

American Outlaws

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Steven Hyden, *There Was Nothing You Could Do: Bruce Springsteen's "Born In The U.S.A." and the End of the Heartland*. Hachette Books, 272pp., \$32 cloth.

Brian Fairbanks, *Willie, Waylon, and the Boys: How Nashville Outsiders Changed Country Music Forever*. Hachette Books, 464pp., \$32.50 cloth.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN'S 1984 ALBUM *BORN IN THE U.S.A.* is a towering monument of rock history. The album offers an unrelenting progression of seminal songs, from the rousing title track to "Cover Me," "I'm Goin' Down," "Dancing in the Dark" and beyond. Many Springsteen fans count other albums as their personal favorite—I prefer *Darkness on the Edge of Town*—but *Born in the U.S.A.* features such a formidable track list, Steven Hyden notes in his book *There Was Nothing You Could Do*, that it functions as a "de facto 'greatest hits' album."

Born in the U.S.A., Hyden writes, is "undoubtedly" Springsteen's "most iconic record from a pop-culture perspective. It's the album that defines his persona in the broadest sense—the way Bruce sounds, looks, and acts in the popular imagination derives mostly from the *Born in the U.S.A.* era." Hyden is well-positioned to make such a claim. He's an erudite rock critic who has recently written books about Pearl Jam and Radiohead, and is especially skilled at placing a musical act's work in historical and cultural context. In his book about Radiohead, he presented the English band's foreboding 2000 album *Kid A* as a herald of the tribulations of the early 21st century: 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial meltdown, and the tech ascendancy.

In *There Was Nothing You Could Do*, Hyden considers the place of *Born in the U.S.A.* in American culture—especially the conundrum of the title track, a stinging indictment of Vietnam-era

America that many have superficially heard as a full-throated patriotic anthem—and Springsteen’s broader body of work. The author first heard the album on cassette at the age of six. From the opening piano chord of the title track, he recalls hearing a man start to sing. “Actually, he is not singing—he is shouting. I try to make out what he’s saying. He’s been kicked around, I think? He says he’s like a dog that’s been beat too much, which disturbs me. He hollers that he was born in the U.S.A., but he doesn’t sound happy about it.” After one full listen, he writes, he was “officially a Bruce Springsteen fan” and would soon have every song memorized.

Hyden ranges widely, flaunting his musical knowledge. Some of his most insightful commentaries consider Springsteen in relation to other legendary artists, including Elvis Presley. The author sees a predecessor to the *Born in the U.S.A.* phenomenon in a pair of live Elvis recordings from the early 1970s: *As Recorded at Madison Square Garden* and *Aloha from Hawaii via Satellite*.

Elvis, Hyden notes, was then touring “with a conventional rock combo,” along with vocal groups, string and horn sections. “It was the most overwhelming musical presentation by an American rock star,” the author writes, “until Bruce’s own *Born in the U.S.A.* tour.” Hyden alights on “An American Trilogy,” a medley that Elvis performed during both concerts. Elvis turned the trilogy, which consists of three traditional songs, into a performance “as broad, thunderous, and all-encompassing as America itself,” a “vehicle in which he could forge a spiritual heartland...in the context of hammy, melodramatic arena rock.” Springsteen, Hyden argues, would attempt to do much the same in the 1980s.

Hyden also points to Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, another blockbuster of the 1980s, released two years before *Born in the U.S.A.* For “Dancing in the Dark,” the penultimate track of Springsteen’s album, producer Jon Landau told Max Weinberg of the E Street Band “to play the drums like the rhythm track” for Jackson’s “Beat It,” the third single from *Thriller*. Weinberg, Hyden writes, interpreted this directive to mean “no frills,” a “simple bass drum,” “constant hi-hat” and to make it sound like a “dance record.” There was a business parallel between the two albums: *Thriller* had seven top 10 singles released over a 13-month period, a schedule that was consciously designed to turn the album into a “multiyear phenomena.” *Born in the U.S.A.* repeated this strategy—like *Thriller*, it had seven top 10 singles, but the release cycle extended some months longer.

There Was Nothing You Could Do offers a brisk survey of the singles themselves. Hyden labels “Cover Me,” originally written for Donna Summer, as the one with “the most guitar solos,” while “I’m On Fire” is Springsteen’s “most overtly sexual song.” In “I’m Goin’ Down,” Springsteen “profiles a couple on the verge of a breakup,” though his delivery “comes across as a playful flirtation.” The album’s

lead single, “Dancing in the Dark,” is “an infectious synth-pop tune about self-hatred.”

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The author holds a special place in his heart for the concluding track, “My Hometown,” a somber song whose lyrics provide the title to the book. The song addresses 1960s racial strife in Springsteen’s hometown of Freehold, N.J., and father-son relationships. Though comparatively subdued, after the high-octane sequence that precedes it, the song is essential to the album, Hyden argues, providing a thematic capstone first signaled at the start of the record. Hyden reports that, when he returns to his own hometown, he drives past his childhood home while listening to it.

Then there’s the title track. “Born in the U.S.A.,” Hyden writes, is “the most misinterpreted Bruce Springsteen song of all time.” Despite its chorus, the verses tell a damning story of Americans sent to die in a foreign land and left to fend for themselves in their own. Many listeners over the years have heard an entirely different song than the one Springsteen wrote.

Hyden discerns in the song a compromise necessary for a massively popular arena-rock act intending to speak to as large an audience as possible. The song, he suggests, is “designed to be heard in a multitude of ways, and only one of those interpretations aligns with Bruce’s original intent.” Speaking to such a wide fanbase, he continues, means connecting with “people who like you for the wrong reasons,” and that the key to the song and the album’s lasting impact is Springsteen’s “ability to appear progressive and conservative at the same time,” and his willingness to leaven “cultural commentary with party-friendly music.”

Some readers will be more convinced by this line of reasoning than others, as they will by Hyden’s various musical judgments. But the author proves a great enthusiast of Springsteen’s music and American rock in general. Though *Born in the U.S.A.* is the book’s centerpiece, Hyden surveys the arc of Springsteen’s career, exploring the making of earlier albums like *Born to Run*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and *Nebraska* (his discussion of the pared-down

predecessor to *Born in the U.S.A.* is especially well-tuned) and later ones like *Tunnel of Love* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*.

The book's narrative takes in the album's cover photo of Springsteen's backside shot by Annie Leibovitz and Andrea Klein; the music video for "Dancing in the Dark" directed by Brian De Palma and featuring a young Courteney Cox dancing on stage; Springsteen's relationships with the members of the E Street Band; and his various reinventions up to the present day. Devotees of the Boss will feast on the book, though music fans of various persuasions should find much of value in Hyden's account, a passionate and sharply observed work of cultural criticism.

Brian Fairbanks's *Willie, Waylon, and the Boys* begins the day the music died. On February 3, 1959, a chartered plane carrying Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson crashed not long after taking off from Mason City, Iowa, en route to a gig in Moorhead, Minnesota. One of its passengers was supposed to be Holly's bass player, Waylon Jennings, who gave up his seat to a flu-stricken Richardson and then joked to Holly that he hoped the plane crashed. When the plane did so, killing all aboard including the pilot, Jennings was distraught.

"I was just a kid, barely twenty-one," Jennings later said. "I was about halfway superstitious, like all Southern people, scared of the devil and scared of God equally. I was afraid somebody was going to find out I said that, and blame me." Jennings, who would eventually reinvent himself as a country star, is a principal character of Fairbanks's book, which describes how Jennings and peers like Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Johnny Cash and others created outlaw country, defying the strictures imposed by Nashville's country-music establishment.

Fairbanks, an investigative journalist and author, traces the careers of his cast of characters as they struggle to establish themselves as musicians. Nelson and Kristofferson had early breakthroughs as songwriters. Nelson's "Crazy" was turned into a hit by Patsy Cline. Kristofferson, who worked for a spell as a janitor at a Nashville studio, penned a number of tunes, including "Me and Bobby McGee" and "Help Me Make It Through the Night," that appeared on his debut album but became hits for other artists. Nelson returned to his native Texas after a decade in Nashville, and beginning in the early 1970s released a string of legendary Outlaw records including *Shotgun Willie*, *Phases and Stages*, and *Red Headed Stranger*.

The book's pages on Johnny Cash are naturally entertaining. Fairbanks evokes the making of Cash's 1968 live album

At Folsom Prison, performed for an incarcerated audience at a California penitentiary. The author writes:

With his back to the audience, Cash was met by silence. When he whirled, took the mic, and intoned: "Hello, I'm Johnny Cash," the audience roared. Each of the nineteen songs he played seemed carefully chosen for the prison audience. From the literal gallows humor of "25 Minutes to Go," with Cash's ragged voice starting to "go" in tandem with the character's life, to the devastating "Long Black Veil," Cash focused mainly on prison songs, and the inmates mostly cheered in all the right places.

The pioneers of outlaw country, Fairbanks notes, collaborated frequently. The 1976 album *Wanted! The Outlaws* was a compilation of new and old songs featuring Nelson, Jennings, Jessi Colter (who was married to Jennings), and Tompall Glaser. Nelson and Jennings shared a fruitful musical partnership. Jennings's song *Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)* has guest vocals from Nelson, and the two created the 1978 duet album *Waylon & Willie*, scoring a hit with their rendition of "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys."

The Outlaws sure did some hard living. Fairbanks notes that Cash and Jennings at one point shared an apartment in Nashville that functioned as a drug den, replete with hiding places for the stash. Both men had severe pill addictions, while Jennings was partial to cocaine. As late as the early 1980s, one of Jennings's sons recalled, his father would cut a straw, put a half in each nostril, and snort "about every fifteen minutes for three or four days as a time." Nelson always preferred marijuana; Mickey Raphael, who plays harmonica with Nelson's touring Family band, quipped that Nelson felt great after one pot bust because he was six ounces lighter.

A narrative high point of "Willie, Waylon, and the Boys" is the formation of the Highwaymen, a supergroup of Cash, Jennings, Kristofferson, and Nelson. The group released three studio albums from 1985 to 1995. Their debut album was a great commercial and critical success; a personal highlight is its rendition of Cash's "Big River," featuring vocals for each member. "It looked like four shy rednecks trying to be nice to each other," Jennings said of their work together.

In the later sections of his book, Fairbanks surveys an impressive roster of artists who have grown to prominence in the Outlaws' wake, including Jason Isbell, Brandi Carlile, Mickey Guyton, Chris Stapleton, Amanda Shires, Allison Russell, Sturgill Simpson, Kacey Musgraves and many others. Readers who are encountering any of these musicians for the first time will be glad they did so.

Jennings's lifestyle left him in poor health in his final years before his death in 2002. Cash recorded right up until his demise the

following year, not long after the death of his long-time wife June Carter. Kristofferson, who in addition to a country star became a Hollywood actor (he won a Golden Globe for his turn opposite Barbra Streisand in 1976's *A Star Is Born*), retired a few years ago. Nelson is still touring at the age of 91, and appears on Beyoncé's *Cowboy Carter*. All of them, along with the other remarkable characters who populate Fairbanks's lively book, are rollicking fun company as we watch them make music that was born in the U.S.A.