Philosophy Americana
Douglas Anderson

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Beauty will not come at the call of a legislature.... It will come, as always, unannounced, and spring up between the feet of brave and earnest men. It is in vain that we look for genius to reiterate its miracles in the old arts; it is its instinct to find beauty and holiness in new and necessary facts, in the field and road-side, in the shop and mill. Proceeding from the religious heart it will raise to a divine use, the railroad, the insurance office, the joint stock company, our law, our primary assemblies, our commerce, the galvanic battery, the electric jar, the prism, and the chemist’s retort, in which we seek now only an economical use.

(Emerson, “Art,” CW, 2:218)

Mystical experience is an American quest. And because of our habitual attention to place and land, this quest, I think, is more closely oriented toward a Deweyan “sensible mysticism” than toward a traditional otherworldly mysticism. From the Puritans to the Lakota, it is part of the fabric of American cultures. The Buffalo Rose Tavern in Golden, Colorado, is one site of such a quest. An old-time saloon, wood all around, carved, burned, and worn, and tractor-trailer running board chrome metal on the walls of the men’s room. Two old white men playing blues and playing it well in one corner of the room. From the next room one hears the explosion of a motorcycle being brought to life. The smell of burned fuel wafts into the bar, and through the back door roars a metallic royal blue Harley Sportster, chromed to the hilt with a beautiful teardrop fuel tank front and center. On it is a youngish man wearing jeans and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up; an American Beauty tattoo rests on a well-kept left bicep. He parks the Harley in the middle of the floor and shuts it
down. All eyes stay on the bike even as he walks to the bar for a beer—it is a holy moment. The man is the owner of the Buffalo Rose. He is one of many shamans of the ordinary, of a kind of Americana mysticism. We strangers in the bar have been thoroughly reminded of our quest as we gaze on and trail light fingers over the metallic luster. Our attachment to the aesthetic of our roads and road machines runs deeper than a question of art; it runs to the religious, for better or worse. *Easy Rider*, for example, is an exemplary, if failed, white-boy vision quest with sin, conversion, and ultimate loss. One difference between this male Americana mysticism and more traditional brands may be its lack of closure. Ours is a mysticism of growth and possibility, not of enclosure and silence. Our road experiences are not meant to be final, to end questing or questioning; they are meant to lead forth and to illuminate new dimensions of our habits of existence. In Thoreau’s way of thinking, they are ways for staying alive and awake. Moreover, as the Harley Sportster in Golden indicates, they are meant to have a communal dimension, they are meant to be shared. They exhibit the generic traits of what Dewey describes as “religious” and as “qualitatively rich.” This is something perhaps humanly aboriginal or something we have learned, perhaps unwittingly, from American Indians and their land.

We in the United States engage in an initiation into a life of quiet desperation in our twenties. If we have not already become laborers, the end of college will bring us to the cusp of a world in which we risk falling asleep for the rest of our lives. This is the time of life in which Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man* makes sense to everyone, not just the contemporary leftists. Young folks have a good sense of the impending flatness of life. They gradually begin to see that it’s all around them. Experiences of qualitative immediacy—or mysticism—remind us of the reality of possibility, and thus they become the places of potential conversion. We can accept the “facts” and resign ourselves; we can, as Thoreau suggests, come to die and “discover that [we] had not lived.” Or we can seek a conversion of spirit that will give us a heading toward experimental lives, lives that “live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” We can fulfill the
promise of being “born to run.” In “Racing in the Street,” Bruce Springsteen states the contrast starkly:

Some guys they just give up living
And start dying little by little, piece by piece
Some guys come home from work and wash up
And go racin’ in the street.⁴

Springsteen himself “escapes” the streets of Jersey; as Mikal Gilmore says, his “records lifted him from a life of mundane reality and delivered him to a place of bracing purpose.”⁴ But that’s not ultimately what is at stake—or at least it is not all that is at stake. Wherever one is, however one lives, the question is about staying “alive” to the lives we’re already in. The road, the car, the movement are, both rhetorically and literally, modes of keeping ourselves awake. The story is about a life transformation such that, in the words of Lowell George and Little Feat, we are, in spite of being “worked by the rain” and “kicked by the wind,” “willin’ to be movin’”—or, as Chuck Berry plays it, we engage in an undying quest for the “promised land.”⁵

If Dewey was “living on the edge” while we remained blind to it, it is no less difficult to consider the intellectual and spiritual efficacy of those who in their concreteness have every appearance of really “living on the edge.” We can be doubly blind in a culture where the popular and the practical are always held to be in opposition to the intellectual, the significant, and the meaningful. If the Buffalo Rose is one site of an Americana mysticism, another is to be found in the listening we do. Various of our popular musics involve the thoughtful development of qualitative thought and provide for us the conditions of more qualitative immediacy. The music works at two levels for us. On the one hand, it serves as a vehicle to the other sites of conversion I have already pointed to: the road and our road machines, for example. When it works, it is more than nostalgia, more than reminiscence; when it brings us back to these other sites, it can also be a source of empowerment toward conversion and transformation. On the other hand, the music is itself a site of qualitative immediacy and transformation. The music opens spiritual space in our everyday
lives. Our listenings enrich, illuminate, deepen, and broaden our experiences; they convert us and transform us. We prepare ourselves to hear the music, we lose ourselves in its immediacy, and we are brought to reflection in its aftermath. Some of us carry our musical altars with us; some of us make our road machines into inner sanctums of sound; and some of us build listening shrines in bedrooms and living rooms where listening may be undertaken with the attitudes and attentiveness Bugbee suggests are required for full receptivity. And we maintain churches of listening as well, where we congregate for communal experiences of insight. For many of us, the Buffalo Rose might serve as such a church, together with concert halls, clubs, roadhouses, and grassy fields.

When the listening and the road come together, we find some of our most powerful catalysts of conversion. Many popular songs take up the double look that I think pervades much of American philosophical thought—the practical and the mystical. Some are directly reflexive, such as Warren Zevon’s “Mohammed’s Radio,” which captures the late-night glow of electronic life as one loses oneself in listening:

Don’t it make you want to rock ’n’ roll, all night long,
The radio, Mohammed’s radio.
I heard somebody singing sweet and soulful,
On the radio, Mohammed’s radio.

Some reveal our made-world and practices in new guises—note the powerfully aesthetic presence of Madonna when she presents herself as “material girl.” What could this be but a very sophisticated and ironic development of the Beach Boys’ romantic presentations of the American automobile? In this vein we might also note Neil Young’s “Long May You Run,” a haunting, poignantly powerful reminiscence of his relationship with a car and of their travels together:

We’ve been on this road together, with trunks of memory still to come;
we found things to do in rainy weather, long may you run.
Long may you run, long may you run,
Although these changes have come.
With your chrome heart shining in the sun,
Long may you run.$

One exemplary and consummatory moment of this living American tension is the presentation of Springsteen’s “Born to Run.” Here we at once hear and experience the experimental at war with the cultural closures that threaten us with the ordinariness of our ordinary lives. As one Springsteen fan noted with reference to the end of the 1960s: “The peace and love thing is over. We’ve got to take a shot now or settle into the masses.” Springsteen, like Emerson, preaches a gospel of the extraordinary in the ordinary.

This gospel is, however, nuanced and multifaceted. In “Born to Run” and elsewhere, the mysticism to which I here attend is accompanied by social and political concerns, personal difficulties, and the ongoing erosion of someone’s version of the “American dream.” This is an old story in American thought. American thinkers are repeatedly cast as naïve optimists and lightweight romantics—Emerson, Margaret Fuller, William James, and so on. Yet none of them overlooked the harshness of experiences in America; their mystical tendencies are born in these experiences, not as a one-time panacea but as an avenue to a way of living in and through the devastations that constitute our human lives. It’s an awakening call, not a lethe for forgetfulness. This seems true of Springsteen as well.

When Springsteen first appeared, his sound spread like a rippling rumble out of the summer heat of northern New Jersey. The word had gotten several hundred miles out by the mid-1970s—Boston, Philadelphia, D.C. “Born to Run,” played live for ten straight years, became our lived experience. Calling up our collective images of Chaplin, the depression, Woody Guthrie, the Beats, Dylan as Chaplinesque, and post-hippie working-/lower-/middle class America, Springsteen drove his punch line home: “tramps like us, Baby, we were born to run.” Born to run as the American wanderers, frontier crossers, runners on the Underground Railroad, Whitmans, Wobblies, right up to Kerouac’s “vanishing American hobo” whom we met in chapter 5:
The American hobo has a hard time hoboing nowadays due to the increase in police surveillance of highways, railroad yards, sea shores, river bottoms, embankments and the thousand-and-one hiding holes of the industrial night.—In California, the pack rat, the original old type who goes walking from town to town with supplies and bedding on his back, the “Homeless Brother,” has practically vanished, along with the ancient gold-panning desert rat who used to walk with hope in his heart through struggling Western towns that are now so prosperous they don’t want old bums anymore."  

What the Beats learned as they sought a 1950s version of the frontier experience was that there was nowhere left to go. The old Turneresque anarchy of the American West was by this time almost completely fenced in. San Francisco led only back to New York, and vice versa. Having traveled with Kerouac as Cody and Dean in *Visions of Cody* and *On the Road*, Neal Cassady went on to drive for Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters and the Grateful Dead. Acid, together with a host of other pharmaceuticals, became gateways to the last American frontier: the internal roads and highways. As Anthony DeCurtis suggests, the decadence of the Eagles’ “Hotel California” marked the consummatory acknowledgment of this end-of-frontier phenomenon:  

*Hotel California* is a clear-eyed, wistful examination of California as the last stop on the American journey westward, the country’s destiny manifest then foreclosed. Novelist Joseph Conrad used the term “fascination of the abomination” to describe the hypnotic power that self-destruction can exert on the soul, and that phrase well suits *Hotel California’s* depiction of a gorgeous paradise—the geographical end point of American aspiration—transformed into a sunny hell of satisfying pleasure.  

Not everyone accepted the “fascination of the abomination” or the tempered lives of the Eagles. Back east, things were earthy and real in a non–Californian way. One was born to run in Jersey like a well-tuned Camaro, experienced as machinery perfection and treated like one of the family . . . or better. If the hippies had traded in their Woodies for VW buses, the idea of the American-made car never left
north Jersey. As New England bluesman George Gritzbach celebrates in song, not without irony: “It’s an American car, goes fast, not far.”

Born to run from routine, the ruts of school and work that constituted “the streets of a runaway American dream.” Born to run toward some ineffable human perfection hiding in the neon possibilities of strip mall nights.

“Born to Run” brings me face to face with a mysticism of the ordinary, white, northern U.S. male of the 1970s—the length of its experiential reach is left up to other listeners. We do not all find our mystical experiences in the same places. But of these Jersey mystics one can say our sweetest experiences are in the streets, where we are free to seek consummations: our music, our cars, our bonds of dress and style, our shared but often hidden longings and yearnings for openness. One can hear the echo of Emerson’s earlier remarks:

> Nature, as we know her, is no saint. . . . She comes eating and drinking and sinning. Her darlings, the great, the strong, the beautiful, are not children of our law, do not come out of the Sunday School, nor weigh their food, nor punctually keep commandments. . . . We must set up the strong present tense against all rumors of wrath, past or to come. (CW, 3:37)

Springsteen shows us and tells us this presence on the highway and in the streets—he enacts our own mystical experiences: “At night we ride through mansions of glory in suicide machines.” That death is a possibility, a lure, suggests the most radical of freedoms in a world of 7-to-3 jobs. “Sprung from cages out on highway nine, chrome wheeled, fuel injected and steppin’ out over the line.” Distinctions between car and person are blurred. Here are our possibilities—work is done, no families call us home, we find ourselves, a community on the highway. We bring our aesthetic with us. No one who has not seen the intensity of young men and chromed cars can understand the richly attentive aesthetic attitude of our culture. Even as we construct theories for their salvation or elimination, we intellectuals often thoughtlessly dismiss the lower middle classes as “tramps,” as “trash,” white and otherwise, as “blue-collared” and aesthetically de-
based. In our liberal colleges and universities we try to cure them of their social habits without first seeing and exploring the depth of their interests and commitments.

The chrome, the engines, the interior, the leather, the tires provide an imaginative potentiality for excellence and freedom, sometimes ironically, as in Tracy Chapman’s “Fast Car,” where the “guy’s” fast car promises freedom but leads only to more of the same masculine infancy and degeneracy. But stereotyping street mysticism as de-based misses the experiential transformations that can and do occur. The fact that John Wayne’s Ethan Edwards character in The Searchers is unredeemed does not tell the story for all whose lives play out in the possibilities available in the immediacy of American life. The city and suburb have come to imprison us more by routine than by lock and key: “Baby, this town rips the bones from your back / It’s a death trap, it’s a suicide rap / We gotta get out while we’re young. . . .” The key is the open possibility of youth, not yet held down, not yet fully co-opted. In the American seventies, Springsteen still sees, though only dimly, the ability to escape Marcuse’s one-dimensional man who is doomed to an Archie Bunker status.

But we see the “death trap” encroaching on our existence. We know in an immediate way what pragmatists Dewey and Peirce, quite independently, maintained: that greed for money and security leads to closure, not growth. The “dreams and visions” of “Wendy”—at least as they are imagined—become the young man’s most cherished hope. But they appear, as always, attached to sexual impulse and release as the young Jersey boy again becomes his machine: “Just wrap your legs round these velvet rims and strap your hands ‘cross my engines.” In the immediacy of the impulse and release, as Springsteen pounds at us, then moderates his voice to a smooth cruising speed, we find ourselves at the edge, in an experience, had experience: “Together we could break this trap, / we’ll run ’til we drop, baby, but we’ll never go back; / Will you walk with me out on the wire?”

The hadness of this immediacy against the background of the “hard” American male from James Dean to John Wayne to “Cool Hand Luke” to the “Boss” himself has to be shared—“’Cause, Baby,
I’m just a scared and lonely rider, / But I gotta find out how it feels.”

The obvious, what we all know and have known, the façade of the “lone ranger”—the American male, machine at hand, able to make, build, construct, and overcome—is vulnerable, lonely, and sensitive. On the negative side of the ledger, this generates an insecurity that leads to perpetual domineering. This is why, or at least one reason why, as we noted earlier, Tammy Wynette in her classic hit “Stand by Your Man” says, “after all, he’s just a man.” On the affirmational side, the American male feels. James Dean, Marlon Brando, and the “Fonz” all have Jonathan Edwards’s “sense of the heart.” There is a part of this boy-soul that still holds out for religious possibility—for redemption and a transformed life. Springsteen closes “Racing in the Street” with just such a hope for redemption:

Tonight, tonight the highway’s bright, Out of my way, mister, you best keep
For summer’s here and the time is right for racing in the street.
For all the shut down strangers and hot rod angels, searchin’ for the promised land
Tonight my baby and me we’re gonna ride to the sea, and wash these sins from off our hands.

The male, machine–artist maker is all about qualitative immediacy. He is sensitive; he is caring, in his own twisted ways; and he is aesthetic all the way down: “I want to know if love is wild, girl, I want to know if love is real.” A key in this transactional enterprise is that Wendy “knows,” just as W. E. B. DuBois knows in The Souls of Black Folk. DuBois describes a veil through which the African American can see white culture, but which the eyes of white culture can’t penetrate. Similarly, Wendy knows where the love is wild and real. She knows the insecurity of the man and its dual potencies: for tragic failure or mystical redemption. The Jersey woman, looking through the veil, sees and sees through the American male. But the male cannot see back through, at least not clearly. Feminists as early as Margaret Fuller painted this picture for us, but the residual blindness of the American male is legendary and seems to know few limits. Yet Wendy, too, has
dreams and visions, and likewise hopes to circumvent the traps of middle-class life. Perhaps she sees a shared mystical transformation as one avenue of escape, but we men never hear her voice in its fullness; perhaps it is the voice of Joan Jett or some incarnation of Madonna. In a fascinating and illuminating twist, the song reveals a larger picture than even its protagonist can see; Springsteen shows Wendy looking through the veil even as Springsteen himself glorifies the young man’s quest for immediacy. He acknowledges both the potential social damage and the transformative possibilities. He does want to know if love is real, but it’s not clear, at least in 1975, that he’ll live with it even if it is real.

Like the America closing in on Kerouac’s hobo, the roles of the Jersey street are fixed in their own way. The questing roads establish another level of routine and entrapment: “Beyond the Palace hemi-powered drones scream down the boulevard.” The energy, loud, vibrant, living machinery, bring us to our senses, as Thoreau used to say. We literally awaken and come alive in the thundering streets. But Springsteen hints that this catalytic moment can itself become routine. The “girls”—not behind the wheel—“comb their hair in rear-view mirrors, / And the boys try to look so hard.” They “try.” It seems apparent that things can break in one of two directions. One may take up the street or road life in a habitual way that simply displaces the entrapment from one mode to another. Or one may actually catch the liberating, awakening spirit and engage in the conversion process that presents itself as a possibility. If one finds this avenue open, Springsteen seems to suggest, there is an initiation to the Jersey vision quest, to love on the streets, to the mystical experience to be had in American towns and cities. As he sings elsewhere, one must catch “the spirit of the night” or slide back into deadening routine.

As the night presses on, not unlike the slow decrescendo in George Lucas’s American Graffiti, Springsteen shows us the haunting background of our drive toward immediacy. In later hours, the electric charge and heat wave give way to a Meister Eckhardt–like landscape that is still part of the consummatory experience. The immediacy ei-
ther edges us toward freedom or we are left with just a taste of consummation as the cool ambiguity of morning dawns on us. “The amusement park rises bold and stark” as a symbol of the limits of an achievement—amusement falls short of qualitative immediacy. The roller coaster is a cheap imitation of the truth on the streets. “Kids are huddled on the beach in a mist” as the fire goes out of the night and out of the loins, and our shaman tries to hang on to his immediacy, to “die with you Wendy on the streets tonight, in an everlasting kiss.” A no less powerful dream has pushed us before: the Puritan’s errand in the wilderness, the mountain man’s search for an absolute freedom, the pioneer’s quest for the extraordinary, the Sooner’s dreams of ownership, the Okie’s hopes of a future in California, and the African American’s dreams of real and lived civil rights and civil existence. The mysteries are in our experiences, as are our conversions and transformations.

But Springsteen, like Thoreau, like DuBois, like Jack Kerouac, and like culturally marginal and provocative feminists bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa, leaves it on the highway, on the road. However important and central are our qualitative immediacies and mystical experiences and moments of disclosure, revelation, revolution, and awakening, they are transitional. As William James aptly put it, “experience grows by its edges.” With Huddie Ledbetter, Robert Johnson, and Woody Guthrie, we’re always “on the road again.” And like Jerry Garcia, we are taught again and again “what a long strange trip it’s been.”

As we, in apparent franticness, pass through the possibilities of youth, mysticism seems to lose its force as an option: “The highway’s jammed with broken heroes on a last chance power drive; / Everybody’s out on the run tonight, but there’s no place left to hide.” Ours is not a culture of older and wiser. If, as Thoreau argues in “Walking,” “in wildness is the salvation of the world,” then we must never relinquish all the features of our youth. The music, when it is something more than “classic” or nostalgic, is a lingering trace of wildness. We must achieve a streak of mysticism and wildness in our everyday being—this is an American mysticism. “Together, Wendy, we’ll live
with the sadness, / I'll love you with all the madness in my soul.” We see (and hear) something of this enacted every year on Memorial Day in the “Rolling Thunder” commemoration of Vietnam veterans in Washington, D.C.; Harley riders from across the United States congregate to throttle up a salute to veterans that can be heard well up and down the Potomac.

Springsteen sings some truths of the male, American street life in all their confusion, contradiction, and capacity for revelation. This includes a telic ending, the ongoing promise that has driven our culture since its inception. Consummation without closure, but with promise of even richer consummation, is our inheritance and, perhaps, our bequest. Though to bequeath it, we must in some fashion live it. Somehow we must remain in the street and on the road. In Springsteen’s version of a sensible mysticism, however, like that of Kerouac and the Beats and unlike that of Dewey, remaining on the road is inevitably accompanied by the undercurrents of the sadness and madness he mentions. Mystical transformations must live dialectically with brooding and suffering.

Various worries about what I propose in thinking of “Born to Run” and mysticism will easily, if not naturally, arise. Complaints and constraints seem inevitable and, to some extent, reasonable—worries of romanticism, of chauvinism, and of appealing to the naïveté of youth. I think it is possible to acknowledge the truths of such complaints and still see something of vast significance at work—Walt Whitman’s democratic vision is one that I think Springsteen and those for whom he sings might easily and naturally embrace. This is a reason to find and develop the powers of Americana mysticism, not to suppress them because of their accidental attributes. Since what I’ve had to say in these few pages is more like a haiku wandering than an argument, I end with two “Conclusions,” whose unintended coincidence speaks, I hope, for itself:

Someday, girl, I don’t know when, we’re gonna go to that place
Where we really want to go,
And we’ll walk in the sun,
But ’til then, tramps like us, Baby, we were born to run.
(Springsteen, “Born to Run”)
So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank side in autumn. (Thoreau, “Walking”)