



Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band performing in Toronto, Canada, in February 2016.

# TUNE INTO ENGLISH Bruce Springsteen's

## Born in the U.S.A.



Più che un inno rock, il classico del New Jersey è una critica pungente al trattamento riservato ai veterani della guerra del Vietnam; una storia di disillusione e fallimento.

One of the most **misinterpreted**<sup>1</sup> songs in rock music history, Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.* is **heavily**<sup>2</sup> critical of his country, with particular reference to the **after-effects**<sup>3</sup> of the Vietnam War. First recorded two years before its 1984 **release**<sup>4</sup>, it was initially an acoustic blues track called *Vietnam*, inspired by veteran Rob Kovic's autobiography *Born on the Fourth of July*. An instantly-identifiable heavy rock riff leads to the opening verse which immediately indicates this is not a patriotic **anthem**<sup>5</sup> but a **tale**<sup>6</sup> of disillusionment and alienation - the iconic chorus is therefore **bitterly**<sup>7</sup> ironic.

The second verse reflects US policy at the time, when young **offenders**<sup>8</sup> were

sent to fight in Vietnam **in lieu**<sup>9</sup> of prison time. The third verse tells of their return, when veterans were unable to find work and were given very little support. The next verse refers to the many active soldiers who fell in love with Vietnamese girls, with the final verse highlighting how many veterans ended up in prison or with no prospects.

Despite its **biting**<sup>10</sup> lyrics, the song was famously used (without Springsteen's consent) by Ronald Reagan in his 1984 presidential campaign, with one contemporary review unperceptively and incorrectly describing it as a "straight-ahead"<sup>11</sup> anthem that celebrates America's traditional values and the common man." ☺



SCAN, READ & LISTEN  
03

LOWER INTERMEDIATE B1

### GLOSSARY

- 1 **to misinterpret:** interpretare male
- 2 **heavily:** profondamente
- 3 **after-effects:** conseguenze
- 4 **release:** uscita, pubblicazione
- 5 **anthem:** inno
- 6 **tale:** storia, racconto
- 7 **bitterly:** molto, davvero
- 8 **offenders:** delinquenti
- 9 **in lieu:** al posto di
- 10 **biting:** pungente
- 11 **straight-ahead:** diretto
- 12 **to take a kick:** prendere un calcio
- 13 **landing:** atterraggio
- 14 **hiring man:** reclutatore, persona che assume

**dead man's town:** this is a metaphor for a place where nothing happens.

**beat:** this is American English. In British English the past participle of (to) beat is *beaten*.

**hometown jam:** a jam is informal English for a problem or predicament.

**yellow man:** this is a derogatory reference to Asians.

**up to me:** this idiom means to have the power to make a decision.

**son:** older men often address a younger man as son, even if they are not their father.

**out by the gas fires:** it refers to the flames from oil refineries, where excess gases are burned off.

**burning down the road:** suggests that the character has spent ten years struggling, trying to move forward in life.

**ain't:** this is often used in songs to mean *it isn't*.

Born down in a **dead man's town**

The first kick I took<sup>12</sup> was when I **hit the ground**  
You end up like a dog that's been **beat** too much  
Till you spend half your life just **covering up**, now

Born in the U.S.A.  
I was born in the U.S.A.  
I was born in the U.S.A.  
Born in the U.S.A., now

Got in a little **hometown jam**  
So they put a rifle in my hand  
Sent me off to a foreign land  
To go and kill the **yellow man**

Born in the U.S.A.  
I was born in the U.S.A.  
I was born in the U.S.A.  
I was born in the U.S.A.

Come back home to the refinery  
**Hiring man**<sup>14</sup> says Son, if it was **up to me**  
Went down to see my **V.A. man**  
He said **Son**, don't you understand, now

Oh yeah  
No, no  
No, no, no

I had a brother **at Khe Sanh fighting off them Viet Cong**  
They're still there, he's all gone

He had a woman he loved in Saigon  
I got a picture of him in her arms now

Down in the shadow of the penitentiary  
**Out by the gas** fires of the refinery  
I'm ten years **burning down the road**  
Nowhere to run, **ain't** got nowhere to go

Born in the U.S.A.  
I was born in the U.S.A., now  
Born in the U.S.A.  
I'm a long-gone Daddy in the U.S.A., now  
Born in the U.S.A.  
Born in the U.S.A.  
Born in the U.S.A.  
I'm a cool rocking Daddy in the U.S.A., now

**I hit the ground:** the idiom to *hit the ground* refers to a landing<sup>13</sup> e.g. of a helicopter, when soldiers jumped out onto the ground, ready for combat from the first moment.

**covering up:** the phrasal verb to *cover up* means to keep something hidden. It is often used in political scandals.

**V.A. man:** the person who worked at the Veteran Affairs office.

**at Khe Sanh fighting off them Viet:** this is historically inaccurate, the Battle of Khe Sanh was fought against the North Vietnamese Army, not the Viet Cong.

Scan this QR code with your smartphone or tablet and listen to the official song on YouTube while reading the lyrics.



Fergal Kavanagh runs the website [www.tuneintoenglish.com](http://www.tuneintoenglish.com), the web's largest free resource for learning English through pop music.