

Magic: Fanfare for the Common Man

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Accidents happen in life, and I became a Springsteen fan by accident. In 1974 my college girlfriend, Paula, and I went to see Richie Havens at the Bushnell Theatre in Hartford, Connecticut; the warm-up act that night was a skinny kid named Bruce. I had never heard of him. The music, no surprise – and no accident, was killer, and the kid was charming, too. I remember that they had a large wooden box on stage that appeared to be full of broken trumpets and tubas. Finally, someone yelled out, “what’s with the box?” Bruce grinned and yelled back, “That’s our brass section. Competition for Chicago!” It got a big laugh. Chicago was big then. I walked out after the concert that night a newly minted Springsteen fan. I couldn’t wait to buy ‘Asbury Park.’ Paula and I didn’t stay together, but I’ve still got that record.

Anyway, I’ve only just started and I’m already digressing. This isn’t about my history as a fan; it’s about someone else’s. His name is Steven Brooks and he’s a twenty-four-year-old student at the Maine College of Art, in Portland, Maine. I first met Steven when he took one of my philosophy classes. He’s a tall guy, over six feet, with sandy colored hair that looks like he combs it with a hand grenade. He often rams a Dallas Cowboys’ baseball cap down over it to hold it in place. He’s a quiet person who rarely speaks unless spoken too - at least with philosophy professors. He’s well-mannered, and a guy who was clearly raised well.

Steven didn't show-up on my radar at first. Like I said, he's quiet. But in March on 2009, halfway through the spring semester, I bumped into him outside the Fleet Center in Boston, just as my wife and I were going to see the "Working on a Dream" concert. I saw him coming down the street with two people that I took to be his parents; they were also going to the show. When we made eye contact I said, "didn't know you were a fan." He smiled through a scruff of beard, "likewise." It was hard to tell which of us was more surprised.

We only spoke for a minute or two (other things were on our minds!) but the joke was that we had our philosophy class in the morning at 9AM. I knew I'd be there, no matter what time I got home, because I was teaching the class, but I grinned when Steven said he'd be there, too. "Yeah, right," I thought to myself, "I was born at night, but not *last* night." Anyway, I was wrong. Steven was there the next morning, and that brings us to another accident. When I arrived at the classroom I was greeted by a woman from the Admissions Office, accompanied by a photographer. She looked bright and fluffy and I couldn't stand that; I had bags under my eyes and a bucket of coffee in my hand. "Mind if we take some pictures in your class for the new catalog?" My shoulders sagged. "No problem," I lied.

When we got inside, there was Steven, smiling an aw-shucks kind of smile that said, "told ya I'd make it." It perked me up a bit, and I confessed to the class that I didn't get to bed until late because "Steven and I were at the Springsteen concert in Boston last night." The photographer, a guy in his late thirties, lowered his camera to reveal his own baggy eyes. "I was there, too!"

After the lecture I caught Steven in the hall and we had one of those, “so what did you think of the show?” conversations. I’m fifty-eight years old and Steven is less than half my age but we quickly realized it was cool for us to geek out, celebrating how much we had enjoyed ourselves – and marveling at how much we had in common. One highlight for both of us was Bruce’s cover of ZZ Top’s “I’m Bad and I’m Nationwide.” Another highlight for Steven was when Max Weinberg walked right past him, his uncle Mike, and his Uncle Mike’s girlfriend, the couple I had mistaken for his parents. Other details of our mutual interest in Bruce came out later. His story is so much better than mine that when I was asked to write this piece, I knew I had to tell it. I’ve been a fan four times as long as Steven, but he’s a fan that’s four times as deep. It was by accident that I first heard Bruce, and it was by accident that I met Steven, which is proof that accidents sometimes can be magic. Real magic, not the Disney World sort. Steven and I got together in my office for an interview, so I’m going to let him tell his own story, but let me give you just a few sentences about his background.

Steven grew up in rural Maine and calls himself a redneck. He’s a simple guy, but I’ve realized he’s nobody’s fool. He usually wears jeans, western-style shirts, and cowboy boots. He’s got a gentle disposition and seems to have been born without an ego; he doesn’t call attention to himself – in fact, once, in class, he confessed that he had finished a group assignment by himself because he was too shy to ask anyone to be his partner. He’s tall, slim and not bad looking, so I heard more than a few girls sigh when he said that (it made me wonder if he’d be brave enough to follow-up on one or two of those sighs). I’m thinking now that he is brave enough, since he works as a salesperson

at the most popular music store in town, and has to deal with people, but I'll have to ask him about that sometime.

Steven spent a year going to college in Florida, at the Ringling School of Art, "where I got a reputation for being the guy from Maine who drinks a lot of beer and listens to Bruce Springsteen," but now he lives back home with his mother while he's finishing school. His father, with whom he was very close, died in a freak snowmobile accident when Steven was seventeen. His father hung on until the day after the accident, so Steven, his mother, his younger brother, and his Uncle Mike, got to say goodbye. When Steven told me about all this I could see how affected he was by it, but I could also see that there had been a lot of healing. He was doing all right. There was no bitterness in his voice, and he certainly didn't seem sorry for himself. He told me about his father and his father's accident for the simple reason that it was part of his Bruce story.

I asked Steven why he'd gotten interested in Bruce's music.

Steven: "There wasn't a 'why.' It was just always there."

Me: "Then why was it always there? Who was playing it?"

Steven: "My father."

Me: "Okay, so when did you realize you *liked* the music? Was there a particular song?"

Steven: "Yeah, I can't explain the connection but it's about 'Pink Cadillac.'"

Steven then told me about his father, his father's brother, "Uncle Mike," and Mike's daughter, Steven's cousin, Samantha. "They all liked Pink Cadillac." Then he told me the story of his father's accident.

Steven: "There was snow over ice on a corner, hiding it, and when he went to make the turn he had no control at all. It happened fast. Anyway, it was one or two years before

the accident that I got hooked on 'Pink Cadillac.' Uncle Mike was always playing that song.

After my father died I went through all of his old albums and found 'The River' and 'Born in the U.S.A.' They were all beat up, he'd played them so many times. I started playing them, too. 'Born in the U.S.A.' was my dad's favorite, and that album follows me. It's a backdrop for my life. It's always there."

Me: "So you started liking Bruce because your dad liked Bruce."

Steven: "At first."

Me: "What do you mean?"

Steven: "Well, at first the albums reminded me of my father but I became my own fan, for my own reasons."

Me: "Such as?"

Steve: "At seventeen you're going to have a lot of questions about life, and you're going to need someone to answer them. My dad wasn't around, so I found a lot of those answers in Bruce's music. I hate to sound cliché, but there's a lot of life lessons in his songs. As time passed, I really clung to his music for the fatherly reason. I liked that he didn't claim to know everything. Bruce seems to say, 'here's what happened to me, now compare it to what's happenin' to you. Here's how I did it. I can't tell you what to do but use what you can from what happened to me.' And I just found a lot of sense in that."

Me: "Give me an example."

Steven: "I don't know. It's not really about anything specific. It just seems like when something was happening to me Bruce would pop up with a bit of advice or an important

line. Like ‘Tougher than the Rest,’ the second cut on ‘Tunnel of Love,’ He’s saying, ‘I know there’s no perfect love - and I know I’m not perfect - but baby, I’m tougher’n the rest’ – and the harmonica at the tail end; I’ve always liked to sit back and listen that one. Or take the song ‘Janey Don’t You Lose Heart.’ He has the ability to make me think, ‘jeez, I wish I had said that to her.’”

Me: “Other songs that had a fatherly influence on you?”

Steven: “Like I said, it isn’t so much about particular songs as about a kind of being there for me. I clung onto this musician like a good horse that will follow the right path and bring you home. But yeah, alright, ‘My Hometown’ sticks out for me. Bruce was singing about his hometown and his relationship with his hometown but all he said about it was true for me, too. And take ‘Used Cars’ off of ‘Nebraska.’ I really, really liked the sentiment. He’s saying, ‘this ain’t a new car *but it’s new to us*, and that’s cool.’ The beauty of appreciation, of appreciating what you’ve got. I like that. I have an old car now - *and I appreciate it*.

Another one is ‘Glory Days.’ That was my father’s favorite song and it’s also mine. Bruce is saying, ‘I don’t want to live in the past and make a big thing out of something that wasn’t that much to begin with,’ but then he adds, ironically, ‘but I probably will.’ I can relate to that. I look back on high school days, and I think about the ex-girlfriends who mostly remember me for always playing Bruce, and then I have to laugh at myself. But in that song Bruce is also saying, ‘don’t worry about it, though, because it’s still all right.’ Anyway, see what I’m saying?”

Me: “Yeah, I think I do.” (I had to laugh inside. “See what I’m saying?” is a line I often use in philosophy classes.)

Steven: “And sometimes it was just a line in a song. When Bruce says in ‘Born to Run,’ that ‘I want to know if love is real,’ I find myself thinking, ‘right, me too.’”

Me: “Favorite songs besides the ones you’ve mentioned?”

Steven: “I never get tired of ‘Badlands,’ ‘The River,’ ‘The Promised Land’ – those songs don’t explode out but I can get into them and *feel* with them.”

Me: “Any songs you don’t like?”

Steven: “I’m sure there’s people who like it, but I say, ‘this one?’ when I hear ‘Part Man, Part Monkey.’ And on ‘The Rising,’ ‘Let’s Be Friends, Skin to Skin.’ It’s a little too pop for me. But I’ll still sit through them – even the ones I don’t like. If he wants to go off on a side thing, I’ll still buy it and listen to it. I owe him that.”

Me: “What’s unique about Bruce for you? What stands out?”

Steve (after shuffling his feet and crossing his cowboy boots): “Well, he has an incredible ability to write a song for a movie, right? He can catch the whole point in three minutes. Look at ‘Philadelphia’ or the song from ‘The Wrestler.’”

Me: “Excellent.”

Steve: “Exactly! And I enjoy how Bruce frames an album. He knows how to begin it and he knows how to send it out at the end. Take ‘My Hometown’ again. What a great song to close an album with. And of course, like everyone else, I’m blown away by Bruce as a performer. Him and the E Street Band. He’s the front of that train. When you enter the arena and see the empty instruments on stage, you start looking around and seeing people of all ages – and I mean *all* ages. But when he comes out and gets things started, there’s nothing else for anyone but the music.

He just holds everything together in this amazing way. He's got the audience right where he wants them and they're happy to be there. I was at the Comcast Center in Mansfield, Massachusetts. Bruce was playing, 'Waiting on a Sunny Day,' and the audience was singing along. Bruce loves to hear his audience sing, and he spotted a little girl singing and he wanted the crowd to hear her sing it. He shushed the crowd by putting his finger to his lips and the crowd went completely quiet in about a second and a half. It was ridiculous. Not many performers have that kind of connection with their audience. So there was thousands of us listening to this little kid sing. It was very cool. In fact, can anything be cooler than that?

I like Bob Dylan, but I hear people say about Dylan, 'he sounded awful but I got to see him.' I don't think that's going to happen with Bruce. He's still alive in his music and at his concerts. When you see him, you *really* see him."

Me: "Favorite Album?"

Steven: "Like I said, 'Born in the U.S.A.' But I got screwed by time on that one. He made it before I was even born. But 'Magic' I could buy when it came out. That was one of those ones that was released in my lifetime, and there isn't a track on it that I would skip. I always loved that he called it 'Magic' because it is for me. I tried to sell that album to everybody who walked into Bull Moose Music - the music store where I work. I couldn't care less whether we made money on it or not, I just wanted people to have the experience I was having. I always recommended it -and I still do." (Steve reaches into his backpack and pulls out the CD; it's held together with tape.) "I play it all the time."

Me: "Is Bruce popular at the store where you work?"

Steven: “Even the punkiest kid with his pants around his butt will hear the music coming over the sound-system and say, ‘hey, it’s the Boss!’ and I’ll think, ‘well kid, at least you got *that* straight.’”

Me: “Who else do you like?”

Steven: “I like lots of people and lots of bands. I like Pearl Jam, and Waylon Jennings is a favorite. But my ‘Mount Rushmore’ is Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, Bob Seger, and John Cougar Mellencamp.”

Me: “What are some great moments in ‘Bruce history’ for you?”

Steven: “When I was living in Florida I got to watch him induct Jackson Browne into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on T.V. How cool is that? And that was the same night George Harrison was inducted as a solo artist, and he was also important for me. It was a great night.”

Me: “I was thinking more about concert moments.”

Steven: “Oh, well, my first concert was ‘The Rising’ tour, at Gillette, just after I graduated from high school. I was with my younger brother, Joey, who’s also a fan, and two of my buddies. We were on the fourth tier, up in the nosebleeds, but it sounded like he was playing in the apartment above us. We were up in the Himalayas, but the sound was incredible.”

Me: “Was that your favorite concert?”

Steve: “No, my favorite concert was last summer, during the ‘Magic’ tour. It was the first time I saw Bruce with my uncle Mike, my dad’s older brother. We already had tickets but there was a contest on WBLM; if you were the fiftieth caller on ‘Spirits in the

Night' you'd win two tickets. I made the call and won, so my brother and a best buddy went too. I wasn't sitting with them but I knew they were there.

The weather was really bad at first – thunder and lightning, and people were freaking out. Then it started down-pouring. But the weather blew threw and it turned out great. They started out with “Summertime Blues” and everything was perfect that night. Mike and I finally got to see Bruce do ‘Glory Days’ together – *live!* It felt like the completion of something important. Dad was with me that night. He was with Mike and Joey, too. That was the best concert for me so far. It truly *was* ‘magic.’”

Me: “Speaking of your father – and if I’m putting you on the spot here, let’s just drop it, is there anything in particular that you think your dad would be happy that you picked up from Bruce?”

Steven: “That’s a great question. I think he’s probably happy that I realized that there are people out in the world that can help me without them even realizing it. I mean, I have seen this through the character ‘Ben’ in Bruce’s song ‘The Factory,’ ‘from Darkness.’ And from Bruce singing about ‘Wayne’ in the song ‘Darlington County,’ from ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ These are fictional folks from songs but I’ve tried to fill my life with people like them, and I’ve established some very important friendships based on the relationships these characters share in their songs. Through my travels with school and all, I have also taken things I have learned from a short list of important figures – you’re on my list, by the way. I do the same thing in this case that I do with Bruce’s music; I take what I feel I am going to need and this has made me feel stronger as a person, and as a visual artist.”

Me: “What was your father’s name?”

Steven: “He was a Steven, too, but I’m not a junior. We have different middle names – and I’m m own person.”

Me: “If you got to meet Bruce what would you say to him?”

Steven: “Simple. Four words: *‘Thanks for being there.’*”