

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #210

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"The Poetry of Bruce Springsteen"



"Dylanologists," please don't start throwing things when I say this, but, in the sweep of the history of rock, it's entirely possible that the primary purpose of Bob Dylan was to prepare the way for Bruce Springsteen. Which, by the way, is a comment I don't think Springsteen would approve of. It's a thought experiment, however, to come back to some wintry afternoon when rummaging around my poetry collection.

Regardless, in this “mini” **Book Note** I want to do three things: pick-up on a comment I made a few **Book Notes** back about the difference between “popular” and “high” artists, about poetry being the most popular art form of our time, and something John McWhorter said in The New York Times about Springsteen and poetry.

I’ll begin with McWhorter, who on vacation in the Catskills found himself in a discussion with a friend about Bruce Springsteen. McWhorter concedes he always appreciated Springsteen but did not take him particularly seriously. His friend said “listen” to him. McWhorter, a linguist and music aficionado did and, as he recounts, “As engrossed as I was, I kept having to remind myself to listen to the music. What grabbed my ear was the lyrics.” [1] Which led him to conclude that “...the reason poetry on the page is such a rarified taste in America today isn’t that Americans don’t have a taste for verse. It’s because there are pop music artists whose lyrics scratch that itch, just as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Robert Lowell once did.” [2] He adds, “Taylor Swift’s music fits into the same category for me...”. [3]

McWhorter seconds an opinion I have made in numerous **Book Notes** these past five years: that poetry, far from being a dying art form, is the most popular art form of our time. I’m not going to list all the links, but you can find those “notes” by scrolling through the titles [here](#). Typically, when one makes the assertion about poetry’s ubiquity in the contemporary world through the medium of pop music, the notion immediately arises that one is speaking about poetry in its lyric form: a short poem expressing the poet’s personal emotions and feelings.

Much contemporary poetry is certainly that, even when practiced by such great poets as Louise Glück. The implication is that for longer, storytelling projects, poetry is obsolete, having long ago been supplanted by prose, which Monsieur Jourdain in Moliere’s “The Bourgeois Gentleman” was surprised to learn he’d been speaking all his life. Not so; last week in **Book Notes** #209 we glanced briefly at Don McLean’s 9-minute-long “American Pie,” which, until bested by Taylor Swift’s “All Too Well” at 10 minutes, had been the longest pop song to reach No. 1 on the pop charts. There are numerous others.

Which leads to the third observation about the difference between “high” artists and “pop” artists we began several **Book Notes** back. Comparing Edward Hopper and Norman Rockwell, I noted that one views, reads, or listens to a “high” artist for the singularity of their vision, but to a “pop” artist to understand what their audiences sought. The argument is both denser and more nuanced than that, and I won’t repeat it here.

That perspective, however, argues that while commercially successful artists might be windows into understanding what their audiences were thinking and

feeling, their “message” usually didn’t merit consideration Which is patently wrong, for it implies that if popular and commercially successful, then the work in question must almost by definition be shallow. That viewpoint, however, crumbles when it is pointed out that the most commercially successful playwright in the history of the English language, and arguably the entire world, was William Shakespeare. Who, rather than starving in a garret, when he had made his fortune on the stage, cashed out and retired back to Stratford-upon-Avon in his late forties or early fifties to live a life of ease. Similarly, it is suggested that pop musicians by virtue of their very popularity must be unworthy of serious consideration.

Which observation also crumbles when one takes the time to carefully listen, as did McWhorter, to what the singer is singing. In contemporary pop music, the lyrics carry the music and not the other way around. And in the best, the lyrics and music fuse in a mutually reinforcing embrace, such as in Springsteen’s “Jungleland,” which concludes his classic 1975 album “Born to Run,” which many claim to be the greatest rock album ever. [4]

Contradicting the notion that much pop music is simply off-the-cuff riffs, “Jungleland” “took 19 months to create...” [5] As Michael Miller says, “it tells a bleak story...the downbeat, noirish ending leaves you emotionally spent yet wanting more...(it’s) a mix of prose and poetry, a kind of story song that tells a story of hope and desperation about the lower-class denizens of a nameless, faceless city...the Magic Rat, an aspiring musician, and his paramour, the Barefoot Girl.” [6] It includes Clarence Clemons “bluesy two-and-a-half minute sax solo...some consider the greatest sax solo on record...” [7]

As frequent readers of these **Book Notes** know, I believe that explication can kill a poem. So, I’ll halt here quoting others and stifle my own instinct to explain what is going on. Read the lyrics, listen to the song and you’ll figure it out. In the process, read and hear why Springsteen might be one of the best poets of his and our time.

Jungleland

The Rangers had a homecoming
In Harlem late last night
And the Magic Rat drove his sleek machine
Over the Jersey state line

Barefoot girl sitting on the hood of a Dodge
Drinking warm beer in the soft summer rain
The Rat pulls into town, rolls up his pants
Together they take a stab at romance
And disappear down Flamingo Lane

Well the Maximum Lawmen run down Flamingo
Chasing the Rat and the barefoot girl
And the kids round here look just like shadows
Always quiet, holding hands

From the churches to the jails
Tonight all is silence in the world
As we take our stand
Down in Jungleland

The midnight gang's assembled
And picked a rendezvous for the night
They'll meet 'neath that giant Exxon sign
That brings this fair city light

Man, there's an opera out on the Turnpike
There's a ballet being fought out in the alley
Until the local cops
Cherry Tops
Rips this holy night

The street's alive
As secret debts are paid
Contacts made, they vanish unseen
Kids flash guitars just like switchblades
Hustling for the record machine

The hungry and the hunted
Explode into rock 'n' roll bands
That face off against each other out in the street
Down in Jungleland

In the parking lot the visionaries
Dress in the latest rage
Inside the backstreet girls are dancing
To the records that the DJ plays

Lonely-hearted lovers
Struggle in dark corners
Desperate as the night moves on
Just one look
And a whisper, and they're gone

Beneath the city two hearts beat
Soul engines running through a night so tender
In a bedroom locked

In whispers of soft refusal
And then surrender

In the tunnels uptown
The Rat's own dream guns him down
As shots echo down them hallways in the night
No one watches when the ambulance pulls away

Or as the girl shuts out the bedroom light
Outside the street's on fire
In a real death waltz
Between what's flesh and what's fantasy
And the poets down here
Don't write nothing at all
They just stand back and let it all be

And in the quick of the night
They reach for their moment
And try to make an honest stand
But they wind up wounded
Not even dead
Tonight in Jungleland [8]

In conclusion, having just listened to the song again, I am going to undercut my own argument. I'm not sure the song "works" without the Clarence Clemons saxophone solo. Regardless, if you don't own it or have it on your Spotify playlist, you can hear it [here](#).



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“Bruce Springsteen with earring” at **Bing Images** available at [Springsteen with earring - Search](#) accessed August 11, 2025.

End Notes

1. McWhorter, John, *“Springsteen Isn’t Who I Thought He Was,”* in **The New York Times** (August 7, 2025) available at [Opinion | Springsteen Isn’t Who I Thought He Was - The New York Times](#) accessed August 11, 2025.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Py-Lieberman, Beth, *“How Bruce Springsteen Created the ‘Greatest Rock Album Ever’”* at **Smithsonian Magazine** available at [How Bruce Springsteen Created the ‘Greatest Rock Album Ever’](#) accessed August 11, 2025.
5. Miller, Michael, *“Jungleland”* at **Classic Song of the Day** available at ["Jungleland" \(Bruce Springsteen\) - Classic Song of the Day](#) accessed August 11, 2025.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Springsteen, Bruce, *“Jungleland,”* at **Musixmatch** available at [jungleland lyrics bruce springsteen - Search](#) accessed August 11, 2025.

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