Renegades

What’s in it for me? Listen in on some fascinating conversations between two American icons.

In the summer of 2020, Bruce Springsteen and Barack Obama sat down for a series of wide-ranging conversations. Maybe you know about this. These conversations became a podcast. This podcast was turned into a book, Renegades. Now you’re reading these blinks. It’s an odd world we live in. But what were these conversations all about? And why did they take place at all? Springsteen is from New Jersey. Obama is from Hawaii, the other side of the country. Springsteen is white. Obama is Black mixed-race. Obama is a politician. Springsteen is a rockstar. Oh, and, as Barack will gladly tell you, he’s more than a decade younger than Bruce. On a superficial level, they could hardly be more different. Still, they’re pals. On Obama’s campaign trail, Springsteen played a few shows; Springsteen has spent time at the White House, more than once. Even their wives get along. So sitting down in front of a couple microphones and talking about the things that matter most – well, it not only felt like a good idea. It felt natural. These blinks – there are six of them – condense those conversations. Obama and Springsteen talked about many things: fatherhood, music, work, race. But the central theme of these conversations, and this is perhaps what drew these two men to one another in the first place, is a shared commitment – a commitment to being honest about America’s problems and pointing the country toward a better future. It’s that commitment – that commitment to facing tough truths and fighting for brighter tomorrows – that made these men (and still makes them) renegades. In these blinks, you’ll learn

that Springsteen and Obama have a lot in common; why Obama remains hopeful about the future; and who Springsteen and Obama name as their personal heroes.

Two Sides of the Country

So Springsteen and Obama are connected by lofty ideals – that commitment to facing the facts and building a better future. But that’s not all they’ve got in common. For starters, these two men, raised on opposite sides of America, were both fortunate enough to have strong mothers. It was their mothers, not their fathers, who were dependable, supportive, always there. It was their mothers who were the rocks in the family. Springsteen’s father was silent, more of a stone than a rock. He was a veteran of World War II, “a truck driver at the Battle of the Bulge,” as Springsteen puts it. But the silence – Springsteen never broke through it, never felt that he really knew his father. When Springsteen was much older, he sat his father down, asked him questions, tried to get him to tell his story on camera. The conversation was over in a matter of minutes. Complicating things further, his father had a history of schizophrenia. He jumped from job to job. And his mental illness only got worse with age. So mom was the rock. She had the steady job. And Springsteen relied on her for many things – but because she had to work, he was largely unsupervised, free to roam the streets, free to do as he wished. Obama’s life looked different. He wasn’t skipping school or roaming any streets. But, like Springsteen, he relied on his mom. She was the source of love and stability in Obama’s family – just as Springsteen’s mom was in his. You see, Obama’s parents separated less than three years after he was born. He had a stepfather for a while, from

age six to ten, but for the most part it was him and his mother. She was caring, loving, kind, and, though she was white, she raised him to feel confident and proud, comfortable in his own skin. This was important. In Hawaii, there weren't many people who looked like Obama, and he felt like an outsider. Not that skin color is the only thing that can make you feel out of place. Springsteen was surrounded by people who more or less resembled him, and he also felt like a misfit. Even as a kid, Springsteen knew that his situation was peculiar. Other children had more structure, stability, and guidance. They weren't allowed to come and go as they pleased. They weren't allowed to stay up late. Their lives were governed by rules – something that Springsteen's life definitely lacked. As a result, Springsteen felt adrift: he had nowhere to fit in and no path forward. Obama has a term for what Springsteen experienced as a child, his feelings of being on the outside. He calls it "emotional displacement." But, then again, wasn't America founded by misfits, outsiders, and the displaced? Isn't part of what makes America great the fact that it's a place where people from every walk of life can come to start anew? Certainly, that's what Obama was talking about in his speech to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery marches. And it's also what Springsteen likes to sing about. So, maybe the friendship between these two guys isn't so unlikely after all. They're connected by lofty ideals, sure – by their vision of a country undivided, their belief in the promise of the future. But they're also connected by their past experiences, and by the promises that their country may not have lived up to.

Two Critical Patriots

In the summer of 1967, violent riots broke out in cities across America. There were riots in Cincinnati, in Detroit, in Atlanta, in Boston. Racial tension in the United States had been building for generations – but that year it overflowed, culminating in months of upheaval and unrest. It came to be called the "long hot summer of '67." There were riots in Newark, New Jersey, too, and these spilled over into Springsteen's hometown, Freehold. State troopers were called in to quell the violence. Springsteen was 17 at the time, but he still remembers their arrival. Even then, he had no illusions about Freehold, a town that was – and these are his words – "small, provincial, redneck, racist." In Asbury Park, a neighboring town, the Black population was all but barred from getting work – a state of affairs that led to further riots in 1970. Yet, for a couple years around 1974, Springsteen's band, the E Street Band, was half Black, half white – three Black guys and three white guys. One of those guys was Davey Sancious. He was only 16 years old, he was Black, and he'd earned his place in the band by standing in front of a white audience at the Upstage Club and blowing everyone away. Actually, the E Street Band got its name from the street Sancious lived on – E Street, in Belmar, New Jersey. By the mid-'70s, both Obama and Springsteen knew that something was going on in America: a national reassessment, a countrywide reckoning. There was a general sense that, in the Vietnam War, America had lost both its innocence and its moral righteousness – qualities that, in the wake of World War II, had seemed indisputable. The race riots and the Watergate scandal made this loss more apparent still. Springsteen wanted to write about it. Or, rather, he needed to write about it. The country's moral compass was spinning, and Springsteen found himself reassessing his place in the world. He was in the middle of a reckoning of his own. On a musical level, he was interested in taking the fundamental rock-and-roll elements of the 1950s and '60s – the screaming girls, the fast cars – and updating them, shading them with the darker outlook of the 1970s. In his songs, he created characters suspended in uncertainty. Where were they going? What were they facing? What changes lay ahead?

In a way, Springsteen helped define the America that he attempted to portray in his music. And his vision broadened and deepened as he saw more of the country. You may be surprised to learn that Springsteen, with his song about driving a stolen car down Eldridge Avenue, didn't learn to drive until he was in his mid-20s. It took landing a gig in California, on the other side of the United States, to finally push him to get behind the wheel. This personal vision of America is another thing that Springsteen and Obama have in common. What Bruce does with music, Barack does with politics. Both love their country, but they're what Obama calls "critical patriots." They point to the problems – be it the racial divides or the damaging effects of capitalism on the American Dream.

American Values

Speaking of capitalism, making money was never the goal – not for Springsteen and not for Obama. So they weren't really in tune with the zeitgeist of 1980s America, which can maybe best be summed up by the motto "greed is good." When Barack told people that his post-college ambition was to become a community organizer, the common response was polite confusion. [pause] Springsteen experienced the peak of his commercial success in the 1980s. Remember, he's a decade older. So the money was pouring in – but Springsteen felt conflicted about his newfound wealth. Instead of happiness, there was a fair amount of guilt and self-hatred. It took him awhile to work through those feelings. But many other Americans in the 1980s were taking the "greed is good" motto to heart. And at the same time, President Reagan was shrinking the government, eliminating federal programs and cutting federal jobs, making it harder for working-class people to improve their station in life. The income gap began to widen. Though Springsteen is around ten years older than Obama, both were well aware of the harmful changes that occurred during the Reagan era, when people began to value money above all else. Shows like Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous were beaming the decade's motto into households across the country, at all hours of the day. Greed is good. Greed is good. Valuing money does not bring feelings of satisfaction and wholeness in life. Both men knew this. And both of them, each in his own way, modeled, and continue to model, a competing system of American values. Money, their lives suggest, isn't the only way to gain status. There are other ways. Music is one. Politics is another. And life satisfaction and fulfillment – things that money simply can't buy – can be found elsewhere. Being a good friend. Being a good neighbor. Becoming a valued member of your community. These are the things – not capital gains – that are truly important, the ingredients that'll add up to a full, meaningful life. Ever since he played his first gig, Springsteen has been after that wholeness, that feeling of fulfillment. Like a lot of people, he's seeking redemption and salvation. And that's something money has never delivered. Redemption, salvation – those are big words. But they're the result of mundane actions, of run-of-the-mill heroism. Being a good husband, being a good father, being of service to others: these are the ways to redeem, to save yourself. Not making millions of dollars. This message is central to the work of both men. Right now, we're bombarded with advertisements. Social media invites you to compare yourself to others, to compare your wealth to theirs, to compare your material possessions to theirs. But Springsteen and Obama strive to put forward a different set of values – a way of looking at what's important that has nothing to do with money.

The Man I Want to Be

When two guys start talking about values and American identity, it's almost inevitable:

they'll start talking about what it means to be a man. How do we define masculinity these days? What's changed, what hasn't? Springsteen and Obama are old enough to remember Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne – tough-talking, hard-living actors who personified American masculinity during the first half of the twentieth century. These were the strong and silent type – guys who smoked and drank and were more likely to throw a punch than to shed a tear, not to mention apologize or admit to making a mistake. Now, men aren't only shaped by societal models. They're also shaped by the form of masculinity that their fathers model. But Springsteen and Obama both missed out on this modeling, at least for the most part. Springsteen's dad died without ever really having talked to him. Obama's dad wasn't around to begin with, though he did visit once when Obama was 10. By the time Obama was 21, though, his father had died in a car accident. As Obama puts it, they both ended up "wrestling with ghosts." It took Springsteen a long time to turn that ghost into an ancestor, someone who walks alongside you instead of haunting you. It was a difficult process. His father and the prevailing ideas around masculinity led him to believe that family and romantic relationships don't strengthen you, they weaken you. They tie you down, take away your independence. Eventually though, in 1984, Patti Scialfa joined the E Street Band, and in 1991 – after a long courtship that required Springsteen to become comfortable with the idea of change – they got married. He realized that Scialfa was a positive influence, the kind of person who, if he allowed it to happen, could help him achieve that wholeness he was after. Obama, on the other hand, was used to having strong, opinionated women in his life – thanks to his mom and his grandmother. So he expected women to challenge him, and that's certainly part of what made Michelle so attractive when he met her in Chicago, in 1989. Michelle never shied away from pushing Obama to ask himself important questions. Who was he? What did he want? What were his expectations, and why? This was the kind of woman he knew he needed in his life. Still, Obama wasn't immune to the expectations around masculinity. At school, he thought that masculinity was judged by things like how well you could play sports, how much you could drink, and how high you could get. It's a shame – both men agree – that even though America has begun to question the legitimacy of the John Wayne-style male role model, a lot of these expectations still persist.

Breaking Through the Filter

So we have two guys – both admittedly getting on in years – who are striving to tell a new kind of American story. Through music, through politics, these two want to bring together a divided country and help the nation rise up as a whole. But is this even possible in this day and age? Obama recognizes the severity of the challenge. There are hundreds upon hundreds of different social-media feeds and news outlets, each simultaneously fueled by and adding fuel to people's anger and resentments. Extremists on both sides have their own devoted channels, protecting them from any sort of conflicting messages. Obama has a pretty good story about just how sheltered people can be if they only watch Fox News. During his second term, he visited South Dakota, an area that had been staunchly Republican for some time. He was giving a commencement speech at a community college, as part of his campaign to promote schools that were training people for immediate jobs. One of the reporters in the White House press pool decided to visit a local bar, where people were watching the speech live on television. Normally, the local news wouldn't broadcast an Obama speech. But because he was visiting their town, there he was on their television sets. As he got into his speech, one of the patrons turned to the reporter and said, "Is this how Obama usually sounds?" To which the reporter said, yeah, this is pretty typical for him. What's

remarkable is that entire communities can have a filter that is so powerful that even the president of the United States – who, by the way, had been in office for six years at that point – quite literally isn't heard unless he shows up, in person, to speak in your hometown. Can a message of unification penetrate this filter and actually succeed? Both Springsteen and Obama trace this divide back to the Nixon era. Nixon spoke of "the silent majority," by which he meant a certain type of true American who didn't take part in protests or criticize the country. Since that time, the division has only grown more stark as the idea of them-versus-us has become the guiding principle of modern politics. Plus, people now have their own personalized news channels and don't even watch the same shows on television anymore. There's little opportunity to unify. Still, there are reasons to be hopeful, and some of those reasons rest upon the younger generations – the ones furthest removed from the concept of the "silent majority." Obama points to the fact that, in the last election, voters aged 35 and under were overwhelmingly in favor of a united vision of America. So even though the America we see today seems to be defined by division, maybe the America of the future will be better and brighter and more unified.

The Greatest American Heroes

Over the course of Obama's tenure in the White House, he hosted a six-year series known as "In Performance at the White House." It featured legendary performers like Tony Bennett, Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson, and Bob Dylan; classical musicians like Joshua Bell; singer-songwriters like Diana Krall, Joan Baez, and Lyle Lovett; as well as contemporary acts like India Arie, John Legend, and Janelle Monáe. All of this is to say, it's no secret that Obama has a broad range of tastes when it comes to music. And during their conversations, Springsteen and Obama spent a good deal of time talking about their shared love of music. This led to a discussion of heroes, both musical and otherwise. For Bruce, it starts with Bob Dylan. Obama can't argue – in fact, he compares Dylan to Pablo Picasso. Both artists had long careers, and neither settled on one specific style. They always tried to keep innovating. Speaking of innovation, Bruce also has to tip his hat to James Brown. As he sees it, without James Brown, there'd be no hip-hop. For Barack, it begins with Ray Charles. He considers Charles's rendition of "America the Beautiful" to be the unofficial anthem of the United States. He also points to Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin. Both men agree that the five albums released consecutively by Stevie Wonder in the 1970s are so perfect that they could stand up against any five albums from any other artist, ever. Just talking heroes in general, outside of music, Springsteen gives top honors to Muhammad Ali. This leads Obama into a moment of tribute to Jackie Robinson, who he notes was not only able to make Black Americans proud, but was able to make white Americans see Black people differently. Many white folks have spoken to Obama about what it meant to see young white kids or their fathers rooting for a Black athlete for the first time. It was a transformative moment. While Obama also mentions Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X, he feels it's important to mention people who aren't so mythologized and larger-than-life. People like Bob Moses, Ella Baker, C. T. Vivian, and Fred Shuttlesworth. These people never got the recognition that others did, but they were no less vigilant in fighting for what they believed in during the civil rights movement. Obama often finds more inspiration in these less lauded people than in the icons everyone knows about. But Obama can't help but drop one of the big names: Abraham Lincoln. A guy who came from absolute poverty. A guy who used the Bible and Shakespeare to teach himself how to read – and who then turned himself into one of the country's greatest writers. Lincoln wasn't without his flaws; he didn't see white and Black Americans as being equal. But

he did an amazing job of wrestling with this question and asking, “Are we going to be a truly free nation or not?” Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address is another inspiration, and a reason to carry hope for America’s future. It’s also an uplifting note to end these blinks on. Here are his words: “Let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds . . . to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Final summary

While their biographies might appear to have little in common, Bruce Springsteen and Barack Obama are actually cut from the same cloth. What Springsteen aims to do with music, Obama strives to do with politics: unite a divided nation and point people toward a better set of values.