

Bruce, Freddie, Elton and the sounds of sehnsucht



In Danny Boyle's new fantasy film, *Yesterday*, a young musician wakes up from a bike accident to discover he is the only person on earth who remembers the Beatles.

So what does he do?

He passes the whole Beatles' back-catalogue off as his own and soars to fame and fortune, of course!

Meanwhile, in an upcoming film, *Blinded by the Light*, a 16 year-old Pakistani boy growing up in England in the 1980s is given some Bruce Springsteen cassettes by a friend and quickly finds inspiration, using the anthems to navigate his way through life as an aspiring young writer in a difficult environment.

Much of the inherent charm in the Bruce Springsteen-inspired film is the fact that a geeky Asian boy in northern England could relate so strongly to the muscular New Jersey working-class sensibilities of the Boss' music.

When you also consider the recent success of the Freddie Mercury biopic, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, and the Elton John rock opera, *Rocketman*, it's beginning to look like cinema is getting taken over by the Classic Hits of the 60s, 70s, and 80s.

And those songs seem to be everywhere these days. I was waiting in line to buy ice cream at a very cool ice cream truck in New York recently. The customized 1978 Chevrolet step van was pumping out hits by Van Morrison, Fleetwood Mac and Bob Dylan as the hipster ice creamers spooned their merchandise into waffle cones.

And everyone was singing along.

There's nothing like a hot summers day in New York, a strawberry rhubarb ice cream, and a few verses of "Brown Eyed Girl".

The thing is, all those tunes are the music of *my* youth, not theirs. What's with that? Is it just nostalgia? Does every generation rediscover the best music of their parents' generation?

Music resonates so deeply, especially in a film like *Blinded by the Light*, which is very emotional and has messages as relevant today as they were in 1987.

It's almost as if the songs were written for this film. Springsteen's music not only explains life as it is for the young protagonist, Javed (played by Viveik Kalra), but provides hope, a way forward, a possibility of dealing with the hopelessness, alienation, and sense of imprisonment he feels.

There's a word for this. The Germans call it *sehnsucht* (they pronounce it, *zen-zookt*), and it describes a kind of longing or desire for we know not what.

It feels like nostalgia, although not for the past, but for a better future. Some define *sehnsucht* as "forward facing nostalgia".

The Christian apologist and author, C. S. Lewis saw this permanent sense of longing as central to his beliefs about Christianity.

He thought we should pay attention whenever a smell, a sound, or an experience fills us with yearning for another world. Lewis described the feeling this way:

“...that unnameable something, desire for which pierces us like a rapier at the smell of a bonfire, the sound of wild ducks flying overhead, the title of *The Well at the World’s End*, the opening lines of *Kubla Khan*, the morning cobwebs in late summer, or the noise of falling waves.”

Or we might add, the first strains of *Born to Run*.

These sensations trigger within us a deep sense that another world is waiting. But that world isn’t present within the sensations themselves.

They are, as Lewis beautifully put it, “only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.”

For Javed in *Blinded by the Light*, Springsteen songs foster sehnsucht. They stimulate a desire for something that he has never actually experienced. They are news from a country he hasn’t visited. Literally and figuratively.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis uses sehnsucht as an argument for the Christian faith: ***“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”***

Those desires that spring up in us — whether for love, friendship, acceptance, belonging — that are never fully satisfied in this life point us to our hope for another life.

They are pointers to another place, somewhere inexplicable, inaccessible, beyond the veil.

Lewis believed that like the “forward-facing nostalgia” of *sehnsucht*, these desires point us toward the heavenly home for which we were created.

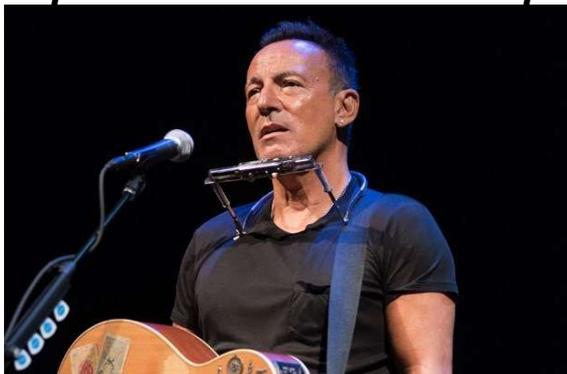
But the answers aren’t in a Bruce Springsteen song or a song by Queen or Elton John.

Their recent biopics showed that for all the joy and energy their music could produce, those songwriters themselves were disintegrating emotionally and physically. Similarly, C. S. Lewis didn’t believe the new world could be found in a William Morris fantasy novel or a Samuel Taylor Coleridge epic poem.

They were merely stimulants for an innate, spiritual hunger that already existed within him.

Even Springsteen knows this. In his 2017-18 residency at the Walter Kerr Theater in New York, he came clean about the origins of the blue-collar narratives that infuse his music:

“I’ve never held an honest job in my entire life. I’ve never done any hard labor. I’ve never worked nine to five... I’ve never seen the inside of a factory and yet it’s all I’ve ever written about. Standing before you is a man who has become wildly and absurdly successful writing about something of which he has had absolutely no personal experience. I made it all up.”



I made it all up.

That's not to say he lied, or that his songs are inauthentic or untrue. I think Springsteen's Walter Kerr presentation shows that his narrative is driven by an intense sense of belonging — to family, to neighborhood, to country. And when a man with his acute observational skills, profound empathy and emotional intelligence writes about a yearning for belonging, it triggers something deep within us all.

He's a purveyor of *sehnsucht*.

I feel it when Bruce sings *New York City Serenade*. Or Van Morrison sings *Cyprus Avenue* or Tom Waits sings *Kentucky Avenue*. Or when I listen to Bob Dylan sing *Every Grain of Sand*.

It's a deep nostalgic yearning for I know not what — something more, something better, something truer and more beautiful than the world around me.

Sehnsucht reaches far beyond daily life and the wistful, muse-worthy self-absorption with pop music or the personal patterns of life and death and impossibility.

Sehnsucht contains within it the meaning of the universe and an unrequited yearning to find and touch the mystery, to resolve it by becoming one with it.

Though haunting, it is alluring, even rapturous, because the heightened longing itself brings a sense of closeness to whatever it is that seems to be calling us from afar. Like C. S. Lewis says, the most probable explanation is that we were made for that other world.

by Michael Frost