

# Springsteen Is Fighting Back the Darkness at the Edge of America

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Photo: Michael Ochs Media/Getty Images

**By Mitchell Duneier**

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A few days before the opening of the Democratic National Convention, I flew to Pittsburgh for the opening concert of the last American leg of Bruce Springsteen’s 2024 world tour. I have been to more than a hundred of his concerts in my life, but I wanted to see this performance in a city and state that could determine the outcome of the presidential election.

In the parking lot, I passed pickup trucks with American flags lined up side by side with BMWs and Lexuses, and I thought of the powerful place the automobile has in so much of Mr. Springsteen’s music about freedom and escape. I thought of how many of his songs focus on life in that region of the country — songs about steel mills, economic hardship, working-class family life and the decline of the American dream. And I wondered if he would use any of those songs to explicitly address the choice his audience would soon confront.

I can’t think of a figure in America today who better embodies the contradictions and complexity of this country’s politics. He is a die-hard progressive who sings about a demographic that is now a core element of Donald Trump’s base. His audience is almost completely white, but he often

sings songs that take up racism and the plight of immigrants. That night at the PPG Paints Arena, I found myself standing next to a couple of workers who were wearing T-shirts from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and drinking large cans of Iron City Beer, while directly in front of us were two couples drinking cocktails and wearing expensive eyeglasses.

Mr. Springsteen didn't mention politics in that show, but he has since come out in full voice — as everyone knew he would — for Kamala Harris and Tim Walz. A month ago, he released an [Instagram video endorsing them](#), calling Mr. Trump “the most dangerous candidate for president in my lifetime” and praising Ms. Harris and Mr. Walz for wanting to expand the economy to benefit everyone, “not just a few like me at the top.” More recently he has been appearing with Barack Obama and others at rallies for the Harris-Walz ticket.

Many artists worry that taking a political position will alienate part of their audience. But I don't think that fans are loyal to Mr. Springsteen despite the contradictions that his music and his presence represent. I think that many of them are loyal to him *because* of those contradictions, because the uncomfortable place that he occupies is the same one the country does. We are divided along partisan lines, but also along lines that don't necessarily square up with party identity. We are suspicious of those with differing views, often ascribing to them the darkest imaginable motives. Yet somehow we're here in the same arena, trying to figure it out.

Though he has written many political songs over the past four decades, the Boss has barely released any in recent years. He said little to nothing about Donald Trump after the former president left office, though he has taken — most notably after the July 13 attempt on Mr. Trump's life — to introducing the song “Long Walk Home” as “a prayer for my country.” A tour favorite, the song is about the desire to restore old-fashioned ideals of America:

Here everybody has a neighbor  
Everybody has a friend  
Everybody has a reason to begin again  
My father said, “Son, we're lucky in this town.  
It's a beautiful place to be born.  
It just wraps its arms around you,  
Nobody crowds you and nobody goes it alone.  
“Your flag flyin' over the courthouse  
Means certain things are set in stone.  
Who we are, what we'll do and what we won't.”

I went to Pittsburgh that night for the same reason everyone goes to a Springsteen show: not to hear a lecture about politics but to see him unify an audience through songs about finding meaning and purpose in life, in a setting approximating a religious revival. He made the right decision to let his songs speak for themselves on this tour and to make a political endorsement on his own time.

He [later explained](#) to George Stephanopoulos, “People know where I stand for the most part, but I also wanted a space where people feel they can come and be with their neighbor regardless of what their particular political point of view is.” And when he did come out with his endorsement, he made it with conviction but also humility, telling the nation that “everybody sees things different, and I respect your choice as a fellow citizen.”

His work on behalf of the Harris campaign has gotten a lot of attention, talked about by some as though it could potentially influence working-class voters. Yet unlike Taylor Swift’s fans, many of whom are young enough to have never voted before, most of Mr. Springsteen’s fans are people over 60 with deep convictions of their own. I don’t know that Mr. Springsteen’s advocacy will change anyone’s mind. I don’t know that Mr. Springsteen feels it will change anyone’s mind. But it’s something he felt he had to do, and so he did.

Like many with strong views about this election, I don’t like being reduced to my politics and try to resist doing that to others. Sometimes that is hard for everyone. Seeing Mr. Springsteen in person or listening to his music at home is an opportunity to celebrate a vision of America — a country that is riven by politics but that is more than the sum of its politics. As he said in his endorsement: “Perhaps not since the Civil War has this great country felt as politically, spiritually and emotionally divided as it does than at this moment. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

However things go on Tuesday, this election is going to leave half the nation feeling bewildered and angry. But come Wednesday we’re all still going to be here, and we’re going to have to figure out how to move forward. Bruce Springsteen’s music and concerts offer a model of how we might do that, containing contradictions and even divisions but more or less making it work somehow, occasionally cheering at the same crowd-pleasing moments or feeling the same tears well up.

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