans who do not want to hear – could it be that Mary's undeniable gender fluidity and the narrator's (read as Springsteen's) first-person sexual relations with this character too thoroughly destabilise fans' notion of their heterosexual pop hero? Springsteen seems to be aware of the song's unpopularity; as is noted on the website 'A Lebanese Tribute to Bruce Springsteen', he did not play it in concert between 1974 and 2000. Interestingly, however, he chose to include a version of the song on the 1998 *Tracks* boxed set, which contains 66 songs narrowed down from hundreds of contenders.

The extensive queer content of Springsteen's early songs leads one to wonder how much of Asbury Park's vibrant gay scene he was familiar with, and under what circumstances. Is the Tiny Tim who Strongman Sampson escorts to his dimly lit trailer the same Tiny Tim who had a 'gay-friendly tea room' on Asbury Park's Bond Street during the 1930s (Pike 2005, p. 98)? While it is hard to know if Springsteen ever crossed the tracks to the African American side of town to patronise Cuba's Bar with 'faggots showing off their wigs and rings; their numbers "out of proportion" to the size of Asbury Park' (Wolff 2005, p. 168), based on his lyrical observations of other West Side activity, it is certain he would at least have known about

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them. Asbury Park was also home to the 'hugely popular' M+K, a gay disco club modelled after New York City's Studio 54 (Pike 2005, p. 106).[8] In a 1996 interview, Springsteen reflected back on his early encounters with gays, saying:

> Basically I was pretty ostracised in my hometown. Me and a few other guys were the town freaks – and there were many occasions when we were dodging getting beaten up ourselves … I started to play in clubs when I was 16 or 17, and I was exposed to a lot of different things. It was the sixties, and I was young. I was open-minded, and I wasn't naturally intolerant … Yeah, I had gay friends. The first thing I realised was that everybody's different, and that it becomes obvious that all the gay stereotypes are ridiculous. I did pretty good with it. (Wieder 2004, p. 216)

Bobby, Terry and other angels

As the Queen of Arkansas is both a male and female Mary, Springsteen's extensive cast of lyrical characters includes many with indeterminate gender. Springsteen uses neutrality in second-person address as one of his most common rhetorical tools, singing to numerous darlings and babies of undefined gender. Furthermore, as Martha Nell Smith (1991, p. 838) has also observed, he relies heavily on 'nam[ing] his beloveds in a most ambiguous fashion' so that we hear of Rickys, Sandys, Bobbys, Terrys, Frankies, and practically an entire host of Angels. Sometimes the gender is specified, so that we get both male and female Angels: 'The angel rides with hunch-backed children, poison oozing from *his* engine', whereas 'Little Angel steps the shuffle like *she* ain't got no brains'. Ricky and Sandy are both pronounced female – 'Ricky wants a man of *he*r own', 'Hey Sandy, *girl*' – and in every single instance where the gender is explicitly declared for a Bobby or Terry the characters are male (all emphasis mine).[9] Yet other songs with these same three names – each of which are addressed to a beloved – remain gender neutral. Martha Nell Smith (1991, p. 839) poignantly asks, 'To whom are Springsteen's poetically professed passions directed anyway? What gender are all those beloveds who he christens so indeterminately?'.

If for the most part there has been little public dialogue about Springsteen's queer musical expressions, the gender-ambiguous Terry of 'Backstreets' from *Born to Run* (1975) has been the centre of an ongoing debate among fans. A presumably male protagonist addresses an enigmatic Terry in a manner where both the latter's gender and the nature of the relationship between the two defy determination. The fans who argue that Bruce Springsteen's music must be heterosexual at all costs ('because *he* isn't gay; he's married with kids, right?') insist that Terry is a woman, or *maybe* a man but only if the song is merely about friends and not lovers. Others venture to push the gay voice.[10]

The 'Backstreets' lyrics are strictly gender neutral. Beyond the scope of pronouns, however, I argue in favour of reading the song as the story of betrayal between male lovers based on the overall content of the lyrics. Springsteen takes up iconic 'masculine' themes in this song that he explores in many others. 'Catching rides to the outskirts' parallels similar lines describing men together in the songs 'Meeting Across the River' and 'Brothers Under the Bridges'.[11] 'Remember all the movies, Terry, we'd go to see / Trying to learn how to walk like the heroes we thought we had to be' also reflects a common Springsteen theme of self-conscious manhood. The line specifically corresponds to descriptions of men

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in 'Walk Like a Man', 'Zero and Blind Terry' and 'The Promise' (interestingly the latter two are also songs with Terrys: the first is gender neutral, the second male).[12] This line also conjures up wild screen heroes of the likes of Marlon Brando or Robert DeNiro. The overall scenery of 'Backstreets' reads like the youthful, stereotypically masculine world of *The Wild One* or *Meanstreets*.

It is the overtly male landscape of 'Backstreets' that leads many to interpret the narrator and Terry as two male friends. But just what is the nature of this friendship? What makes their lives together so forbidden that they must hide on the backstreets? Lines like 'Sleeping in that old abandoned beach house' and 'With a love so hard and filled with defeat' suggest a romantic liminality in the characters' relationship. The language is quite emotionally charged for a strictly platonic friendship.[13]

Regardless of any particular listener's own gendering of 'Backstreet's' Terry, the fact that Springsteen himself has refused to definitively say one way or the other is in itself a queering of the character. Ignoring an opportunity to declare the both the gender and relationship of the characters, in *Songs* he simply states that the song is about 'broken friendships' (Springsteen 1998, p. 46), and in the 2005 *Wings for Wheels: The Making of Born to Run* documentary, he elaborates provocatively:

> One of the most significant things about *[Born to Run]* is the cover, where I'm not on the cover by myself. I'm on the cover with Clarence. That was enormously significant I think as a message to send to our fans … That it was a record about friendship. 'Backstreets', that's what the entire song is about. [Sings through the song.] That is the whole deal.

Springsteen here essentially links a photo of himself gazing lovingly at his male friend with the romantic feeling of such lyrics as 'Laying here in the dark you are like an angel on my chest / Just another tramp of hearts crying tears of faithlessness.'

In live performances of 'Backstreets', Terry's gender typically remains indefinite, even with the addition of panting, whispered sweet talk used to introduce the song (such as on the *Born in the U.S.A.* tour). However, for a brief period in the late 1970s Springsteen regularly performed the song with the addition of what is called the 'Sad Eyes Interlude', an ever-changing spoken piece that usually referred to a female 'baby'. Many years later Springsteen offset the heterosexuality implied by this configuration by resurrecting the song on his 2007 tour in support of the album *Magic,* which was dedicated to the memory of his long-time friend Terry Magovern. Furthermore, in the first concert after E Street organist Danny Federici died in 2008 he sang the song specifically aimed at his deceased friend, with the emphasis on the line, 'We swore we'd live forever on the backstreets we take it together'. (It is worth noting that in this same concert, Bruce Springsteen kissed pianist Roy Bittan on stage at the end of 'Fourth of July, Asbury Park'.)[14] In 'Backstreets', Terry – far from being explicitly or unambiguously gendered – is a floating signifier of gender, shifting depending on media and mode, and making space for the exploration of a deeper love between men (a romantic friendship, a homosocial relationship, and even a homoerotic tension) than an explicitly gendered figure would allow.

'Just one kiss from you my brother': romantic brotherly love

Like the *Born to Run* album in general, 'Backstreets' marks a thematic transition from Springsteen's early boardwalk music to his developing identification with the greater

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American everyman. His protagonists are still on the Jersey Shore, but the story is now in the past tense, wistfully mourning bygone youth. Nostalgia for both personal youth and the supposed simplicity of an American past came to be a defining characteristic of Springsteen's music of the late 1970s and 1980s. When the shaggy tramp escaped the Jersey Shore to eventually become the buff worker offering his behind literally across America on the album cover of *Born in the U.S.A.*, his queer character – and characters – transformed right along with him.

Cullen argues that the male intimacy, 'sexual or otherwise', of Springsteen's early albums disappears with 1978's *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, which he interprets as a result of simply growing up. 'Never again would Springsteen *write* about brotherhood with quite the same insouciance of his early career, even if he continued to perform rituals of brotherhood on stage' (Cullen 2005, p. 126). Except for Springsteen, most of the members of the E Street Band had in fact married by this time, even as they were still living in the youthful world of rock 'n' roll. But I would argue that if growing up meant being forced to distance oneself from the carefree brotherhood of youth, for Springsteen it did not mean going straight. On the contrary, Springsteen continued to develop a queer aesthetic: the tone of his songs about men in this period turned from celebration to nostalgia, from a matter-of-fact 'this is how it is' to an almost melancholy 'I wish this is how it could still be', all the while maintaining suggestively homoerotic undertones.

In the late 1970s Springsteen's musical narratives and persona gradually changed from playful street hooligan to working-class hero. His subject was still the glorified outsider, yet now this outsider was someone who was *trying* to fit into the American dream but had failed – or rather had been failed by the system. Under the tutelage of his friend and new manager Jon Landau, Springsteen studied American history, largely through the works of his great cultural forebears in film, music and literature. He reflected on his family's own story in the context of American history and developed a social and moral consciousness, particularly with regard to class oppression, which shaped all his work from this era on. Among Springsteen's new influences was Walt Whitman, who clearly articulated the role of the artist as a moral orator to inspire social equality and a sense of connectivity among Americans.[15]

As Bryan Garman explores at length in *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*, Springsteen mirrored the significance of homosociality and homoeroticism inherent in Whitman's vision. Whitman spoke extensively in terms both spiritual and sexual about his feelings for his fellow 'brothers', which he distilled into the concept of 'adhesive love'. Garman explains:

> Whitman argued that if Americans were to create a previously unimagined democracy, they would have to forge an unforeseen love and respect for political equals, that is, other white men. Rooted in the homosocial and often homoerotic culture of the artisan workshop, adhesiveness promised that the exchange of sexual pleasure between men would reconcile individual freedom and social equality and promote a radical democracy. (Garman 2000, p. 9)

Throughout the epic poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, written between the 1850s and 1890s, Whitman interweaves his views of the United States with his love for its men. Many Springsteen songs read like Whitmanian portraits of the American moral landscape, not a few sharing Whitman's erotic language to describe his feelings for his brothers.

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Springsteen's lyrical use of the term 'brother,' for example, as often as not has direct – or at least highly suggestive – eroticism attached to it. As quoted in the opening paragraph, 'This Hard Land' describes a romantic bond forged between two men as the idyllic escape from the dreariness of contemporary America. Garman says:

> The protagonists express their love freely and naturally in the open air with a soul kiss, an organic, evenhanded sexual exchange that binds them together in an unmitigated equality based on what Whitman would call a 'love more precious than money'. To form a more perfect union of the body politic, they recommit themselves to disseminating this love along the open road. (Garman 2000, pp. 256–7)

Springsteen has described 'This Hard Land' as summing up what his music is about. Elaborating on the intensity of a friendship united in music, he remarks:

> 'This Hard Land' has always been one of my favorites . . . I really wanted to write music about You, and Your friends, so that you really could feel it when you stood there among thousands of others in the audience. When people think back on their closest friends . . . those friendships always go hand in hand with the music and all the strong feelings that the music brought, feelings which were even stronger if you shared them with somebody. It was an essential part of what rock 'n' roll was about and I really tried to write songs that captured that. 'This Hard Land' was one of those. (quoted in Flannigan and Phillips 1998, p. 7).[16]

For Springsteen, the feelings for a close male friend could, at least under the influence of rock 'n' roll, grow intense enough to include kissing as you rode off into the sunset.

Springsteen is even known to use erotic language when describing the relationship between actual brothers, as in *Nebraska's* (1982) 'Highway Patrolman'. The narrator croons, 'Nothing feels better than blood on blood' to describe himself and his brother dancing with his wife. The video accompanying the song reinforces the erotic reading with footage of a boy tackling and trying to kiss his squirming yet grinning younger brother. Additional footage shows the now adult siblings in a long, tight embrace in the dark, followed by a final sultry shot of the no-good brother lying on his back in a bed. 'Sinaloa Cowboys', Springsteen's follow-up to 'Highway Patrolman' on his next acoustic album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995), also ends where the character Miquel 'Kissed his brother's lips and placed him in his grave'.

In the two songs 'No Surrender' and 'Bobby Jean', Springsteen expresses his fraternal desire for his best friend and bandmate Stevie Van Zandt on the occasion of Van Zandt's departure from the E Street Band at the end of the *Born in the U.S.A.* recording sessions in 1984. To accompany these songs, the *BITUSA* album credit lines end with 'Buon viaggio, mio fratello, Little Steven'. 'No Surrender' celebrates the redemptive value of this rock 'n' roll friendship. Sung in a nostalgic past tense, Van Zandt's departure heavily directs the song's feeling. Springsteen introduces the phrase 'blood brothers' for the first time while expressing a desire to maintain that bond: 'We swore blood brothers against the wind / I'm ready to grow young again'. Springsteen has performed two different last verses for 'No Surrender', both of which are open to homoerotic interpretation:

I want to sleep beneath the peaceful skies
In my lover's bed
With the wide open country in my eyes
And these romantic dreams in my head

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and:

We could sleep in the twilight
By the riverside
With a wide open country in our hearts
And these romantic dreams in our heads

In the first version, recorded on the *Born in the U.S.A.* album, it is left ambiguous as to whether the gender-neutral lover with whom the narrator wants to sleep is the same friend from the past to whom the whole song is addressed, or whether it is a second person in the narrator's present-day life. However, the alternate last verse to 'No Surrender', recorded on the *Live 1975–85* album, explicitly expresses a desire for the narrator and his male friend to sleep together by the riverside, with the romantic dreams *shared* in their hearts and heads. Here the ambiguity lies not in the gender of the characters but as to whether 'sleeping' is sexual or platonic. Springsteen introduces this live acoustic version of the song as 'one for friendship'. In both highly romantic renditions of 'No Surrender' one can hear the loving echoes of Whitman and his male companion sleeping beneath the cool night of the open road.[17]

Just as in 'No Surrender', in 'Bobby Jean' Springsteen uses the endearment 'baby' to address his friend Steven. 'Bobby Jean' is in fact the only song in his repertoire to use the common romantic phrase 'I miss you'. He ends the song with, 'I'm just calling one last time not to change your mind / But just to say I miss you baby, good luck goodbye, Bobby Jean'.

The homoerotic suggestivity of Springsteen's relationships with Steve Van Zandt and Clarence Clemons will be discussed further when looking at his performance and videos. His brotherly eros also extends to the band in general. Lyrically, Springsteen has been bursting with affection for the band since the early days with songs such as 'The E Street Shuffle', 'Tenth Avenue Freeze Out' and 'Jungle Land'. Springsteen describes himself (and is described by biographer David Marsh) as a loner who found community in rock 'n' roll, specifically in the electrifying brotherhood of the E Street Band.

The fraternal mythos (whether seen as sexual or not) of the E Street Band has been celebrated as an essential part of Springsteen's appeal by the band, media and fans alike. So when Springsteen abruptly broke up the band in 1989 after over 15 years of playing together, the rock world reacted harshly. Rock critics and fans generally agree that Springsteen's music suffered tremendously as a result, only to regain its footing when the band reunited in the late 1990s. The E Street Band, it seems, proved to be one of Springsteen's most important muses.[18]

Springsteen returned to writing narratives about the band when he called them back together in 1995 to record new songs for the forthcoming *Greatest Hits* album. (During these sessions Springsteen also rerecorded *This Hard Land* and released it for the first time.) The mournful 'Blood Brothers' tells of Springsteen's feelings about his relationship with the band as they reunite. He had already shown his erotic use of the term 'blood brothers' in 'No Surrender' and exploited this potential further in 'Blood Brothers'. Springsteen says,

> I wrote 'Blood Brothers' on the eve of recording with the E Street Band again. The song is filled with the ambivalence and deep affection of revisiting a relationship spanning twenty-five plus years. You hope the rough spots are balanced out by your common history, the unique experience you shared, and the love you have for one another. (Springsteen 1998, p. 252)

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When describing such love, the line between the fraternal and the romantic becomes blurry.

Now I don't know how I feel, I don't know how I feel tonight
If I've fallen 'neath the wheel, if I've lost or I've gained sight
I don't even know why, I don't know why I made this call
Or if any of this matters anymore after all

But the stars are burnin' bright like some mystery uncovered
I'll keep movin' through the dark with you in my heart, my blood brother

Springsteen closed the 1999 Reunion Tour with a rendition of 'Blood Brothers', calling the band to the front of the stage together and singing 'with tears in his eyes' (Marsh 2004, p. 669).

If 'Blood Brothers' hints at romantic feelings for the E Street Band, 'Back in Your Arms' holds no bars. Recorded during the same 1995 *Greatest Hits* sessions, 'Back in Your Arms' appears on the 1996 DVD/CD *Blood Brothers* and 1998 *Tracks* box set. The song uses the language of romantic love to tell a gender-neutral 'darling' of the narrator's regrets for having left, as he now begs to return to his/her love. I cannot help but interpret the song as an apology from the remorseful bandleader who left E Street behind. The last verse reads:

You came to me with love and kindness
But all my life I've been a prisoner of my own blindness
I met you with indifference and I don't know why …
… And all the love I've thrown away and lost I'm lookin' for again
Now darlin' I just wanna be back in your arms
Back in your arms again

Acknowledging that he 'threw away' the love the band gave him without a reason, he now asks for their forgiveness for his selfish actions. As elsewhere, Springsteen blurs the line between fraternity and romance when expressing his feelings about individual band members, and in this case, the band collectively.

While the erotic crossover from brother to lover is particularly characteristic of Springsteen's music from the 1980s to 1990s, he has continued to explore this subject on recent albums as well. In 'Gypsy Biker' from *Magic* (2007), the narrator declares to a deceased friend, 'Now all that remains / Is my love for you brother / Lying still and unchanged'. While the song traces a whole community's response to the protagonist's death, ending each verse with 'our gypsy biker is coming home', in the last verse the refrain switches to '*my* gypsy biker is coming home', indicating the narrator's more personal relationship with this man. (As mentioned earlier, *Magic* as an album is dedicated – complete with a photograph of a muscle-bound young motorcycle rider – to Springsteen's recently deceased long-time friend and personal assistant, Terry Magovern.) 'Devils and Dust' from the 2005 album of that title and 'Devil's Arcade' from *Magic* are two songs about soldiers with interesting slippage. 'Devil's Arcade' opens with:

Remember the morning we dug up your gun
The worms in the barrel, the hanging sun
Those first nervous evenings of perfume and gin
The lost smell on your breath as I helped you get it in
The rush of your lips, the feel of your name
The beat in your heart, the devil's arcade

While perhaps meant to be spoken by a female narrator, this is never indicated.

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'Find[ing] our beautiful selves again': gay relationship songs

On *Tunnel of Love, Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* – three albums from the late 1980s and early 1990s – Springsteen again shifts his narrative focus, this time from brotherhood and working-class heroism to the trials and triumphs of marriage and otherwise conjugal relationships. Unlike the nostalgic backward glance found in the songs discussed above, his relationship songs wrestle through the very present emotions of people who are intensely involved with one another. Significantly, during this era he also wrote two songs about gay relationships: the Academy and Grammy Award-winning 'Streets of Philadelphia' and the lesser-known 'My Lover Man'.

As the title track to the 1993 film *Philadelphia*, the narrator of 'Streets of Philadelphia' is a gay man dying of AIDS, though this is never specified in the lyrics themselves. The haunting music underpins the narrator's address to his lover, which captures the spiritual vulnerability and sense of abandonment he feels with his impending death. Springsteen sings, 'Ain't no angel gonna greet me / It's just you and I my friend'. The song, like the film, gently pushes a potentially homophobic audience through their fear by universalising the experience of a gay man. 'Streets of Philadelphia's' enormous chart success and numerous awards indicate that it succeeded in its mission, which Springsteen described in a 1996 interview with *The Advocate* magazine:

> [Jonathan] Demme told me that *Philadelphia* was a movie he was making 'for the malls'. I'm sure that was one of the reasons why he called me, I think he wanted to take a subject that people didn't feel safe with and were frightened by and put it together with people they did feel safe … I always felt that was my job. (quoted in Wieder 2004, p. 213)[19]

For all its critical acclaim, however, I have found little evidence of a discussion of 'Streets of Philadelphia' within the framework of Springsteen's larger body of queer music.[20] The song is viewed as a brilliant work by an artist with leftist politics which, while surely accurate, misses the opportunity to examine the rich history of Springsteen's songs with queer themes. In this regard, it is useful to place 'Streets' next to 'My Lover Man', Springsteen's other homosexual relationship song from the early 1990s.

On a queer Springsteen mix tape, 'My Lover Man' would be the title track. Recorded in 1990 and released on the 1998 *Tracks* box set, there are no known live performances of this deliciously explicit gay relationship song. In the compilation liner notes Springsteen describes *Tracks* as being 'the alternate route to some of the destinations I traveled to on my records' (*Tracks* liner notes, p. 1). On this particular back street of Springsteen's songs about 'adult love' (Springsteen 1998, p. 190), the narrator addresses his ex-lover on the occasion of their getting back together. The song expresses a deep intimacy through both the men's past failures and their attempts to reconcile their relationship, each verse ending with an invitation to 'my lover man'.[21]

Surprisingly – or not – in their supplemental booklet to accompany *Tracks*, Erik Flannigan and Christopher Phillips, the editors of the Springsteen fan magazine *Backstreets*, insist on the heterosexuality of 'My Lover Man'. Flat out refusing to acknowledge even the possibility of a homosexual reading, they say:

> Sounding nearly identical at first to 'Brilliant Disguise', this song soon reveals its own twist (if the title hadn't already): Springsteen is writing in the first person from a woman's point of

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view. While *Tracks* shows that he had done this before with 'Car Wash', that *Born in the U.S.A.* outtake was little more than a character sketch. 'My Lover Man' is a full-blown relationship song, told from the other side. There has been speculation that the song was written for Patti Scialfa's solo album *Rumble Doll,* though this has never has been confirmed. (Flannigan and Phillips 1998, p. 10)

The only known comment Springsteen himself has made on the song is that it is part of a group of tracks from the early 1990s that 'are very psychological portraits of people wrestling with relationships and their own isolation' (quoted in Flannigan and Phillips 1998, p. 10).

At face value, a homosexual reading of 'My Lover Man' is so obvious that *Backstreets Magazine's* denial of this possibility would be humorous if not for its hegemonic silencing of queer voices. A male singer speaks in a first-person narrative to an unequivocally indicated male 'you'. The song's details and contextualisation within Springsteen's larger body of work indicate that a homosexual reading remains strong on every level. First, to rebut Flannigan and Phillips's argument, in 'Car Wash', the only song in which Springsteen sings explicitly from the perspective of a female protagonist, he belabours the point by stating in the first line, 'Well my name is Catherine LeFevre'. In 'My Lover Man', on the other hand, nothing in the narrator's self-description indicates a female gender, except – from a heteronormative point of view – the narrator's relationship to the lover man. A 'she' does appear in the song as the lover man's ex with whom life 'turned to black'. One could argue that this indicates the sexual orientation of the beloved to be straight. However his bisexuality is equally if not more compellingly indicated. After two verses describing the two lovers' promises to each other and faithlessness in keeping those promises, the song ends with a crooning supplication:

Come close and we'll begin
To find our beautiful selves again, my lover man
My lover man
My lover man

To return to their beautiful selves is – to quote Nadine Hubbs (1996, p. 283) – to speak in 'queer-insider language': for a queer listener, at least, this line speaks of the falsity of trying to live a heterosexual life. The narrator pronounces their redemption through an invitation to be their true selves. Accompanying the printed lyrics to 'My Lover Man' in the *Tracks* booklet is a photograph of Springsteen riddled with gay signs. Springsteen squats against a wall with his face turned and covered (nodding to the closet?) by his right hand, which bears a thick band on the fourth finger. Historically, a ring on the right fourth finger signified homosexuality to others in the know; the fingers of Springsteen's left hand are tucked against his thigh, conspicuously obscuring the status of his left ring finger. His hairy chest emerges from a shirt unbuttoned to the waist, a cross dangling from his neck points down to the open-legged, full-frontal view of his crotch. If 'My Lover Man' is one of 'the ones that got away', as Springsteen declares of the songs on *Tracks,* he now offers it to us with conviction.

'Living proof': Bruce performing queerly

For any serious Boss fan the live concert embodies the 'true' Springsteen ethos. Springsteen and the E Street Band's famously epic shows are carefully staged sites

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of community enrapture. Thus Springsteen's performance tactics are as vitally important as his lyrics to the study at hand. I discuss Springsteen's videos alongside live performance, for although he was hesitant to jump on the MTV bandwagon out of concern that video could not express the vision of community and that connection central to his concerts, he ultimately used video to create stories parallel to the live shows, relying heavily on concert footage to do so.

The *Blood Brothers* and *Live in New York City* documentaries and the 'Better Days' music video show Springsteen kissing band members Danny Federici, Max Wienberg and Roy Bittan on the head or cheek. Garman writes, 'E Street was the site of a tight-knit fraternity of five men [sic] whose emphasis on male bonding rang with homoerotic overtones. Whether these men were posing for publicity photographs or performing onstage, they were not reluctant to demonstrate their affection for one another in physical terms' (Garman 2000, p. 123).

Bruce Springsteen's performances are most significantly queer in terms of his relationships with bandmates Clarence Clemons and Stevie Van Zandt. These two contrasting men both serve as Springsteen's onstage foils, and while their roles are very different, each interacts with the Boss in a way that often suggests a powerful homoeroticism. The late 'Big Man' Clarence Clemons fills out his appellation on every level. At 6′ 4″ and of sturdy build, he towers over Bruce and the other members of E Street, who are all several inches shorter (Springsteen is 5′ 8″). Clemons was also older than the rest of the band, and it is no small matter that he was African American in a group that is otherwise mostly Jewish and Italian American.[22] Wielding his powerful (and phallic) saxophone, the Big Man is the only one who ever gets to be a bit more 'boss' than the Boss. Throughout his performances Springsteen supplicates himself to Clemons: he variously leans into him for comfort, prances around him like a puppy in love, and elevates him with introductory titles such as 'King of the World' and 'Master of the Universe', whose name should not even need to be pronounced.[23] Bruce worships Clarence and invites the audience to do the same. Photographs from concerts throughout the early 1970s show the same unabashed gaze of adoration that was so carefully constructed on the cover of *Born to Run*.

Springsteen and Clemons's onstage behaviour does not stop with the affection of good buddies. Video footage of concerts from the late 1970s shows Springsteen briefly kissing Clemons on the cheek at the end of 'Rosalita' and 'Thunder Road'; by the *Born in the U.S.A.* tour in the mid-1980s, these already titillating pecks turned in full-blown lip-locked embraces. 'Thunder Road' routinely concluded with Springsteen sliding across the stage on his knees to land in Clemons's outstretched arms, their guitar and saxophone phalluses accenting their passionate kiss. Such footage also appears in the 'Born to Run' video on the official *Bruce Springsteen Video Anthology, 1978–2000*.

It is of note that the performances that culminate in Bruce and Clarence's passionate kiss are those of songs about the fantasy of escaping together, each addressed to a woman. 'Born to Run', 'Thunder Road' and 'Rosalita' all reach a lyrical crescendo with a triumphant declaration of winning against all odds. Springsteen's slide across the stage to meet Clemons's waiting lips is a climatic corporeal embodiment of the lyrics he sings. But with the subversion of gender from the abstract woman of the storyline to Clemons's very real person, is Springsteen not so subtly indicating just whose 'velvet rims' *he* wants to wrap his legs around, who he *really* wants to

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climb into his car as he 'pulls out of here to win?' ('Born to Run' 1975; 'Thunder Road' 1975).

Performances of 'Fire', in this case a song about sexual frustration rather than fantastical escape, find Springsteen and Clemons staging a competition of macho posturing that then is supplanted by desire for each other. Springsteen typically sings the first three verses of the overtly heterosexual song on his own with Clemons saddling up to him for the last line of the third stanza, 'Well your kisses they burn but your heart stays cool'. At this point Springsteen and Clemons face off against each other as if they are competing for the same girl, sometimes even breaking into a fake fistfight. But then the mood shifts and the two men gently wrap their arms around each other during the closing verse. For the final line, ''Cause when we kiss, fire' Bruce and Clarence stare deeply into each other's eyes and hold each other closer. At a performance of 'Fire' in Philadelphia on Springsteen's 2009 *Working on a Dream* tour, Springsteen's gaze at Clemons during the delivery of this line was as libidinously charged as any actual kiss.[24]

Both Clemons and Springsteen have spoken in romantic, almost mythological terms of the moment they first met at the Student Prince Club in Asbury Park in 1972. In his recently published memoir *Big Man: Real Life and Tall Tales*, Clemons and Reo say of that night:

> At some point I turn and look over at him and he does the same thing at the same second, and there was this connection, and we both felt it and we both knew it was powerful and that our lives would be intertwined forever. I know it sounds like bullshit and it sounds faggy and all that shit, but it's as true as anything that I know in life. (Clemons and Reo 2009, p. 256)

Throughout the book Clemons makes several other acknowledgements (though always tempered by stories of womanising) to the seemingly romantic or sexual nature of his relationship with Springsteen.

At his induction into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in 1999, Springsteen said of Clemons:

> Something happened when we stood side by side. Some . . . energy, some unspoken story. For fifteen years [sic] Clarence has been a source of myth and light and enormous strength for me on stage. He has filled my heart . . . and I love it when he wraps me in those arms at the end of the night. That night we first stood together, I looked over at C and it looked like his head reached into the clouds. And I felt like a mere mortal scurrying upon the earth, you know. But he always lifted me up. Way, way, way up. Together we told a story of the possibilities of friendship, a story older than the ones that I was writing and a story I could never have told without him at my side. I want to thank you, Big Man, and I love you so much. ('Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame').[25]

On the 2012–2013 'Wrecking Ball' tour, the first since Clemons' death in 2011, Springsteen routinely paid tribute to Clemons while performing 'Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out' (a 1975 song celebrating their friendship) by holding an extended moment of silence during which a video montage of Springsteen and Clemens was projected behind the stage. Included in the compilation was footage from the late 1970s of one of their onstage kisses.[26]

Springsteen's behaviour towards Clemons' larger-than-life masculine authority is repeated by Stevie Van Zandt as he plays the role of Bruce's little sidekick. Stevie is emotionally and physically demonstrative, emphatically throwing his arms around Bruce and holding him in an intimately locked gaze that both idolises his Boss

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and whips him into shape. In the 1985 'Glory Days' music video, for example, we see Van Zandt nestle himself behind Springsteen during the chorus, a look of pure ecstasy spreading across his face as Bruce leans back into him. Stevie is positively fruity: from his theatrical facial expressions to the flamboyant clothes and the steadfast frilly do-rag he adopted in the early 1980s, Van Zandt reminds us of the carnivalesque origins of Springsteen's music. Both his appearance and role in singing duets with Springsteen arguably brought a feminine element to E Street long before Patti Scialfa joined the band. (It is notable that when Van Zandt left the band in 1984, Springsteen replaced him with two new members: Nils Lofgren to play the guitar parts and Scialfa to pick up the high notes.) While Little Steven's look may appear as a more typical – if uniquely his own – version of 1980s rock androgyny, in the context of Springsteen and the E Street Band's sturdy masculinity it reads as transgressive.

To this day, during any given performance, Springsteen and Van Zandt repeatedly share the microphone throughout the night, staring intensely into each other's eyes, their lips nearly touching as they harmonise. They either face each other or spoon their bodies, their guitar fret boards conspicuously erect as they pulse together.

If the majority of staged eroticisms with Clemons are during songs expressing a fantasy of escape, Springsteen's sexualised unions with Van Zandt have their recorded origin in songs from *The River* (1980) that speak of digging deeper into relationships. David Marsh (2004, p. 232) describes *The River* as an album of duets between Bruce and Steve: 'If Springsteen's voice is strength and power, Van Zandt's is pure vulnerability, a heart about to break'. Steve's vocal harmonies on songs like 'The Ties that Bind', 'Out on the Street' and 'Two Hearts' plead for the connection that the lyrics bespeak. Ten years after the 'elaborate homoerotic dances' (Smith 1991, p. 835) of 'Glory Days', the video footage of a 1995 performance of 'Two Hearts', as captured in the *Blood Brothers* documentary, shows Springsteen and Van Zandt at their most intimate. The two grin as they sing into each other's mouths, Bruce wiggling his eyebrows at Steve throughout. They seem to have no need to search further to find the 'special one' that the lyrics indicate.

Springsteen's erotically charged performances with Clemons and Van Zandt queer the context of a given song's lyrics regardless of the gender of the song's characters. Martha Nell Smith writes, 'Springsteen's constructions of romantic and connective encounters often seem double-edged, contextualising publicly honored heterosexual couplings with ambiguous or homosexual unions publicly repudiated' (Smith 1991, p. 838).[27] Does the woman of the lyrics become an artifice to offset Bruce's homosexual desire? In a performative sleight of hand, Springsteen utilises the woman as an abstract lyrical object that allows him to get close to his male bandmates.[28] Perhaps this double gendering functions in the same manner as the parallel stories presented in 'Incident on 57th Street', where Johnny finds his redemption through getting both the girl *and* the boy(s).

'A real man': queering the Springsteen image

To the general public the first image of Bruce Springsteen that might come to mind is that of the bandana-clad buff and sweaty worker of the *Born in the U.S.A.* era, an

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image that is quickly conflated with all the simplistic trappings of an imagined white working-class male heterosexuality. Garman writes,

> Gay men have been so feminised and the working class so masculinised that even in the 1980s it was virtually impossible to imagine a place or a person in which these two categories could overlap … No one commented on Springsteen's homoerotic forays because his masculinity, whiteness, and invocation of the post-World War II past were such an integral part of Reagan's America that they could not possibly be seen as subversive. (Garman 2000, p. 225)

The American pop media and Reagan-era fans of the *Born in the U.S.A.* album so easily assumed that Springsteen's new 'masculine authority' (Garman 2000, p. 223) indicated heterosexuality that they were quick (or relieved?) to overlook the queer elements of his sexuality.[29]

In the 1980s the media certainly went out of its way to 'jubilantly document' Springsteen's 'aggressive heterosexuality', with extensive tabloid coverage of his burgeoning sexual relations with Patti Scialfa. If there was any doubt in the public mind about Springsteen's sexuality, the mainstream media squelched it, playing their 'important role in guiding consumers toward particular meanings, describing and assessing music and musicians in ways that commonly involve reference to well-established gender stereotypes or assumptions' (Smith 1991, p. 839; Cohen 1997, p. 29).

Not only did Springsteen's brawn mirror the 'Rambo' look of 1980s gender nostalgia, it also conveniently fit into a dominant storyline of rock 'n' roll. As written by rock historians – and duly criticised by Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie in their seminal 1978 essay 'Rock and Sexuality' – rock music has been seen as an expression of authentic male heterosexuality, where white men co-opted the supposedly natural sexual prowess expressed in African American musical forms. From Elvis's gyrating pelvis to 1960s and seventies 'cock rock' (a term coined by Frith and McRobbie to characterise 'music making in which performance is an explicit, crude, and often aggressive expression of male sexuality'), rock and virility are said to go hand in hand (Frith and McRobbie 1990, p. 374).

At a time when glam rock and disco spectacularly highlighted the performative nature of gender and worked to disrupt the gender and sexual binaries of male/female, gay/straight, the press turned to Springsteen as a saviour of rock's values of hegemonic masculinity. (Ironically, the *content* of Springsteen's music indicated a far more serious exploration of queer desire than that of many of the most flamboyant cross-dressers. Hubbs points out that the '"gender bender" poses' of many rock stars contrast with 'their shrill claims of heterosexuality and "real" manhood, [and thus show] a willingness to cash in on the style of gender transgression while disclaiming associations with any deeper substance' [Hubbs 1996, p. 268]. One would never look at the Rolling Stones, for example, and say that those five men were expressing love for one another, even as Mick Jagger used transvestism as an ongoing performative act.)

But this simple reading of Springsteen's muscular image fails to take into account two important factors: (1) this was not always his look; and (2) this image has a thoroughly queer history as well.

While Judith Butler has convincingly declared all gender to be performative rather than essential, Judith Halberstam articulates that masculinity tends '"to define itself as nonperformative", and is commonly perceived and presented as "natural",

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"original", and absolute' (Butler 1999; Halberstam 2007, p. 5).[30] Upon closer investigation, however, Springsteen's hypermasculinity appears to be as much a performance as glam rock's gender ambiguity. Before Springsteen's self-conscious buffing of both his physical body and musical voice into an American working-class hero, his appearance was a cross between greaser, surfer and hippie, as typical of the Jersey Shore at the time. The result was a skinny, unkempt, and rather *pretty* kind of rebellion.

Springsteen's early image could hardly be called hypermasculine; rather it exuded a soft warmth and, when seen with other members of the band, a celebratory, homosocial togetherness. With this look it seems that Springsteen appealed to both gays and straights to notice his sexuality, from the aforementioned cover of *Born to Run* to 'the feminine earnest face in front of the blinds and peering at us from both sides of the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* package' (Smith 1991, p. 835). The homoerotic appeal is amplified when all the members of the band are viewed together. Additional album art and other band photographs display the members with their arms thrown around each other or, in one case, even piled on top of one another on a bed.[31] As if winking to gay fans, the picture of the chummy boys of the E Street Band on the back of *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* shows both Vini Lopez and Clarence Clemons with open shirts and bulging packages; Clarence's hand lightly touches Bruce's behind.

But viewed through a queer lens, Springsteen's later hypermasculine image also looks awfully gay. The ass shot of the cover of *Born in the U.S.A.* and the close-up of Springsteen's crotch in the 'Dancing in the Dark' video mimic queer iconography enough to make one question if Springsteen intended them to be for women's eyes only. Ian Biddle writes:

> The imagery of the *[BITUSA]* album cover is available also for a different reading in which the codes of gay subcultural identification can be surreptitiously recuperated here: certainly, the hanky (of gay 'hanky codes') has been replaced by a cap, and yet the fixation on the back pocket and the perfectly curved male arse would seem to suggest that the potentiality of a queer reading has not been fully eschewed. (Biddle 2007, pp. 126–7)

Springsteen's manly image of the 1980s, touted as heterosexual, can just as likely be seen as from concurrent gay subcultural code. His work boots, cropped hair and tight, bicep-emphasising sleeveless t-shirts during the *Born in the U.S.A* era closely paralleled the idealised butch masculinity of the popular 'Castro Clone' look (named after San Francisco's gay neighbourhood, the Castro), a look also glorified in the erotic art of gay icon Tom of Finland. Martha Nell Smith comments, 'On the Amnesty International Human Rights tour [in 1988], the husky-voiced hunk looked fit for a leather bar' (Smith 1991, p. 839). While perhaps feminised in the eyes of mainstream culture, gay men certainly have a long history of valuing archetypical brawniness, no less promoted by Walt Whitman, to whom Springsteen looked for the ideological underpinnings of his working-class heroism. It is during the peak of the Reagan era – when conservative columnist George Will was exalting in Springsteen's masculine American wholesomeness – that Springsteen regularly kissed Clarence Clemons on stage and performed songs with some of his most homoerotic lyrics, effectively destabilising the notion that masculinity and heterosexuality are two sides of the same coin.

In fact, Springsteen's apparent nod to queer culture did not go unnoticed by the gay press. In a humorous 1987 article in the popular gay magazine *The Advocate*,

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entitled 'Springsteen's Ass – and Why You Can't Tell the Straights from the Gays', Edmund Carlevale questions Bruce's sexual orientation. He asks, 'Who exactly is he trying to attract with a shot of his ass?' Carlevale points out the queer content of songs like 'Bobby Jean', even asking, 'What is the man hiding from?' in reference to 'Dancing in the Dark' and 'Cover Me' (both gender-neutral songs). When he tells his friends his suspicion, he is met with profound disbelief. On this he muses that the stereotypically gay looks had been so co-opted by the mainstream that queers didn't think about Springsteen's image (Carlevale 1987, p. 9). However, Carlevale delightfully concludes his article by saying that ultimately it is not Springsteen's physical image that tips his 'gaydar', so to speak, but his 'Nautilised consciousness':

> I am not implying that sensitivity is the sole province of gays but sensitivity of a certain type may be. Bruce writes of pain and loss without bluster or shame. Of self-doubt not as something to be placated by women, but understood by himself … He is not jabbing his finger in anyone's chest and shouting, 'See, see … now, change'. He simply describes, and that sort of gentleness … is a stereotype of homosexuality I can't shake. (Carlevale 1987, p. 9)

While refraining from ever declaring his own sexuality, Springsteen has counteracted the heterosexualising of both his music and image from the beginning through his consistent development of a queer aesthetic. Thus, from the 1990s forward, when he made public statements about gay rights, you could hardly say it was out of the blue. Yet he himself knew such statements were an opportunity to redress the conflated masculine-as-heterosexual rock hero image. In 1996 Springsteen explained in a cover interview with *The Advocate*:

> The bonus I got out writing 'Streets of Philadelphia' was that all of a sudden I could go out and meet some gay man somewhere and he wouldn't be afraid to talk to me and say, 'Hey, that song really meant something to me'. My image has always been very heterosexual, very straight. So it was a nice experience for me, a chance to clarify my own feelings about gay and lesbian civil rights. (Wieder 2004, p. 211)

In an extremely rare and overtly political use of the homepage of his website, in December 2009 Springsteen posted a statement to advocate for gay marriage, urging 'those who support equal treatment for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to let their voices be heard now' (Official Bruce Springsteen website).[32]

I wanna know if love is real: the normality of queer in Springsteen's vision of community

Bruce Springsteen has said that his life's work has been to try to answer the question he first verbalised in 'Born to Run': 'I wanna know if love is real' (Springsteen 1998, p. 47). As we have seen, his answer to what constitutes real love is not limited to sanctioned heterosexuality, but rather reveals a thorough mapping of same-sex desires. The fact that this map details not only homosexual partnerships on the streets of Philadelphia but also the most indeterminate of locations – that liminal space just over the slippery line between friend and lover – is of no small significance. Through his career-long, systematic blurring of the rigid boundaries by which we regulate society, Bruce Springsteen calls into question the very notion of the American popular icon. With his queer lyrical content, his onstage intimacy with Clarence Clemons and Stevie Van Zandt, and his bisexually erotic image, Springsteen challenges us to examine not only our beliefs about who he is, but

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also critiques the hegemonic limitations placed on what constitutes real and acceptable love. Martha Nell Smith writes:

> Springsteen precludes definitive determination of sexual preference, mooting a fundamental constraint whereby our culture knows us and names us. Such mooting matters not just because inquiring minds want to know, but because undermining this constraint calls into question conventional representations of love and traditional musical constructions of desire. (Smith 1991, p. 839).

Bruce Springsteen's sexual and gender ambiguity is not only a challenge, it is an invitation. Springsteen encourages us to examine both his and our humanity through a complex algorithm of emotion, desire, friendship, bonding and romance. As fans we identify with him and his characters as active participants in the music. Simon Frith writes, 'The best records (the ones that give us the most pleasure) are the ones that allow an ambiguity of response, letting us be both the subject and object of the singers' needs (regardless of our or their gender)' (Frith 1990, p. 423). Perhaps the most radical aspect of all is that the majority of Springsteen fans, as self-identified heterosexual men, are welcome to the opportunity to enter Springsteen's world of indeterminate desire and thus both receive and express love and affection for him and each other.

For Springsteen's LGBT audience, meanwhile, his queer music is pure pleasure. While one may hope for the day that Springsteen will play 'My Lover Man' onstage, the songs with liminal romantic desires no less indicate that our musical hero is a sexual 'tramp like us'.[33] As Nadine Hubbs writes, 'Ambiguity is not particularly confusing to queer subjects to whom its utility and indeed necessity are intimately known' (Hubbs 1996, p. 296).

To all his fans Springsteen offers a rigorous articulation of intimacy and connectivity: when he sings, 'Well I'm gonna push my way through that crowd, I'm gonna tear all your walls down / Tear all your walls down / My love will not let you down', he promises his love but also demands that we, his audience, *meet* him. His enduring popularity shows just how commanding his appeal for love is. And here lies the subversive power of his expressions of queer love. His same-sex desires are so thoroughly and consistently interspersed throughout his directive of intimacy that he effectively moves queer from a position of 'other' to one of 'normal', while simultaneously working to disintegrate the very notion of a limited normality. Springsteen says his work explores 'the search for identity, for personal recognition, for acceptance, for communion, and for a big country'. We are to 'feel that big country in [our] hearts' (Wieder 2004, p. 214).

Afterword: The last carnival

Springsteen's 2009 tribute to deceased band member Danny Federici, 'The Last Carnival', continues the queer lyrical themes explored throughout his career. 'The Last Carnival' acts as a sequel to 1973's 'Wild Billy's Circus Story' by showcasing Federici on accordion as the listener is taken on a journey through the seedy and glorious (and gay) life of a traveling carnival. The narrator alternately searches for his 'handsome Billy' and 'darlin' Billy', sadly mourning 'the thing in you that made me ache'. As Springsteen sings a dirge for his departed bandmate, the line between friend and lover is noticeably blurry.

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We won't be dancing together on the high wire
Facing the lions with you at my side anymore
We won't be breathin' the smoke and the fire
... Hangin' from the trapeze my wrists waitin' for your wrists
Two daredevils high up on the wall of death
You throwin' the knife that lands inches from my heart

'The Last Carnival' honours a man with whom Springsteen had a forty-plus year friendship and collaboration; his tribute travels the same long arc, coalescing themes from throughout the history of his queer body of work. The carnival boys meet on the high wire, viewed through the lens of nostalgia for erotic brotherhood. And in its loving details the song discloses the complex intimacy of Springsteen's most powerful relationship songs. I do not doubt that we can also soon expect a rich and complex musical tribute to Clarence Clemons.

Appendix: A queer Bruce mix tape

Here follows a catalogue of Springsteen songs with queer lyrical content, listed in order of official release. Unreleased songs are grouped with their associated album, followed by the date of the first known recording. Though too numerous to list here, Springsteen's body of work also contains dozens of songs addressed to a lover of unspecified gender that can easily be read as about male-to-male relationships (including a significant number of the tracks on *The Rising* album of 2002).

Greetings From Asbury, Park, NJ (1973):
- Mary Queen of Arkansas
- Lost in the Flood
- Spirit in the Night
- Marie [unreleased, 1972]

The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle (1973):
- Fourth of July (Sandy)
- Wild Billy's Circus Story
- Incident on 57th Street

Born to Run (1975):
- Backstreets
- Dance on Little Angel (aka 'Angel Baby' and 'A Night Like This') [unreleased, 1974]
- And the Band Played (aka 'Tokyo', 'Shanghai' or 'Born to Win') [unreleased, 1974]

Nebraska (1982):
- Highway Patrolman

Born in the U.S.A. (1984):
- No Surrender
- Bobby Jean

Greatest Hits (1995):
- This Hard Land [first recorded 1982)
- Streets of Philadelphia [first recorded 1993]
- Blood Brothers

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The Ghost of Tom Joad (1995):
- Balboa Park
- Sinaloa Cowboys

Tracks (1998):
- My Lover Man [recorded 1990)
- Back In Your Arms [recorded 1996]

Devils and Dust (2005):
- Devils and Dust

Magic (2007):
- Gypsy Biker
- Devil's Arcade

Working on a Dream (2009):
- The Last Carnival

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Endnotes

1. A sonic analysis of Springsteen's queer aesthetic is not a focus of this paper. It is my hope that another scholar will undertake such a study, in the tradition of Nadine Hubbs' analysis of Morrissey and Jennifer Rycenga's take on the music of Yes (see Hubbs 1996; Rycenga 2006). Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie's formative thoughts on 'cock rock' versus 'pop music' could be a jumping off point for an investigation of Springsteen's sound (Frith and McRobbie 1990).
2. See Sedgwick (1985). She argues that male homosocial situations are carefully regulated through homophobia and the subjugation of women to ensure that there is no slippage into an erotic realm, necessarily because 'for a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being "interested in men"' (Sedgwick 1985, pp. 2–3, 89).
3. Springsteen actually began leading bands and performing his own songs as early as 1965. He signed a contract with Columbia Records in 1972.
4. In addition to the songs that appeared on albums, the rare early song 'Dance on Little Angel' (aka 'Angel Baby' and 'A Night Like This') provides a whirlwind mash-up of gender and sexuality. Over the course of eight verses Springsteen switches between first-, second- and third-person address, and alternately describes gay and seemingly straight male protagonists as they relate to each other and a topless dancer named Little Angel, who may or may not be a cisgendered woman.
5. Another early indication of equivocal views on homosexuality is 'And the Band Played' (aka 'Tokyo', 'Shanghai' or 'Born to Win'). Springsteen uses the word 'queer' to describe one of the characters. Although now proudly reclaimed by the LGBT community, in the early 1970s this term was derogatory. Yet in the introduction to a performance of 'And the Band Played' in Philadelphia on 24 April 1973, Springsteen chastises the audience for their apparent disapproval of the gay character and further associates himself with him by saying that he and Danny (the gay character, who was a real-life acquaintance) were the 'weird cat[s] in town'.
6. 'Marie' is an additional early song that thematically parallels the complex relationship with the

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apparently transgendered character of 'Mary Queen of Arkansas'. In this case Marie is 'the queen of all the stallions'. The song ends with:

And I watch her dance like some berserk fairy
All across the concrete prairies of Bleecker Street
Marie, she can be so strange
But she's the only lonely cowgirl on my range

Bleecker Street is in New York City's Greenwich Village, which at Springsteen's time of writing was the hot-bed for the burgeoning gay liberation movement.

7. See, for example, the discussion board on the website for the Springsteen fan magazine *Backstreets Magazine* (http://www.backstreets.com/btx/).
8. It is the M + K that most likely appears in the unreleased 'Dance on Little Angel'. In the 1970s Asbury Park was also home to the lesbian Club L.
9. Quoted in order, the songs are 'The Angel' on *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ* (1973); 'The E Street Shuffle' on *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* (1973); 'Ricky Wants a Man of Her Own', recorded in 1977, released on *Tracks* (1998); 'Fourth of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)' on *The Wild* (1973). Out of 11 individual Springsteen songs in which the name Bobby appears, nine use a male pronoun and two are gender neutral. Out of four occurrences of the name Terry, one is male, one is implicitly male and two are gender neutral.
10. See, for example, http://www.backstreets.com/btx/. Ironically, considering they named their magazine after such a cryptic song, the *Backstreets* editors always take the heterosexual high road when discussing Springsteen's music.
11. Hey, Eddie, can you lend me a few bucks
And tonight can you get us a ride
Gotta make it through the tunnel
Got a meeting with a man on the other side

From 'Meeting Across the River' on *Born to Run* (1975); 'Well me and my brother'd hitched a ride in Joey's pickup to the edge of town / And we watched from the tall grass as the challenges were made and the duels went down', from 'Brothers Under the Bridges', recorded 1983, released on *Tracks* (1998).

12. 'Tracing your footprints in the sand / Trying to walk like a man', from 'Walk Like a Man' on *Tunnel of Love* (1988); 'Now Terry's pop says these kids are some kind of monsters / But Terry says "No, pop, they're just plain heroes"', from 'Zero and Blind Terry', recorded 1973, released on *Tracks* (1998); 'I followed that dream just like those guys do up on the screen', from 'The Promise', written 1976, released on *18 Tracks* (1999).
13. All lines are quoted from the album version of 'Backstreets' on *Born to Run.* Alternate lines in an early version of the song throw a wrench in both a straight and queer reading. Note the following changes in verses two and three:

In the basement at St. Johns well I found her where she fell
Just another busted sister of Heartbreak hotel…
… Endless juke joints and Valentino drag
Watching the heroes in the funhouse ripping off the fags …
… But I hated him and his fancy ways
I hated you when you went away

Here the pronoun 'her' alters the gender neutrality of the song, yet it does not clearly indicate a cisgendered female. Taken together with the lyrics about the funhouse and the other man with 'his fancy ways', this Terry could potentially be a drag queen like Mary of Arkansas. See other early variations on http://www.springsteen-lyrics.com.

14. This concert was performed on 22 April 2008, in Tampa, Florida.
15. On Springsteen's development of class consciousness and on his relationship to manager Jon Landau, see Marsh (2004) and Garman (2000).
16. Flannigan and Phillips took this quotation from a 1998 interview Springsteen had with the Swedish magazine *POP.*
17. For example:

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast – and that night I was happy. (Whitman 1993, p. 155)

Thank you to Jim Cullen for identifying this particular excerpt from the poem 'When I Heard at the Close of the Day'.

18. Unfortunately many blame the band's breakup on Patti Scialfa's joining of the E Street Band and Springsteen and Scialfa's subsequent marriage (as Clarence Clemons infamously did, later to apologise). The chain of events is described as: (1) Patti joins the band; (2) Bruce and Patti fall in love and get married; thus (3) Springsteen drops the band and his 'real' music to play family man. Faulting the woman who infiltrates the boys' club for its ultimate upheaval is simply rock's deeply ingrained misogynistic shortcomings rearing their ugly head. Early on, Springsteen himself expressed the patriarchal attitude that you couldn't have a rock 'n' roll life and the responsibility of marriage. In 1969 he told a member of his first band upon his marriage, 'Man you'll never make it now' (quoted in Marsh 2004, p. 322). Springsteen was in fact the last member of the E Street Band to marry. I do find an interesting parallel between Springsteen's reunification of the band and the story of Johnny in 'Incident on 57th Street'. After a period of focusing on his heterosexual romance and young family he realised he could have it both ways. 'Growing up' didn't theoretically have to mean abandoning the world of boys for one of girls.
19. It is of note that many gays criticised the film *Philadelphia*, and perhaps Springsteen's song by extension, for sanitising the gay experience for

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straight audiences. There are very few scenes in the film that show the protagonist with his lover, and these contain limited sexual contact.

20. Of note is Jim Cullen's contextualisation of 'Streets of Philadelphia' within Springsteen's genre of songs about brotherhood. He suggests that here Springsteen takes brotherhood to its fullest intimacy, 'not simply that of a bond of blood, sex, or friendship, but love in its most physical and metaphysical dimensions' (Cullen 2005, p. 131).
21. The opening verse of the song is representative of the intimate push/pull between the characters:

    You treated me hard and made my heart ache
    I know you're only human, and men they make mistakes
    Your life with her turned to black
    And now you want our love back
    Well come into my arms and fall, my lover man

22. The early E Street Band included two other African Americans: pianist David Sancious and, briefly, drummer Ernest 'Boom' Carter. Although in this paper I do not explore the racial dynamics of the Springsteen phenomenon, it is a rich topic that has seen only limited discussion. See the work of Garman (2000), and Pfiel (1995).
23. For example, as is captured on *Live 1975–85.*
24. Lines from 'Fire', first released on *Live 1975–85.* For an example of the 'fistfight', see the YouTube video for a performance in Toronto on 26 July 1984, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7p1p66v8k8. The 28 April 2009 performance in Philadelphia can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kTnyP33fbM.
25. For the full transcription of Springsteen's speech, see http://frankenschulz.de/bruce/hall-of-fame.html.
26. As seen by the author at the Los Angeles Sports Arena, 26 April 2012 and at Sydney Allphones Arena, 18 March 2013.
27. See also Martha Nell Smith's excellent analysis of Springsteen's inclusion of gays and lesbians in the video for 'Tougher than the Rest' (1988).
28. This is consistent with Sedgwick's argument about the use of women as a means to the fulfilment of male same-sex desire. See Sedgwick (1985).
29. For good discussions of Springsteen's hypermasculine image, see Pfeil (1995) and Palmer (1997).
30. On the Springsteen image and 'authenticity', see Simon Frith (1988).
31. See, for example, images in Patrick Humphries and Chris Hunt (1985).
32. This statement appeared on 8 December 2009, a few days before a key same-sex marriage vote in the New Jersey legislature.
33. Springsteen fans call themselves tramps, after the line 'Tramps like us, baby we were born to run'.

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