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Bruce Springsteen and the Wave Model of Development

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Springsteen, Criticism, and the Discourse of Evolution

- *Wrecking Ball* (2012): “few, if any, moments of musical innovation here” (Gill, *The Telegraph*);
- “[I]t finds Springsteen still firing on all cylinders—writing with poetic urgency, drawing on traditions old and new, singing and playing with prime strength and energy, and delivering a new set of killer melodies with fresh sonic wallop” (Leftridge, *PopMatters*)
- “Just for a change it’s encouraging to hear a big sound that’s linked not to individual aggrandizement or indulgence, but to something more unselfish…It also…holds some of Springsteen’s most elaborate studio concoctions since ‘Born to Run’” (Paraeles and Caramanica, *New York Times*)
- “[M]usically *Wrecking Ball* is the most innovative album of Springsteen’s career…” (Masur, *PopMatters*)
Musical Development and Popular Music Historiography

- Braae (2014): analysis of Queen’s musical development, 1973-80; focus on identifying and understanding musical changes over time
- “Expedition” narrative and Queen (Braae 2014); “elliptical” model and Radiohead (Moore and Ibrahim 2009)
- The “wave” model and Springsteen
Born to Run (1975)

❖ “Wall-of-sound” style production (Zagorski-Thomas 2010)

❖ Droning saxophone of “Born to Run” cf. The Ronette’s “Do I Love You?” or Ike and Tina Turner’s “River Deep, Mountain High”; glockenspiel like Darlene Love’s “The Boy I’m Gonna Marry”

❖ Stratification of texture: dense middle-low register (bass, acoustic/electric guitars) plus sparkling upper register keyboards
“She’s the One” and “Thunder Road”
“Darkness on the Edge of Town”, “I’m a Rocker”, “Ramrod”
Born in the USA

- Textural stasis (aligning with limited harmonic movement)
- Various layers—bass guitar, electric guitars, keyboards—converge into single harmonic layer; limited counter-melodic embellishments
“Born in the USA”
**Born in the USA**

- Textural stasis (aligning with limited harmonic movement)
- Various layers—bass guitar, electric guitars, keyboards—converge into single harmonic layer; limited counter-melodic embellishments
“Walk Like a Man”, “Living Proof”
The Rising - present

- Additions to the backing band: backing vocal sections (gospel choir); strings and/or horns; extra organs (beyond Hammond)

- Active, swirling, and dense middle register, but also the return of stratified upper layers (piano/organ)
“Mary’s Place”
The Rising—present

- Additions to the backing band: backing vocal sections (gospel choir); strings and/or horns; extra organs (beyond Hammond)

- Active, swirling, and dense middle register, but also the return of stratified upper layers (piano/organ)
“I’ll Work For Your Love”, “Gypsy Biker”
Springsteen and Record Production Historiography

❖ A cyclical model?
❖ The wave model: phases of sonic signatures
❖ Reflects continuities across eras (e.g. “The Wrestler” (2009) and 1980s style), analogous to water washing back out to sea
❖ Lack of fixed evolutionary points over time, so much as retrospective identification of “breaking” and continuity
❖ Little sense of linear evolution; emphasis on change and renewal
The Outliers

- *Nebraska* (1982); *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995); *Devils and Dust* (2005)
- Stripped-back acoustic sound; outside major waves of Springsteen’s career
- Or...necessary stylistic ruptures in Springsteen’s narrative
- “Productive tension” between modernist and folk visions of Romanticism (Keightley 2001)