

Building Communities: Springsteen and Pakistan

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by Ahmed Rashid

After thirty years of wanting to, I finally attended a Bruce Springsteen concert this summer, at Madison Square Garden. For a journalist born and based in Pakistan who has carried Springsteen's music everywhere over the years, from war zones to weddings, it was a mind-blowing experience. The music, the energy, the wall of sound, the dancing on the stage, the camaraderie and professionalism of the E Street Band— aspects of Springsteen's performances that David Remnick captured in [his recent Profile](#)—added up to the total fulfillment of a desire to see him live I'd held since first hearing his music, while travelling in Europe some three decades ago. Watching Bruce, I thought that I understood, for the first time, something that is distant to those on the periphery of the world of Western dance halls. Everyone in the audience was standing the whole three and a half hours of the concert, everyone was singing along together, and everyone knew all the words of the songs—even those of his latest album, "Wrecking Ball," which had only been out a few weeks. And by "everyone" I mean from teen-agers to grandmothers.

What Springsteen epitomizes is the meaning and power of American culture—and that is community. Through his music and his earthiness Bruce builds a community of people who share every beat of his guitar, who partake ever so briefly in the life of the artist but who share that with millions of other people. I thought about how General Zia ul-Haq, during his awful and brutal dictatorship, from 1977 to 1988, banned any public gathering of five or more people. That, of course, ended any hope of cultural performances. It's part of his legacy that even today, as Pakistan's youth culture flourishes with filmmaking, music, drama, and art, there are no proper venues or halls to perform plays, concerts, or dance. Much of the circulation of culture here is done through YouTube and private gatherings. Springsteen himself is hugely popular with millions of Pakistanis working or studying abroad, and young people at home who see his performances on social media. It is a crying shame that a country of a hundred and eighty million, home to some of the biggest cities in the world, has no large purpose-built modern auditorium where Springsteen-scale performances can take place.

I say this with an acute sense of loss, because in Pakistan and so many other countries of the world a community built through culture has always been a threat to the status quo, to the military dictatorships, and to the wealthy—those who believe their position would be undermined with democracy and freedom of expression. In many Muslim societies there is the added problem of cultural segregation, with men and women often unable to hear or see each other's dance and music. In Afghanistan, Pakistan's neighbor, the Taliban have executed women who dared to dance at a family wedding. But such restrictions are not really about Islam—it's about how those in power wish to prevent the building of a culture and with a certain sense of shared responsibility. Today there is the problem of local Islamic extremists and terrorists who would try to prevent any concert taking place in any major city. The threat alone scares many people away from participatory culture.

Culture is all about strengthening civil society, building a community of people with shared values, strengthening the bonds between generations. Rightly or wrongly, America dominates world culture, but no cultural expression explains its power so well as rock music does. (In contrast, Hollywood movies or HBO TV series are ultimately more about enjoying spectacle and drama in the privacy of your own home and mind than about sharing them with the community.) It is about partaking of a cultural event in the company of others: bringing the maximum number of people into a venue, performing for them, and allowing them to go home with the feeling that they have shared something with other human beings. We want to hug the guy we are standing next to, we want to talk to people we don't know, we want to keep singing the songs as we leave the theatre, and when the harsh reality of the street hits us we want every taxi driver to turn into an angel while we keep talking to strangers.

This is what Springsteen does for me and for many others. Like no other rock musician—perhaps since the early Bob Dylan—Springsteen builds a wall of friendship and shared longing for American society to come together instead of splintering apart, as it is doing. He temporarily bridges the generation gap, the class divide, and the wealth gap. In other words, his music builds communities of people who want to realize their responsibility to each other. There are several Pakistani pop singers, such as Ali Zafar or Atif Aslam, who could aspire to play such a role if there were the opportunities, the venues, and the support from the state and society.

Remnick makes the point that the liberal left have always confused a musician's words and music with his politics. Bob Dylan was castigated first for dropping the acoustic guitar for the electric guitar and then for turning away from anti-Vietnam War songs and folk music to rock music. Springsteen, the working-class boy turned billionaire, is often criticized for an allegedly fake concern for people's welfare. However, what is important for these icons is their music not their overt political stands; I don't expect Springsteen to sing songs about the war in Afghanistan, but he does touch all important social bases for an American public. I do have the sense from his songs that his heart is in the right place and that he rejects violence—that the community his music builds is one of shared hopes and human values.

As a reporter who has covered wars for thirty-two years—the numerous wars in Afghanistan and Central Asia and the bloody violence in Pakistan— I have always taken Springsteen with me, whether in the shape of early cassette tapes or today's CDs. I would always play him at night after a day of watching people kill each other, and I would play him loud. Strangely, the thump of rock, the wall of sound, his gruff, aching voice were always immensely soothing. I wanted to go out into the streets and let the warriors battling it out there hear his music.