

*Shades of Springsteen: Politics, Love, Sports, and Masculinity***John Massaro****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021****254 pages****ISBN: 9781978816169****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i1.276>**

The greatest pop stars are those with whom we bond for life. We typically encounter them at a formative period in our youth, and the experience of their music imprints us as a generational marker. Sinatra, Dylan, Swift: Decades later, we listen to their songs, attend their concerts, follow their whereabouts. They become the tape measure of our lives.

Bruce Springsteen falls into this category, but with a twist. Perhaps more than any musician of the twentieth century, Springsteen has made the life cycle itself the focus of his art—and many of his fans have followed him on that basis. All pop songs become frozen in amber, and indeed we come to cherish them as artifacts of memory. But Springsteen songs are not only about the joys and sorrows of adolescence, but also adulthood, middle age, and senescence. His great topic is aging itself.

John Massaro is a Springsteen fan with a twist. Actually, a series of twists. For one thing, he's older than Springsteen—Massaro was born in 1941, Springsteen in 1949—which is a departure from the usual pattern, as we typically encounter those whom we consider role models as the psychic equivalent of elder siblings. For another, Massaro didn't become a serious fan until 1986, when both he and Springsteen had entered middle age. A political scientist by training, Massaro went on to become a Springsteen scholar, but until the publication of this book, that work has been mostly in the realm of teaching. He was one of the first college faculty members in the country to develop courses on Springsteen (prevailing over administrative skepticism in order to do so), and indeed his teaching work is an important component of this volume, as he toggles

between his own experiences, those of Springsteen, and those of his students, whose ideas he generously incorporates and evaluates in the book.

Shades of Springsteen fits squarely into what is now a sizeable literature of Springsteen studies. The tenor of that discourse, like that of fandom generally, has a deeply personal dimension, but Massaro is part of what might be termed a strongly ethnographic cast in recent Springsteen writing, one that began with Daniel Cavicchi's 1998 study *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans*. Rutgers University Press, which published *Shades of Springsteen*, has been at the vanguard of this trend in honoring its local son, which includes the 2019 anthology *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*, edited by June Skinner Sawyers and Jonathan Cohen, as well as a forthcoming sociological study of Springsteen fandom in the lives of women. Like most writers on Springsteen, Massaro provides close readings of Springsteen songs, and usefully includes a 30-page first chapter that limns Springsteen's life. But the heart of the book is a series of personal meditations, many in the form of some three dozen short essays, on Springsteen and his interface with various figures who range from comedian George Carlin to Pakistani Briton Sarfraz Manzoor, whose 2007 memoir, *Greetings from Bury Park*, became the basis of the 2019 film *Blinded by the Light*.

Of particular note is a chapter on Springsteen and sports, which at first glance would seem an unlikely subject, since Springsteen's own engagement with the topic, other than fleeting references to baseball in "Glory Days" and football in "Wrecking Ball," has been thin. But some of the most affecting writing in the book comes from Massaro's own experiences as an athlete and those of his family growing up in New Jersey in the 1950s and '60s. He recounts a memory of his uncle Phil, and Massaro's failure to be as generous as he might have been in recounting the old man's youthful exploits. "I promised myself after that day that when I meet anyone, especially

relatives or friends older than I (I realize that this group dwindles swiftly as I write), I will act differently,” he writes. “I will act differently. I will be more aware, more assertive, more creative—and, hopefully, not obvious—in providing an occasion for them to relive their ‘Glory Days,’ their cherished if faded moments in the sun” (191).

A passage like this (and another on Massaro’s callow failings as a boyfriend) are indicative of Springsteen’s distinctive place in American culture, and why it is perhaps more significant than many of his peers. Most of us cherish the music of our youth for the sheer sensory pleasure it affords, whether as a matter of memory or the way we re-experience it in real time. Music can also be a balm in times of pain; Massaro writes of first encountering Springsteen’s work at a particularly challenging moment in his own life, and usefully emphasizes Springsteen’s own generous candor in describing his battles with depression in his 2016 memoir *Born to Run* (xi; 83–85). But Massaro’s “Uncle Phil” story is also suggestive of the way that great art can also be an instrument of understanding and improving our lives in ways that fuse idea and emotion in a powerful way. Good music can help us become better people—or, at any rate, at least understand what that really means.

So can good criticism. *Shades of Springsteen* is a useful contribution to a vibrant, ongoing conversation.

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