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Born to Run: The Transmedia Evolution of the Bruce Springsteen Memoir from Book to Stage and Screen

Laura Watson

Department of Music, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT


This article explores how the genre of rock memoir took a new cultural and commercial turn with the publication of Springsteen's book *Born to Run* (2016). It traces how the book became the foundation for a transmedia project that unfolded across several platforms (including the Broadway stage and Netflix) over the course of two years (2016–2018). This transmedia project worked to construct the twenty-first-century Springsteen as an artist and commentator whose work lies at the intersections of rock, popular literature, scripted theater, and the screen.

KEYWORDS

Autobiography; memoir; narrative; Netflix; Springsteen; transmedia

Introduction

Rock memoirs have been around in various forms since at least 1974, when Ian Hunter of Mott the Hoople published *Diary of a Rock'n'Roll Star*. A stream of first-person narratives (sometimes involving a coauthor or ghostwriter in the writing process) subsequently appeared – by George Harrison, Joan Baez, Chuck Berry, Frank Zappa, Ray Davies, and others. The early twenty-first century marked a turning point in the history of rock memoirs when Bob Dylan published *Chronicles, Volume One* (2004): It received literary acclaim (Rollason 147) more than a decade before its author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Since *Chronicles*, memoirs by Anglophone pop and rock artists have proliferated. Moreover, many musicians strive to present themselves, like Dylan, as bona fide writers, as sole authors of their life stories with literary voices that are as distinctive as their signature sounds. Notwithstanding editorial oversight of the writing process, these books may be considered “solo” works in the same sense that an album featuring a team of producers and session musicians can retain its status as a “solo” effort (Watson 121). The authors of such memoirs include Bruce Springsteen, Eric Clapton, Chrissie Hynde, Nile Rodgers, Elvis Costello, Kim Gordon, Carrie Brownstein, and so on. A few, such as Kristin Hersh, Patti Smith, and Viv Albertine, have established separate careers by publishing multiple books. In this article I argue that the rock memoir took another decisive commercial and cultural turn with Springsteen's *Born to Run* (2016). Unlike *Chronicles*, that turn had little to do with literary style; rather, the innovation is that the book partly functioned as an entry point into a transmedia memoir project that unfolded over the course of 2016–2018. By harnessing multiple media platforms over an

CONTACT Laura Watson  laura.watson@mu.ie  Department of Music Maynooth University Maynooth Co. Kildare Ireland

extended timeline, Springsteen constructed and reconstructed a narrative, one that was first presented to readers and subsequently developed for listeners, Broadway theatergoers, and Netflix viewers. The reimagining of the book for stage and screen was not simply about repackaging for different audiences. Instead, these formats facilitated the thematic and expressive expansion of the book. As I discuss below, this development of the book across multiple media platforms renders the memoir project a transmedia work.

Reflecting currents in literary scholarship, I generally speak about *memoir* in preference to *autobiography*. *Memoir* is “more malleable than the term *autobiography*, foregrounding historical shifts and intersecting cultural formations”; often, the memoir text is further distinguished by “self-reflexivity about the writing process” (Smith and Watson 4). Such self-reflexivity, as I discuss below, is a hallmark of Springsteen’s book. Whereas autobiography has connotations of completeness, memoir instead suggests work that explores “a segment of a life, not its entirety [...] focusing on interconnected experiences” (Smith and Watson 274). Compartmentalization is apparent in rock memoirs, whereby authors privilege stories of their musical selves. This trend can be observed generally, from compact studies of a pivotal moment in the subject’s life (e.g. Kristin Hersh’s *Paradoxical Undressing* focuses on the year she recorded her debut album with Throwing Muses) to tomes spanning several decades of an individual’s history (e.g. Springsteen’s *Born to Run*). Over the past twenty years popular-music scholars have defined “musical autobiography” as a form extending beyond the sole-authored personal narrative to that which encompasses coauthored books (Fox 238–43; Swiss 290–91; Lovesey 303, 310; Mahon 3; Shank 382, 388); some scholars expand the definition to accommodate “a range of different media and genres” (Stein and Butler 118). Responding to this work in two different ways, I start by addressing Springsteen’s book within the boundaries of memoir literature. But, due to how it evolved into a transmedia project, I also venture into the broader terrain implied by the more diffuse “musical autobiography” category. The *Born to Run* book marks the entry point into a larger Springsteen memoir world, built on multiple media pillars. Several existing autobiographical Springsteen songs belong in that world, but here I explore how the memoir has generated an ecosystem of new works across various media. Like the book, these outputs portray and reenact Springsteen’s curated memories of his life and career.

Springsteen, the *Born to Run* Memoir, and Convergence Culture

If there is a traditional way of reading a rock memoir, it is in relation to what a fan already knows about the musician’s work and public persona. That retrospective approach guides the only book-length essay collection published to date on music memoirs (Edgar, Mann, and Pleasance). Edgar, Mann, and Pleasance define music memoirs as “historical forms” produced by “the narration of what is remembered and the gaps around that” (4–5). *Born to Run* fulfills the retrospective function of that form, without being reducible to an exercise in nostalgia. It doubles as a new departure in Springsteen’s career, a gateway into a “convergence culture” that has developed through works stemming from his life story. “Convergence culture” refers to “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (Jenkins 2). In the world-building of transmedia storytelling, Jenkins explains, each text makes a unique contribution to the whole (95–96). He models his theory on

television and film franchises. I argue that this transmedia theory can be applied to the study of Springsteen's memoir project, particularly as the storytelling depths of transmedia accord with this musician's self-image as a storyteller (discussed below).

My study of Springsteen's memoir world contributes to recent developments in the discourse. An interdisciplinary turn is increasingly evident in Springsteen studies (Wolff; Elliott; Harde and Streight; Womack, Zolten, and Bernhard). More specifically, Elliott's 2019 article centers on two "texts" in Springsteen's late career, the *Born to Run* memoir and the Netflix film *Springsteen on Broadway*. He interrogates whether these late autobiographical projects show the artist engaged in "creating a new persona" or "adding layers to existing personas" (Elliott 18); he asserts that Springsteen's participation in that process builds an "affective pact" with his fans (19, 27) and concludes that Springsteen brings audiences "closer to his real self than he ever has before [...] through the intimacies afforded by different platforms" (28). My study pursues different directions: I am primarily concerned not with persona but with how the Springsteen life story is produced as a complex form of convergence culture. It is worth mentioning that, while I admire Springsteen's work, I do not identify as a fan with a deep attachment to the artist in the way that some commentators do – "he is still speaking for, with and of us" (Elliott 27; see also, Elliott 25). My positionality affords some critical distance from this artist's persona as it has been constructed over five decades. It has influenced my experience of this memoir as dependent on transmedia for full realization, as a product for heterogeneous audiences to navigate over a few years and across different platforms. Springsteen's autobiography is enacted across multiple media formats and accessible via several types of experiences (reading, listening, theatregoing, private viewing). Therefore, I analyze the memoir world through the theoretical lens of transmedia. In this process, I refer to works beyond the book and Broadway film.

Research on transmedia and popular music is a relatively recent development, reflecting the scarcity of transmedia output by high-profile musicians until the 2010s (Jeffery 67). Transmedia projects to have attracted scholarly attention include Björk's *Biophilia* and visual albums such as Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (Brembilla 82–84, 86–87; Sedeño-Valdellós 108–09). *Biophilia*, the first "app album," was released in conjunction with a suite of apps that included a sequencer, which allowed listeners to modify tracks. *Lemonade*'s hour-long film immerses fans in a visual experience that expands upon the thematic content of its tracks. Springsteen's project similarly prompts fans to engage with the "work" (the artistically curated autobiography) on a variety of platforms, each of which supports a unique type of content and user experience.

Springsteen's 2016–2018 memoir project developed from September 2016 to December 2018, as outlined in Table 1.

While the book is a self-contained work, it also doubled as a portal for a cultural and commercial franchise that generated an additional seven products or experiences. The expansion of the book into forms that generate new revenue streams underlines, too, the profitability of transmedia. Together and separately, the eight "texts" typify the transmedia architecture Jenkins describes: "Any given product is the point of entry into the franchise as a whole. Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption" (96). My discussion concentrates on the most substantive and novel elements of the 2016–2018 Springsteen autobiographical franchise: the book, book tour, Broadway residency, and Netflix film. (Due to the comparatively few and

Table 1. Chronology of transmedia projects associated with the *Born to Run* memoir.

<i>Born to Run</i> , book	Published 27 September 2016
<i>Chapter and Verse</i> , companion album	Released 23 September 2016
Book tour: US, Canada, and London, UK	27 September–2 December 2016
<i>Born to Run</i> , audiobook	Released 6 December 2016
<i>Bruce Springsteen: In His Own Words</i> , documentary	Premiered on BBC America, 26 November 2017
Residency in Walter Kerr Theater, Broadway	3 October 2017–15 December 2018
<i>Springsteen on Broadway</i> , soundtrack album	Released 14 December 2018
<i>Springsteen on Broadway</i> , Netflix film	Released 16 December 2018

sporadic television presentations of the documentary, and its status as the least novel, least integrated aspect of the memoir world, I refrain from discussing it here.) Each element is autonomous and simultaneously in dialogue with the others. Audiences may choose any as a portal to the Springsteen memoir world.

***Born to Run*, the Book**

Published on 27 September 2016, *Born to Run* topped nonfiction bestseller charts around the world. Simon & Schuster had been invested in the book for close to a year at that point. Seven months earlier, the publishers had issued a press release that celebrated their author in terms that invoke his musical reputation. Stressing the authenticity long ascribed to Springsteen’s music (Bird 42, 49–55; Frith 250–53; Moore 213, 219; Palmer 108–13; Sheinbaum), they announced that the artist had been “privately writing the autobiography over the past seven years,” resulting in a book in which he “tells, for the first time, the story of the personal struggles that inspired his best work” (“Bruce Springsteen’s Autobiography”). The industrious rhetoric serves Springsteen’s image, his stature as an artist who commits to the “sweat and toil of the performance” (Palmer 109). The musician’s website posted the same press release when the memoir became available to preorder (see “Springsteen’s Autobiography”). Such cross-industry cooperation suggests a slick marketing strategy.

At more than five hundred pages and concluding with a mini photo-album, *Born to Run* is substantial. The scale is reminiscent of its author’s live craft: Springsteen has been known to play arena concerts more than four hours long (Stonerook 213). Material is chronologically ordered under the headings “Book 1: Growin’ Up,” “Book 2: Born to Run,” and “Book 3: Living Proof.” Each “Book” is subdivided into several chapters. Central to Chapter 1 are Springsteen’s memories of “a towering copper beech” outside his childhood home (4). In the volume’s closing pages, the musician recalls recently visiting the street to find the tree felled, leaving “small snakes of root slightly submerged by dust and dirt” (504). These images frame Springsteen’s story as metaphorically grounded in that same soil.

The theatricality of Chapter 7 seems scripted for a live audience. The Broadway show later capitalized on this attribute, insisting on the memoir’s capacity for trans-media realization. Chapter 7 focuses on Springsteen’s memory of watching Elvis Presley on television in 1956. “A FREEDOM SONG HAS BEEN SUNG!! THE BELLS OF LIBERTY HAVE RUNG!! A HERO HAS COME,” he rhapsodizes (39). Rhyming “sung” and “rung,” Springsteen slips into quasi-lyricist mode. Over the remainder of this chapter, streams of all-caps outbursts, double exclamation marks, and ellipses flood

the pages. Elsewhere such rhetorical flourishes are used sparingly. This chapter assails the reader's visual and auditory senses in a manner that hints at Presley's effect on Springsteen. It demands to be *heard*, amplified, witnessed by a crowd. The text bristles with tension between a visceral, multisensory memory and the confinement of the page. Such tensions are common in contemporary literary memoirs, which often accentuate how memory is mediated through "the artifice of textual transformation" (Madden 223).

Recounting formative impressions of music icons is a rock-memoir trope. Early in their books authors frequently invoke archetypes such as Elvis Presley and the Beatles. These anecdotes reveal the writer's younger, aspirational self. Later, those heroes may reemerge in the subject's story, now as peers. In *Born to Run*, Roy Orbison makes a cameo appearance as a voice on the boyish Bruce's transistor radio (45). Subsequently, Orbison reenters the story when Springsteen inducts him into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986 (427). Swiss observed that writing an autobiography allows the musician to "seize narrative authority" and enter "into a dialogue with history" (288). I see memoir as an exercise in bridging the gap between a subject's story and a universalized post-1955 rock history – although this "universalized" history is constructed as predominantly white, patriarchal, and Anglo-American. Eventually, as in *Born to Run*, these two narratives (the personal and the rock history) converge: The memoirist makes an intervention in the history which he or she had initially documented as an outsider.

Springsteen's status as a storyteller is such that his ordinary speaking voice has accrued its own cultural capital. Since at least 1986 "reflective monologues" have featured in his concerts and live albums to the extent that fans transcribe these (Palmer 114; Spelman 133, 135–36). By inscribing the kind of anecdotes that he has previously shared during performances, the memoir reenacts, formalizes, and archives that part of his stage routine. Reflections on the organic process of storytelling – without necessarily distinguishing between the storytelling forms of songwriting, prose, or spoken monologues – permeate the book from foreword to final chapter. As noted above, self-reflexivity about writing is common in literary memoirs, and *Born to Run* is similar in that regard. Asserting that he had a "performance style and a story to tell," Springsteen introduces his book as "a continuation of that story and a search into its origins" (xi). He flags it as a "continuation" of an artistic journey as much as a retracing of steps. Toward the end (Chapter 79), he self-reflexively calls attention to his narrative efforts (504). Finally, in the postscript acknowledgments, he more formally elaborates on the nuts and bolts of the writing and editing process, thanking four individuals (Patti Scialfa, Jon Landau, Jonathan Karp, Mary Mac) for their contributions. On the last page of the narrative, Springsteen reiterates that his motivation for becoming a musician was to "hear and know the whole story" (505). This conflation of rock and storytelling anticipates what stands as a central pillar in the transmedia structure: the musical performance of the memoir narrative. Reflecting the relationship between the book and its live "interpretations," I return to passages in the text when analyzing how Springsteen vocalizes the printed word in theatrical and studio settings.

Chapter and Verse, the Companion Album

Chapter and Verse is an eighteen-track retrospective of Springsteen's band and solo career from 1966 to 2012. With an eye to sales, no doubt, a third of the album consists of previously unreleased material. As shown in Table 1, it was released a few days prior to the publication of the book; it thus functions to a large extent as a promotional vehicle. Identical cover artwork on the book and album explicitly pairs *Born to Run* and *Chapter and Verse* as associated products. Both the choice of tracks and their chronological order construct a narrative that frames Springsteen in important ways. Firstly, they trace his artistic growth over a period of nearly half a century. Secondly, the song selection suggests an agenda to portray Springsteen as a U.S. cultural authority and commentator. Four tracks merit remarks on this point. The two most overtly political tracks are the 1984 hit "Born in the U.S.A." and the 2002 single "The Rising." The lyrics of "Born in the U.S.A." condemn U.S. political and social policy from the viewpoint of a Vietnam War veteran, while "The Rising" is a meditation on the 11 September 2001, attacks, imagined from the perspective of a New York firefighter in the World Trade Center. Two other tracks on this album further embed Springsteen in U.S. culture. "The Ballad of Jesse James" (recorded in 1972 but unreleased until *Chapter and Verse*) is a rendition of a nineteenth-century folk song about a Western outlaw. Springsteen's recording of the track continues a legacy that dates to the earliest days of the recorded music industry and counts predecessors such as Woody Guthrie. Guthrie factors into the fourth track I will mention: "The Ghost of Tom Joad" (1995). This Springsteen original is descended from Guthrie's composition "Tom Joad" (1940), which in turn was inspired by John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). By referencing Springsteen's connections with U.S. artistic worlds beyond the boundaries of rock, *Chapter and Verse* calls for a wide-ranging discourse about this musician's life story and legacy.

Toward Transmedia: the Book Tour

With performance intrinsic to how the memoir was conceived, it is not surprising that this also informed its publicity. Central to its promotion was a "solo tour" of book signings. Springsteen's website announced a string of appearances under the banner of "Live Dates"—a catch-all category with zero distinction between "live music" dates and "live readings" (see "Live Dates"). Listings segue directly from a stadium show on 14 September 2016 to the fifteen *Born to Run* appearances. From 27 September to 2 December 2016 Springsteen crisscrossed the United States and Canada and flew to London to promote his latest release at bookshops and libraries. At the first signing, in a Barnes & Noble branch in Springsteen's hometown of Freehold, New Jersey, a car park corralled crowds behind metal barriers, as if in a concert queue (Glenza). Following the website's conflation of shows and readings under "Live Dates," fans greeted Springsteen's book appearances with the enthusiasm usually reserved for stage performances. In a way this was justified: The meet-and-greet format enabled them to connect with their idol in a way that is impossible in the mass-audience setting (Angermiller). While the book tour was an effective promotional instrument, it doubled as a structure in the transmedia architecture of the Springsteen memoir project. As a short film of one date on the tour illustrates, the signings represented the first move toward "performing" the memoir.

Director Thom Zimny captured the London reading in October 2016. His short film virtually situates the viewer at the event, presenting close-ups of Springsteen as the crowd recedes into a blur. Zimny employed a similarly intimate esthetic with the Netflix production discussed below. As documented in his 2016 film, the London signing included an interview in which Springsteen spoke about writing the book:

You can do the entire thing, which takes—I did it in a period of over seven years. And then, you're finished. It's sort of like doing everything except the performance, you know. For me that's—that's the crowning moment, when I finally get to go out on stage and perform what I've written. So, it was a chance to, sort of, speak in a different way to your audience. (*Short Film*)¹

Judging by these remarks, Springsteen welcomed the opportunity to communicate with fans through print but found the experience anticlimactic as it lacked a performance element. The subsequent Broadway residency offered an opportunity to redress this.

The book tour and *Chapter and Verse* challenge notions of memoir as a purely or predominantly literary form. The final part of Zimny's 2016 film (approximately four of the total eight minutes) consists of Springsteen reading the closing pages. Here, he reminisces about his origins and what he has tried to achieve by writing. Shot in black and white, the scene recalls the artwork for the albums *Born to Run* and *The River*. Both the visuals and vocal delivery (honed to perfection yet retaining a spirit of impromptu confession) transform that reading into a filmed performance. Already the book's expansion into performed memoir had begun. Per Jenkins's theory of convergence culture, by December 2016 fans were being prompted to access a variety of content across multiple platforms. The multidimensional world-building of Springsteen's life story was underway. Together, the book tour and *Chapter and Verse* hint at how the memoir was adapted for Broadway in 2017.

***Born to Run*, the Audiobook**

Four days after the tour concluded, the audiobook was released. As the audiobook is accessible via digital devices, it lends the original book the quality of *platform mobility*: “ubiquitous, mobile access to a wide range of entertainment choices” (Tryon 4). The audiobook, however, is also its own entity, an expansion of the original product. Marketing it as a must-have, the Springsteen website appropriated rock-canon values such as authenticity, creativity, and uniqueness. The promotional blurb assured fans that the man himself delivers the eighteen-hour reading (a task that some musician-memoirists delegate to actors—Watson 129). It stressed, too, that content is not simply repackaged from one medium for another – because when this artist finds himself behind a mic, music inevitably follows. Thus: “In addition to his narration, Springsteen recorded musical transitions for the audiobook at Stone Hill Studio in New Jersey. Excerpts from the original studio recordings of “Living Proof,” “Long Time Comin’” and ‘Born to Run’ are also featured in the audiobook” (see “*Born to Run* Audiobook Out Now”). The audiobook inverts the balance between verbal storytelling and stylized performance that a musician would normally present. Songs are mostly pared down to ten-second

snippets and deployed as narrative framing devices. Track choice is also a function of literary form. Music is reduced to paratext, not unlike the way in which illustrations serve as paratext in the rock-memoir book (Sutton 213–18).

A blast of the opening guitar riff from “Born to Run” fades out as Springsteen reads the dedication and foreword. Proceeding to Chapter 1, he strums a fragment of “Growin’ Up” to usher in “Book 1: Growin’ Up.” Rather than use the track on *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* (1973), this acoustic solo is one of the “musical transitions” created for the audiobook. Likewise, the curtain-raiser for “Book 2: Born to Run” teases an unplugged, solo guitar version of “Born to Run.” Introducing “Book 3: Living Proof,” Springsteen recycles the first few bars of the eponymous track recorded for *Lucky Town* (1992). Reaching the epilogue, he signals the end of the book with another new “musical transition”: an acoustic guitar fragment of “Long Time Comin’.” Similar to the *Devils and Dust* version (2005) but lacking that track’s production polish, the recording possesses a raw quality. It has a sense of spontaneity that tempts the listener to imagine Springsteen delivering this audiobook recording live on stage instead of through edited studio takes.

This product was marketed to maximize appeal to rock devotees (as evidenced in the website blurb) and to those with more voyeuristic celebrity interests. Springsteen’s website posted Zimny’s *Short Film* of the London reading alongside two excerpts from the audiobook. In the Chapter 41 excerpt, Springsteen reveals how he and the E Street Band assembled at Clarence Clemons’s deathbed to bid farewell to their saxophonist. Equally intimate is another tale beginning at the side of a hospital bed, taken from Chapter 53. Here, Springsteen reflects on the birth of his first child, recalling his wife Patti Scialfa’s postpartum elation and exhaustion and confessing to his anxieties about fatherhood. This publicity material, which distilled the memoir to birth, death, family, and music as a communal experience, emphasized the main pillars of the theatrical presentation that began in 2017. That show, as Elliott notes, “makes further use of the intimacy of autobiography” (25).

Springsteen on Broadway, Memoir in the Theater

In August 2017 Springsteen’s residency at the Walter Kerr Theater was confirmed. Following a preview on 3 October 2017, a planned eight-week run commenced on 12 October. Exceptional demand saw the series extended until February 2018; subsequently it was renewed until June 2018, then 15 December 2018 (“*Springsteen on Broadway – Extended Through February!*”; “*Springsteen on Broadway Extended Through June 2018*”; “*Springsteen on Broadway Extended Through December 2018*”). Virtual shows kept the industrial juggernaut going once Springsteen exited the physical stage. The soundtrack album was released on 14 December 2018, while Netflix began rolling out *Springsteen on Broadway* to subscribers on 16 December 2018. In total there were 236 theater shows, each performed to a capacity crowd of about 900. Various media sources attest to the consistency of the shows, apart from one significant change in June 2018, discussed below. Critics also validate the Netflix film as an authentic evocation of the live experience (Onkey; Rose; Willman). That consistency was the result of a nightly scripted routine where Springsteen delivered several autocued passages from the memoir and matched these with musical performances.

The show's chronological format and dramatic content are derived from the book; furthermore, eight of the sixteen songs from *Springsteen on Broadway* appeared on *Chapter and Verse*.² The show's linear structure renders it straightforward for those who have not read the memoir; that accessibility also exemplifies the transmedia storytelling practice of facilitating consumer engagement via several platforms. In content and duration, the split between speech and song is roughly equal. Springsteen's adherence to a script and Zimny's directorial approach (more on which below) allow us to trust the film as a reliable document of the stage show's concept, content, and style. True, the film and soundtrack album transform live performance into a fixed entity for viewers and listeners to experience on their own terms. However, due awareness of how technological remediation intervenes in the (re)presentation of performance (Bolter and Grusin 44–50) does not prohibit us from using the film and soundtrack album to appraise fundamental aspects of the production.

Reviewers noted the Broadway show's roots in the book. Shortly after opening night, *Rolling Stone* judged the production "in many ways a live version of the book" (Greene). As the residency concluded fourteen months later, Willman saluted Springsteen's stage mastery: "He's not afraid to sound scripted when he's rattling off a poetic list of rock 'n' roll's curative powers, but he's also gotten awfully good at feigning those moments in captivating personal anecdotes when he seems to be searching for the right word." Like the book, the Broadway show is a critical intervention, an exercise in examining and constructing one's own legacy. Part of this involves pulling back the curtain on contrived rock fantasy. Springsteen mocks his clichéd youthful persona – "I hated school. That's just rock star 101!" he laughs before singing "The Wish." Introducing the opening song, "Growin' Up," he demolishes the notion of rock authenticity by confessing that his lyrics about working-class life were fiction: "I made it all up! That's how good I am!" Ridiculing his macho posturing in "Racing in the Street," he exclaims: "at 21 I had never driven a fucking block!" Reading from his book's foreword, he claims that wooing crowds of 80,000 is his "magic trick" (for discussion of this "magic trick" metaphor, see Elliott 18 and 23). These onstage commentaries about the constructedness of his own stardom and his songwriting imagination are the words of a star partly engaged in a meta-performance. Springsteen confronts and deconstructs the mythologies that have sustained his reputation for decades (see, also, Elliott 18, 19, and 24).

Music in *Springsteen on Broadway*

The production is a balancing act between dramatizing a book and showcasing a song catalog. Stripping the music to a core of sixteen tracks representing his catalog across four decades, Springsteen distances his songs from their original production values and contexts, reconfiguring them into a setlist appropriate to the autobiographical theme. Apart from Scialfa's guest appearance on "Tougher Than the Rest" and "Brilliant Disguise," Springsteen performs solo, accompanying himself on guitar or piano. He is no stranger to the "unplugged" sensibility; hence, *Broadway* builds on a strand of his existing practice. The extent of the narrative framing, however, is new. While he has a history of weaving anecdotes into live shows (as noted above), here an overarching prose monologue formally shapes the entire performance and setlist.

Virtually all songs (except “The Rising”) are preceded by introductions based on the *Born to Run* book. The soundtrack album splits each of these monologues into a separate track from the associated song. Thus, the monologues become performances in their own right. Four songs (“My Hometown,” “The Promised Land,” “Born in the U.S.A.,” and “Born to Run”) are preceded by extended multitrack introductions. While there is no difference in audio content between the film and soundtrack, the album’s track list and track running time highlight how much the production is dominated by spoken narrative. The first two tracks, “Growin’ Up” and “My Hometown,” are case studies in how the show uses the book to generate new interpretations of Springsteen’s rock legacy.

“Growin’ Up” begins conventionally, but, just before the two-minute mark, Springsteen stops singing and starts talking. Remembering how Presley inspired him to learn guitar, he recounts formative musical experiences. This monologue is based on Chapter 7, discussed above. Excerpts are lightly edited for impact: E.g. the florid description “in a moment of light, blinding as a universe birthing a billion new suns” (38) is replaced with “in a blinding flash of sanctified light” (3:30). After ostensibly off-the-cuff remarks, Springsteen reverts to the book by proclaiming “THE REVOLUTION HAS BEEN TELEVISED!!” (39, emphasis in original). This mixture of faithful reading, tweaking of text, and story expansion typifies how Springsteen treats the book as a flexible text that may be modified in ways appropriate to a given medium.

Why interpolate a memory of being a seven-year-old midway through performing “Growin’ Up,” a song about teenage rebellion? I suggest that this spoken interlude serves to expand the lyrical universe. It functions as a world-building flashback that supplies the protagonist’s backstory. Nine minutes after pausing the song, Springsteen resumes with gusto for the final verse. But he had never truly ceased the musical performance – during the spoken interlude he played the song’s signature arpeggiated guitar riff almost continuously. He effectively created an instrumental soundtrack to the literary text. This passage of accompanied monologue acts as the narrative glue between the sung segments. The interlude therefore possesses a dramatic function and conveys a distinctly theatrical quality.

The subsequent performance, “My Hometown,” hints at cinematic expressive potential. Accompanying himself on piano, Springsteen plays a rendition of the song, absent the dramatic interlude of its predecessor. However, this rendition is preceded by almost seven minutes of stories cherry-picked from his book. About two minutes in, Springsteen begins to soundtrack his reading. This time he supplies an atmospheric piano accompaniment, which echoes the simplicity of the “Growin’ Up” interlude. It is defined by a simple two-bar chordal riff: in bar one, over F in the bass, the right hand plays a fairly free crotchet-beat pattern of a G-B dyad falling to an F-A dyad (this occurs twice); in bar two, the bass leaps downward to C while the F-A dyad alternates with an E-G dyad in the same rhythm. This riff is repeated seamlessly, usually in the midrange, but occasionally transposed an octave higher and with variation toward the end. As Springsteen plays, he delivers a monologue about his hometown. He starts by describing the tree outside his house before zooming out of that scene to pan across the local landmarks that were central to the lives of him and his relatives: the school, church, and cemetery. “I literally grew up surrounded by God,” he states, elaborating that Catholic wedding and funeral rituals were a constant. Appropriately, the peals of his piano accompaniment resonate like church bells. In this passage, then, Springsteen’s music functions as a soundtrack to

his vivid oral montage of 1950s Freehold, New Jersey. The style departs from rock and gestures toward the cinematic. A quasi-minimalist wash of relentless piano chords lulls the listener into hearing time stand still, mirroring how the tree and church symbolize eternities for Springsteen. As with the “Growin’ Up” interlude, the composite spoken-instrumental form influences how the listener hears the song that is paired with it. “My Hometown,” also performed at the piano, metamorphoses into a poetic, lyrical expansion of what has just been evoked. Via the staging of the first two songs alone in the Broadway production, Springsteen reimagines his legacy in ways that migrate from the boundaries of popular music.

Participatory Culture in *Springsteen on Broadway*

Catholic rituals are integral to the musician’s memories, and these overtones permeate the stage production. “Let the service begin,” he announced early in *Born to Run* (7). In an example of world-building transmedia, that content flows from the book to the stage to add a new dimension to the memoir experience. No longer simply a narrator, Springsteen now interacts with the Broadway audience as if they were a congregation. Such quasi-religious communal feeling has long been part of his live act (*Stonerook* 213–14). He is occasionally evangelical about rock mythology too. Introducing “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out,” he pays tribute to Clemons and the E Street Band by solemnly describing the band as a “communion of souls.” An unaccompanied monologue prior to “Dancing in the Dark” mimics a closing homily. Borrowing from the book’s last chapter, he prefaces the song by professing belief in his “service”: He presents his music’s “long and noisy prayer” as an offertory to the Broadway faithful. Then, as the preamble to the “Born to Run” finale, he recites the Our Father prayer. That prayer also appeared in the memoir’s last chapter (505). Its ritual nightly utterance on stage transforms the printed text into an immersive, participatory moment for those who wish to join in. This is another example of world-building, which expands the content of the book into an experience.

The communal potential of this reminds us that immersive, participatory culture is integral to the transmedia experience (*Brembilla* 84–86). To function as transmedia, it does not suffice for a work such as a recording to be replicated on multiple platforms. Rather, a transmedia musical work must “reinforce the relationship with its audience through immersive, emotional, and long-lasting experiences” (*Brembilla* 84). Extending this analysis, I propose that, for musicians to be effective transmedia figures, they must offer audiences new, meaningful experiences appropriate to the media platforms used. Voicing a prayer during his theatrical monologue, Springsteen exemplifies one way of doing this. He plays a role akin to a priest or preacher to forge connection with his “followers.”

Changing the Script: Updating *Springsteen on Broadway* in 2018

Springsteen used the Broadway stage as a political platform, notably when instigating the only major change in the show’s history, on 19 June 2018. That night he added “The Ghost of Tom Joad” to the setlist, a ballad whose eponymous hero vows to fight for the weak and marginalized in society. The song is prefaced by a thinly veiled denunciation of

U.S. President Donald Trump. “I refer back to the weekend for March for Our Lives,” he says, before lamenting broken families and political violence. Together the monologue and performance constituted Springsteen’s response to news of U.S. border policy to separate immigrant children from parents and incarcerate them. As Springsteen’s rhetoric of resistance recalls passages in the memoir that protest the Vietnam War, the speech renews the values he had expressed there. It thus constitutes another form of transmedia expansion, whereby the artist extends the political narrative threads from his book. Testifying to his concern with preserving this commentary as part of his legacy, a transcript of the text appeared on his website on 20 June 2018 (“Bruce’s Remarks Before ‘The Ghost of Tom Joad’”). By making this segment a permanent fixture (captured on the film and soundtrack), Springsteen updated the records of his life story to include a statement of political dissent about events in 2018.

Remediating *Springsteen on Broadway*: the Netflix Production and Soundtrack Album

The Broadway show survives in mediated form via its audiovisual recording. Yet Zimny’s Netflix film, recorded over two nights in July 2018, is not solely a historical document. It is also a discrete work in the Springsteen memoir world. At present, however, scholars lack a clear framework for analyzing this form of cultural production, by which I mean a Netflix-produced film that centers on live music performance. In this section, I tease out how this twenty-first-century new media platform supports and develops a memoir project that originated as a book.

As of 2021, Netflix has more than 200 million global subscribers. Once a distributor of film and television content, the company now produces much material too. *Springsteen on Broadway*, subtitled *A Netflix Original Special*, is an in-house creation. As a concert film it is a relative rarity in the company’s catalog, although there is tentative evidence of an emerging trend for more content of this nature.³ Netflix built its reputation on “high-quality media content [...] traditionally produced by the Hollywood studios and major television networks” (McDonald and Smith-Rowsey 2). Music’s value in this commercial setting has thus far received little attention. Researchers have focused on the platform’s importance as a transformative visual and digital technology (McDonald and Smith-Rowsey 3); its challenge to mainstream television and film cultures (Jenner 3); the presentation and categorizing of content (Smith-Rowsey 72–73); and new modes of consumption (Snider 123). As music becomes more visible and visual in digital media, it should play a bigger part in this discourse. Norma Coates long ago urged scholars of new media and screen media to integrate popular music into their research, citing popular music’s “intertwined history with the film and television industry, the tools and methodologies applicable to all three, and the reality that popular music was the first frontier in the digital entertainment age” (125).

Scholars of popular music have investigated how listeners use audio streaming technologies and services (Katz; Hagen; Johansson et al.; Eriksson et al.). Something that could be further considered is how the listener – now also a viewer – responds to popular music in hybrid audiovisual digital environments such as Netflix. While there is much published on popular music and traditional screen media, especially music video (Goodwin; Frith, Goodwin, and Grossberg; Kaplan; Mundy; Railton and

Watson; Arnold et al.), further development of theoretical frameworks is required. In the new-media field, the proliferation of scholarship on Netflix suggests that meaningful interpretation of music in that context requires a parallel expansion of how scholars conceptualize popular music on the small screen – a mode of viewing that encompasses the television, laptop, tablet, and smartphone. Recent studies analyze internal structures, content, and representational powers of the conventional music video (Arnold et al.; Railton and Watson). But with music video’s “aesthetic boundaries [...] challenged by the emergent audiovisual economies of the internet” (Cleeve 172), we must also attend to newer transmedia examples such as *Springsteen on Broadway*.

I seek to analyze how the music fan’s encounter with the film is conditioned by the norms and practices of Netflix’s audiovisual culture. Nonetheless, the film shares certain attributes with older music videos. That audiovisual genre has traditionally had a marketing role – to support concurrent music single releases – and that legacy informs the Zimny film. Part of its function is to promote another product: the book. This is the “core product” of the Springsteen memoir franchise, a situation that currently renders it unique in popular music transmedia. Brembilla’s discussion, for example, operates on the assumption that music is always the “core product” (87). *Springsteen on Broadway* operates in what can be described as a transmedia ecosystem, which nurtures synergetic relationships between core products and by-products and dissolves cultural and commercial hierarchies (Brembilla 88). Viewers unaware of the film’s genesis are likely to retrace a route to that book, should they seek to become more immersed in the memoir world.

Given the film’s origins in an autobiographical text and its portrayal of a scripted narrative show, it is in some ways less aligned with music video than with the music biopic. Inglis broadly defines the latter as “the biography of a musical performer (living or dead) and which contains a significant amount of his or her music” (77). In practice, as understood by viewers and as discussed by Inglis, the genre more narrowly refers to films with casts of professional actors. Springsteen’s theatrical show does not conform to these parameters. Hence, rather than categorize *Springsteen on Broadway* as either an unconventional music video or biopic, it is more productive to interpret it as stylized according to the signature esthetic of the Netflix Special.

The Netflix Esthetic

Netflix remediates a theater performance into a personal viewing experience. The Netflix Special/Netflix Original Special is a genre of the brand’s programming that concentrates heavily on stand-up comedy. Dozens of Specials have been produced and distributed in various languages since 2012. While Springsteen’s show may seem worlds away from stand-up comedy, there exist some unlikely parallels. Like a solo comedian, Springsteen relies on amusing anecdotes to captivate his Broadway audience for much of the evening. Even the staging of his performance is reminiscent of a comedy-club setting: It features an exposed brickwork backdrop, a spotlight over a fixed microphone stand, and an audience situated near the performer. In the Netflix genre, the comedy club is also a site of soul-searching and self-disclosure: For example, in her Netflix Special *Nanette* (2018), the comedian Hannah Gadsby discusses affecting personal experiences of sexism

and homophobia. While Springsteen's *Special* strikes a very different tone, it, too, partly trades on the currency of private revelation. It profits from the performance of introspection and confession.

Music is filtered through the artifice of the "unconstructed" set. Stripped back, the set purports to leave the performer exposed. Low-key and lo-fi, the surroundings and sound convey a sense of slightly impromptu performance by Springsteen, who could almost be imagined here as a busker or bar-stool entertainer. The mic stand, amp guitar, and grand piano with another fixed mic comprise the sum audio technology at his disposal. Not wearing a mic, Springsteen, in theory, should position himself within range of the stand or piano. Instead, he moves to and from the mics, treating these as instruments to modulate his vocal timbre and vary dynamic intensity. Moments where he slips out of range as he wanders around result in occasionally uneven dynamic levels. This is part of the act, the construction of the authentic everyman persona. It seeks to persuade the viewer (or listener) that the singer is averse to how technology mediates and intercepts communication (see also Elliott 28).

Zimny's cinematography exaggerates these constructions of authenticity by focusing on Springsteen's face. Rather than fetishize rock musicianship as concert films and biopics often do, here the camera barely acknowledges the technicalities of Springsteen's craft. Wide-angled shots of him playing guitar and piano suffice. Footage of the guitar draped around his neck as he speaks heightens the sense that, at times, instruments function as props for a spoken performance. This Netflix Special places a premium on emotional, autobiographical content. Hence, the distillation of Springsteen's presence to a face and voice is apt.

Fixing the camera's gaze in this way robs the performer of privacy and positions the viewer as something of a voyeur. It exemplifies how the film remediates the theatrical experience for the Netflix subscriber: The theatergoer chooses where to look, the viewer cannot. The director sought to create a "theatrical home experience, that's one-on-one with Bruce" (Giroux). In fact, the film's emotional intimacy transcends that which was available to all but those in the front row. That "one-on-one" communication converges with how Springsteen speaks directly to the reader in *Born to Run*. Its storytelling is also mirrored in the film: The director approached "the Broadway show and its script very much how [he] would treat a narrative film [and] look at the power of lines and imagine certain things played out in wide, medium, and close" (Giroux). Zimny's camerawork therefore translates the original memoir text into a new visual form. One of the most arresting moments occurs in the introduction to "The Ghost of Tom Joad." As noted, this monologue and song were added to the show as a reaction to news about Trump's border policy. Zimny's cinematography matches Springsteen's bleak commentary. When he begins to speak, the screen is mostly submerged in black. Springsteen is profiled in the distance, the camera angled diagonally toward him. As the monologue progresses, he is drawn into the foreground; for the concluding remarks, in which he quotes Martin Luther King, Jr., the camera zooms in for a close-up. This imprints on the viewer's mind an image of Springsteen as political activist.

This scene hints at an arc of character development, which accords with Zimny's mission to make a "narrative film." It is also well-suited to a Netflix marketing strategy that exploits the plot lines of Springsteen's life more than his music. "Bruce Springsteen shares personal stories from his life and acoustic versions of some of his best-known

songs in an intimate one-man show,” the synopsis reads. Likewise, the trailer highlights those stories, with music relegated to the background. Zimny’s camerawork fosters emotional intimacy to the extent of banishing the Broadway spectators out of sight until the end. He “wanted nothing of a distraction, no backstage, no cutting into interviews, no stepping away from the performance” (Giroux).

Conclusion

This article has addressed how Springsteen’s book represents an innovation in the field of rock memoir. The 2016 *Born to Run* book became the locus for a larger project that unfolded from 2016 to 2018. In true transmedia fashion, this franchise dispersed content across media platforms and cultural environments, from bricks-and-mortar bookshops to the theater to the personal streaming app. Springsteen had already used his published memoir to intervene in the construction of his legacy as a recording artist and performer. Often, he did this by stressing how his persona as a rock musician branched off into another identity: the storyteller. The book’s transmedia extensions – companion album, documentary, audiobook, book tour, Broadway residency, Netflix film, and soundtrack album – reinforce the central claim about Springsteen as a versatile storyteller. They also do the work of archiving the artist’s autobiography in multiple formats.

Much of this article has focused on *Springsteen on Broadway* because the show and film represent a new development in the musician’s public image. The stage performance portrays him as a figure whose work now lies at the intersection of rock, popular literature, scripted theater, and political commentary. Subsequently, the production and distribution of the film via Netflix lent the work a contemporary gloss that renders it legible to new viewers – who may not be dedicated music fans, let alone Springsteen devotees. Just as this artist adapts to multiple roles, there exist myriad avenues into his work, especially the memoir project. Post-2018 he has released the new albums *Western Stars* (2019) and *Letter to You* (2020), moves that signal the continuation of a rock trajectory and, it might be inferred, the conclusion of the memoir franchise. On the latter point, however, Springsteen has recommitted to the transmedia storytelling concept through two endeavors he embarked upon in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, he began broadcasting the radio series *From My Home to Yours*, in which he purports to share more of his private life with fans. By inviting them to listen to his record collection, Springsteen welcomes fans into his inner sanctum, thus strengthening the artist-audience bond. In 2021, he delivered a different type of audio experience: the eight-part podcast *Renegades: Born in the USA*. Structured as conversations between Springsteen and Barack Obama on “the American dream and the American reality,” this series does much heavy lifting for Springsteen’s legacy. It aligns him politically and gives him the highest stamp of official approval. It authorizes him as a storytelling figure whose words echo beyond the musical arena, as one who has the power to tease out and shape the stories that others seek to share. Mirroring the exclusive deal struck with Netflix for *Springsteen on Broadway*, this “Spotify Original” streams solely on Spotify. Like the Netflix film, it is marketable to subscribers beyond the musician’s traditional fanbase, to listeners potentially more interested in politics and podcasts than music. As events since 2018 demonstrate, Springsteen’s negotiation of his identity and legacy-building efforts are ongoing.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated, transcriptions of Springsteen's monologues and interviews are my own.
2. In order of their appearance on Broadway, the songs that overlap with the tracks on *Chapter and Verse* are: "Growin' Up," "My Father's House," "Born in the U.S.A.," "Brilliant Disguise," "Long Time Comin,'" "The Ghost of Tom Joad," "The Rising," and "Born to Run."
3. Shortly after *Springsteen on Broadway's* release, Netflix exclusively released two further concert films: Taylor Swift's *Reputation* (31 December 2018) and Beyoncé's *Homecoming* (17 April 2019). These reinforce how popular musicians are increasingly using this audio-visual medium to construct and reconstruct their legacies. *Homecoming* is particularly open with its audience about the artifice of the medium: E.g. it features backstage footage and includes narrative voice-overs from Beyoncé. Like *Springsteen on Broadway*, it weaves together performance material from two concerts (recorded at Coachella) and was released concurrently with a live album.

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Notes on contributor

Laura Watson is Associate Professor of Music at Maynooth University, Ireland. Her musicological research focuses on relationships between twentieth-century music and texts, and on women in music. Books include *Paul Dukas: Composer and Critic* (2019) and published or forthcoming edited collections. Articles and reviews appear in journals such as *Twentieth-Century Music*, *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland*, *Musical Times*, *Music and Letters*, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, and *Irish University Review*. Further recent publications include chapters in *Made in Ireland: Studies in Popular Music* and *Music, Memory and Memoir*. Laura is a co-founder and active member of Sounding the Feminists, an advocacy group that campaigns for gender equality action in music throughout Ireland.

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