

*Springsteen on Broadway*  
#docuhistory Discussion Questions  
April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020

**Questions to start #docuhistory Twitter discussion:**

1. How do you use music in the history classroom? What assumptions are safe to make about students' existing knowledge about popular music?
2. How can studying the history of popular music in the United States help students to challenge the most conventional narratives about race, class, and gender?
3. Many of Springsteen's songs are stories of South Jersey communities in the 1950s and 1960s as people experienced and responded to painful economic change, racial tension, and cultural conflict between generations. What songs do you use to teach about these historical forces in other cities and regions of the country? Other time periods?

**Suggested questions for teachers to use with students:**

1. In his introduction to "Growing Up" at the very start of the performance, Springsteen tells his audience:

*"Now I come from a boardwalk town where everything is tinged with just a bit of fraud. So am I...I was a guitar player on the streets of Asbury Park, but, I held four clean aces. I had youth, I had a decade of hardcore bar band experience already behind me, I had a great group of musicians and friends who really knew my playing style, and I had a magic trick. Now I'm here tonight to provide proof of life, to that ever-elusive, never completely believable, particularly these days us - that's my magic trick, and like all good magic tricks, it begins with a setup."*

While Springsteen is not exactly the "unreliable narrator," he is forthcoming about his identity as a magician, someone whose stories are a form of autobiographical fantasy.

- How can Springsteen's admission, and the lens it gives us to analyze and appreciate his songs, provide teachers with strategies and methods to teach students to *source* sources in cultural history?
  - How do you teach students to appropriately "trust" artifacts of art (including music, film, literature, mythology, visual arts, etc.) in order to learn from them? What is similar to how you teach students to source other types of primary sources? What's different?
  - If you are teaching with Springsteen in the classroom, what kinds of sources would you encourage students to consult to corroborate his autobiographical accounts?
2. In "My Hometown" and many other of his songs, Springsteen tells the story of growing up in Freehold, New Jersey at a moment in the mid-1960s as "tension was running high at my school" and "troubled times came..." Many of his songs are stories of South Jersey communities in the 1950s and 1960s as people experienced and responded to painful economic change, racial tension, and cultural conflict between generations.

- What details in Springsteen’s depictions can be highlighted to teach the history of racial tension, economic transformation, and social revolt?
  - What songs or do you use to teach about these historical forces in other cities and regions of the country (i.e. Detroit in 1967)?
  - What other sources (i.e. films, documentaries, posters, etc.) do you use to teach these historical forces in this era?
  - What sources would you use to teach social and economic change in other eras? For example, if you were teaching about the economic and social change in and around the time of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, what sources would you use?
3. Springsteen’s songs evoke all the senses: “smell of moist coffee grounds wafting in from the Nescafe plant from town’s eastern edge”; “screen door slams”; “roll down the window and let the wind blow back your hair”; “He had a woman he loved in Saigon / I got a picture of him in her arms, in her arms”; “From a tenement window a transistor blasts”; “Preacher lights up a butt and takes a drag”---this list could go on forever.
- What are some ways that you engage your students’ senses when studying history? What impact do the senses have on student understanding? Their historical empathy?
  - How can Springsteen’s narration in this show be used to introduce students to emergent areas of academic inquiry—sound studies, cultural geography, and so on.
4. Though he has rarely experimented with hip-hip sounds or narratives, Springsteen shares with many rappers a desire to tell stories with extreme local detail (i.e. Wu-Tang Clan’s Staten Island; Lil Wayne’s New Orleans; the Geto Boys’ Houston) and some interest in presenting his music through at least a partially fictionalized persona.
- What rappers can you think of who tell stories of their neighborhood or city?
  - What characters do they “portray” in song? To what effect?