

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Like a lot of people, the year 2020 stirred up a whole lot of emotions in me.

For three years, I'd had to watch a presidential successor who was diametrically opposed to everything I believed in. And witnessed a country that seemed to be getting angrier and more divided with each passing day. Then came a historic pandemic, along with a slip-shot government response that rained hardship and loss on millions. And forced all of us to consider what's really important in life.

And in the middle of all this – there were the nationwide protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd. Yet just another tragic reminder of just how powerfully racism continues to stain so many aspects of American life.

And all that was before the world witnessed a violent mob – spurred on by lies and wild conspiracy theories – storm the U.S. Capitol where I'd once served.

How did we get here? How could we find our way back to a more unifying American story? That topic came to dominate so many of my conversations last year – with Michelle, with my daughters and with friends. And one of the friends just happened to be Mr. Bruce Springsteen.

On the surface, Bruce and I don't have a lot in common. He's a white guy from a small town in Jersey. I'm a black guy of mixed race born in Hawaii with a childhood that took me around the world. He's a rock n' roll icon. I'm a lawyer and politician – not as cool. And, as I like to remind Bruce every chance I get, he's more than a decade older than me. Although, he looks damn good.

But over the years, what we've found is that we've got a shared sensibility. About work, about family and about America. In our own ways, Bruce and I have been on parallel journeys trying to understand this country that's given us both so much. Trying to chronicle the stories of its people. Looking for a way to connect our own individual searches for meaning and truth and community with the larger story of America.

And what we discovered during these conversations was that we still share a fundamental belief in the American ideal. Not as an airbrushed, cheap fiction or as an act of nostalgia that ignores all the ways that we've fallen short of that ideal, but as a compass for the hard work that lies before each of us as citizens to make this place and the world more equal, more just and more free.

Plus, Bruce just had some great stories.

So we added a participant to our conversations: a microphone. And over the course of a few days at the converted farmhouse and property that Bruce shares with his amazing wife Patti along with a few horses, a whole bunch of dogs, and a thousand guitars – all just a few miles from where he grew up – we talked.

We kicked things off by identifying why we both felt like outsiders as kids. And not surprisingly, the conversation then shifted to what has been the central dilemma of America since its founding – the issue of race.

***[Bruce Springsteen - Born in the U.S.A. plays]***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Alright, by the way I'm sorry I was late, everybody.

FARMHOUSE STAFF: This is for you, sir.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Well, I like how y'all just put a little whiskey there just in case.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: We keep that there permanently *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* Just as a—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It just sits there while you're recording if something happens *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* Yeah, yeah. You go, "Man, I need that."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You need it, you go get it.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Question: How do you like to be addressed?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Barack, man. Come on, dude.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Just checking! *[laughs]* I want to get it right.

PRODUCER: You're here... You're on. Can I put a lav mic on you?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah, yeah that makes sense. When was this studio built?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: We built this about... eight years ago, maybe?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I love this place, man.

PRODUCER: All right, good to go?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: All right, let's do it...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Go, go, go.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So, we're sitting here in...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* The great state of New Jersey. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: The great state of New Jersey with one of New Jersey's prodigal sons...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's about right. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: The boss, my friend: Bruce Springsteen. And we're—we're in a studio— just to paint a picture here, we've got... How many guitars you got up in here?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: We're looking at the house of a thousand guitars right now— *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: We—I haven't counted them all. But there are guitars everywhere. There is a ukulele, a banjo...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: So if we get moved to make music, we—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I've been known to sing—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: We got the instruments at hand.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* It's good to see you, my friend.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It's good to see you also.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It's a pleasure to have you here.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I was trying to remember the first time we actually met, and it probably was in 2008.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: During the campaign.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right.

*[Ambi of campaign concert]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You came to do a concert with us. Was it in Michigan or Ohio?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I have... I have no recall. But, uh... *[laughs]*

*[Ambi of campaign concert]*

***[2008 CLIP BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: So Barack Obama and Joe Biden, roll up our sleeves and come on up for the rising.]***

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: But I remember, uh, your family was with you.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And I remember thinking, "He's very low key, even maybe a little bit shy."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And I liked that in you. So I thought, "I hope I get a chance to talk to him at some point." But because it was in the middle of the campaign, we were rushing around. And... so, you know, we had a nice chat, but—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It wasn't like we had a deep conversation.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: No.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And we had a—a number of those sort of interactions: you know, you performed at the inauguration, came by the White House, you know, I run for re-election, you do some more stuff.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: We had a nice dinner or two.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: We had—we had a great dinner at the White House where we sang—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I played the piano, and you sang. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Well, I don't know about that. But we all sang—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* That's right—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Some Broadway tunes. And some Motown.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Oh, yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And some classics.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And there was, uh... there were libations involved.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: There was drinking—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* Yeah, that was good.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And then I said, "Well, he's not as shy as I thought, but he just has to loosen up a little bit."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I don't know if I would say that's most people in my business, but the shyness is not unusual. If you weren't quiet, you wouldn't have so desperately searched for a way to speak. *[laughs]* You know.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* Yeah.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The reason you—you have so desperately pursued your work and your language and your voice is because you haven't had one. And you understand, you realize that, and you feel the pain of being somewhat voiceless, you know.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And so the performance then becomes the tool, the mechanism—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It becomes— it becomes the mechanism from which you express the entirety of your life.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Your entire philosophy and code for living, and that was how it came to me. And I felt previous to that I was pretty invisible, and there was a lot of pain in that invisibility.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And see, the kind of thing that you just said here – is how we became friends. Because after a few drinks, and maybe in between songs, you'd say something like that, and I'd say, "Aw, that makes sense to me." And, uh, those are some deep waters—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And I think that—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: –above the stillness there. And so, and I think, uh, we just grew to trust each other and have those kinds of conversations on an ongoing basis, and once I left the White House we were able to spend more time together and, you know, little sympatico.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, I feel like I recognize those things in you.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yes.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And, uh... So I felt really at home around you.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And the other part of it was Michelle and Patti hit it off.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And Michelle was very pleased in the insights you had...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: About your failings as a man.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* Oh, yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And after we would leave a dinner, or a party, or a conversation, she'd say, "You see how Bruce understands his shortcomings and has come to terms with them—"

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* Sorry about that. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "...in a way that you have not? Uh, you should spend some more time with Bruce. Because he's put in the work." And so there was a little also of...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* I got you.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Of the sense that I needed to get coached—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I got you—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: In how to be a proper husband.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It's been my pleasure. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You know, and I tried to explain: Look, he's ten years older than me. He's— he's— he's been through some of this stuff. I'm still, I'm still, uh, you know, in— in training mode, uh... Despite the fact that we come from such different places and obviously had a

different career path, the same issues that you struggle with have been issues I've struggled with. The same joys and doubts. You know, it turns out there's a lot of overlap.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Well, the political comes from the personal.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Well, look, in the same way that a musician is looking for a way to channel and work through pain, demons, personal questions. You know, that was certainly true for me in terms of getting into public life.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: But you gotta have two things going, which is very difficult. One, you've got to have the egotism to believe that—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: The megalomania—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The megalomania... OK, you know, to believe that you have a voice and a point of view that is worth being heard by the whole world. *[laugh]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: All right? *[laugh}*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: By the whole world. So you, on one hand you need that type of megalomania, and yet on the other hand... for it to be true... for it to have the kind of impact that you've had... you've— you've— you've... you've got to have the tremendous empathy for other people, you know.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And it's a— it— it— it's a hard trick to pull off. You— you start off with ego—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: But then at some point you empty out and become a vessel for—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: The hopes and dreams and...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: At your best...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Stories...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: At your best, yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: That, uh, that you've heard from others, and you just become a conduit for them.

We're— we're actually talking, and I actually just left delivering the eulogy for my friend, John Lewis, one of the giants of the civil rights movement, uh, and somebody who was probably as responsible for making America a better, freer, more generous place, and making our democracy live up to its promise.

And... the first time I met John, he came to speak at Harvard where I was going to law school, and um... after he spoke, I came up to him. And I said to him, "You are one of my heroes. You... helped me find my sense of who I at least wanted to be—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, that's right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: In this huge, complicated, contentious, multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious place called America."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right. The funny thing is to come at it from that vantage point is to come at it from the vantage point of the outsider.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: That's exactly right...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You know...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: This is going to be interesting, because I'm going to have to figure out why you thought you were an outsider. I know why I was an outsider.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I— that I could explain, but a nice Jersey boy doesn't have to be an outsider.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You know what I mean? He can be an insider.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I don't think it's something that you choose. I think it's something that is innate within you. I had a very, very strange upbringing. You know, I grew up in a small town, very provincial.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Let's just get on the record here.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The great town of Freehold, New Jersey.



POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Freehold, New Jersey.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Population?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: 10,000.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: 10,000.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: 1,600 of whom work at the Karageusian Rug Mill — including my dad. My mom was the main breadwinner. My father worked when he could, but was... he was pretty mentally ill. My father had a, since he was quite young, he suffered from schizophrenia, which we didn't understand at the time, but it made life at home very difficult and it made him holding on any kind of job very difficult. So we had that in the house that was... that sort of made our house different from others, I'd say. You know?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So... my upbringing on the surface looks completely different.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I'm born in Hawaii—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Strange. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Hawaii's a long ways from Freehold, New—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* Everywhere!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah. It's in the middle of the Pacific... I am the product of a mom from Kansas: a teenager when she had me, and a college student who had met my father, who was an African student at the University of Hawaii. You know, my grandparents are basically Scotts-Irish. And the Irish were outsiders for a long time.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah. My grandparents were old school Irish people.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And they were... very, very provincial: quite backward, quite country people, and we all lived in one house: my parents, my grandparents and myself.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Grandparents on your dad's side or mom's side?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: My grandparents on my dad's side. I was brought up from the Irish side of my family, and they were just as eccentric as— as you would— as— as American Irish could be, you know. And started me off when I was a very young child on simply being different from everybody else. I had an emotional displacement.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah. *[Ambi of beach and guitar strumming]* You know, I tell a story about how my grandfather used to take me to the beach and that's where he'd go down there and play checkers and he'd drink beers, Primo Beer. I—I still have—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Memories of that—that little bottle of Primo Beer that had King Kamehameha's picture on the front of it.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

*[guitar fades in more]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And, uh, the tourists would come up and they'd see me, and they'd, you know, this is when I'm like three, four, five years old. They'd say, "Is he Hawaiian?"

*[guitar fades in more]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And my grandfather would say, "Yeah, he's the grandson of King Kamehameha."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And they'd be taking pictures, and...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* I like that.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And, you know, it's a nice story in the sense of my grandfather enjoyed pulling the wool over their eyes. But it's also a story of the fact that I wasn't easily identifiable. I felt like an outsider.

There was visible proof that I wasn't like everybody else. And—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And this is the city you were in? What— what city?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Honolulu. Honolulu, Hawaii, which is this little jewel in the middle of the ocean...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: That is made up of all these immigrants who come from all these different places. You've got Japanese and Chinese, Portugese who've come over, you know as seamen, and you've got the native Hawaiians who, like many indigenous peoples, find themselves decimated by disease. And so, you got that base culture that's beautiful and powerful, and— and I'm looking around as a kid and none of them really look like me.

*[guitar fades up]*

**[AD BREAK]**

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So you're growing up in Freehold.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: My grandparents, they allowed me freedoms as a child that really... children shouldn't have. Because my grandmother had lost her daughter in a traffic accident at five years old.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Hmm.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I was the next child that came along. I was given complete license—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: To do whatever I wanted to do.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So what were you doing, man? I mean, you just tearing up, tearing up Freehold? Just running rampant?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Exactly! At five years old.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Up and down the streets? Terrorizing the population—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I was... I was literally— I was doing things, I was given so much license. I was getting up later than all the other kids. I was going to bed later than all the other kids. I didn't fit in— school, immediately when I went to school—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: 'Cause you didn't like all these rules all of a sudden.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And I did not like the rules. If you don't have a working parent, and school presents to you a set of rules, you're not prepared for them. You know? I said, "OK, what do I want to do? I want to find my way in, you know. I need to find my way into my town. I got to find out who my people are." And it wasn't until I discovered music and— and found a way to process identity and to process my own identity, and to find a way to speak and to have some impact in how to be heard that I began to feel at home where I lived.

***[Bruce Springsteen - Lost in the Flood plays]***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: When I heard your music, I caught that sense of emotional displacement, and it was a reminder that, in a lot of ways in America, we all have started off in some fashion as outsiders. I guess I— my question is... what's the makeup of Freehold?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The shore was a lot of Irish/Italian and previous to the Southern African Americans, who were bused up every summer to work in the fields outside of town.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: What kind of fields were they?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Potato. So, I grew up in a bit of an integrated neighborhood. I had Black friends when I was really young. But, there were a lot of rules.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Whose house you go to...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right, and whose you can't—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Whose you can't—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Who you can't have in your house.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And whose house you shouldn't be in.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Mhmm...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: That's before you even start talking about dating or—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right. You're a child on your bicycle.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And you're aware of— of all of these unspoken rules.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Mhmm...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And, uh, Freehold was your typical, small, provincial, redneck, racist little American 1950s town. You know? It was a town that suffered a lot of racial strife right around '65, '67, '69— You know '69, right?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So when you got the Newark riots and...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Literally, the day of the Newark riots there was rioting in Freehold, New Jersey, a little town of 10,000 people. They brought in the state troopers, and there was a state of emergency in this—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: How old were you at that point?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I was... 17 maybe... you know? I was in high school.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So... so when you write “My Hometown”—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You talk about redneck.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Sure.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And that has a particular set of connotations, you know, in the same way that in the African American community we can say certain things about ourselves.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Uh, you know,... you’ve got to feel a certain comfort and love for a community to be able to describe it in terms that...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: An outsider, you might get into a fight.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I got you.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Of course!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: How do you think about that?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Well, A: these were the people I loved... with all of their limitations, all of their blessings, all of their curses, all of their dreams, all of their nightmares. These were the people that I loved. And that was, like a lot of other small American towns in the 1950s and it’s where I grew up. So this particular song I wrote in... 1984.

And it was just a re-visitation of my life as a young child. The town that I'd grown up in at the time was really having a tough time, you know. Factories were gone. When you went down our little main street you saw boarded up businesses and the town sort of was dead on arrival, you know. And so this was just something that came out, you know. Let me— let me run you a little bit of it...

*[Plucks guitar strings]*

Is there a pick around anywhere? *[laughs]*

*[Plucks guitar strings]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[sings]* *I was eight years old and running with a dime in my hand... Into the bus stop to pick up a paper... for my old man... I'd sit on his lap in that big old Buick... and steer as we drove through town... He'd tousle my hair and say "Son, take a good look around... This is your hometown... This is your hometown... This is your hometown... This is your hometown"...*

*[singing fades]*

The event that started the race rioting that we had in town at the time was a shooting at a stop light.

*[sings]* *Two cars at a light on a Saturday night... In the backseat there was a gun...*

A car full of white kids with a shotgun firing into a car full of Black kids. A friend of mine lost his eye.

*[sings]* *Troubled times had come to my hometown... In my hometown... In my hometown... In my hometown...*

And then just— the town sort of just— the town's just shutting down.

*[sings]* *Now Main Street's whitewashed windows and vacant stores... Seems like there ain't nobody...*

This was— I guess I wrote this in the '80s, and I knew in the late '70s and the '80s this is what I knew I wanted my subject matter to be, for who I was going to be and what I was going to write about. This is what made sense to me. I wanted to stay home. I wanted to live here. I wanted to be sort of surrounded by the people that I knew and tell my and their story, you know?

*[sings]* *This is your hometown... [hums]*

There was a— there's a generational element to this song 'cause where— the song is set with a boy sitting on his father's lap, and this father's saying, "This is your hometown and everything in it."

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Good and bad.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right. You are a part of the general flow of history, and as such what is happening and what has happened is partly your responsibility. You know? You are tied in historically to the good and the bad things that have happened, not just in our little town, but in our country, and as an active player in this moment in time you have some power to acknowledge these things and perhaps do something about them in some small way. And I still love to sing it today. It's just... And everyone in the audience recognizes these things. It becomes more, it's more than an act of nostalgia.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: People always sing, "My/your hometown..." They always sing that verse with me, and I always get a sense that they know the town they're talking about isn't Freehold, it's not Matawan, it's not Marlboro, it's not Washington, it's not friggin' Seattle. It's the whole thing.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It's all of America, you know?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It's a good song.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It's a great song.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So you had these riots in Freehold, what happens? Because in a lot of parts of the country, places like Newark, Detroit... they never really recover, right? But how does it— how does it play out in the immediate aftermath of—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Where it played it more like Newark was less Freehold than Asbury Park... Asbury Park really suffered from its riots, you know? And they were a long time coming and justified, and the Black population of that town was totally underrepresented in the city government and it was just... it was that moment in time.

But Asbury really didn't come back for a long, long time. It's obviously had a resurgence over the past ten years, but some of those issues— not some of those issues— most of those issues

still remain unresolved on the west side of town. So you would say, “How much did that really change? I’m not so sure.” Freehold, what did I see get better? Not very much, you know. Now, it was a much smaller event, you know. Freehold’s main street is three blocks. You know—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So some stores get torn up, some folks get arrested, but the guts of the town doesn’t really get impacted that much...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: No, no, no.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And did your family talk about it? Do you remember talking about it? Did you talk about it with your friends?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Less than talking about it, I’m experiencing it in high school where my Black friends, there’s a moment where they won’t speak to me.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Mhmm...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I said, “Hey...” “I can’t talk to you right now... right now, I can’t speak—”

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It’s interesting that he said, “Right now.”

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That’s right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: He’s sending you a signal, “Right now, you just— we need to let this lie.”

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That’s right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Doesn’t mean we can’t have a conversation later.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That’s right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: But not today, you know? And there was a lot of flat out fighting between white students and Black students, you know. So, high school became a microcosm of what was, of what happened in Freehold, Newark, Asbury. Those tensions became very real in ‘68, ‘67, which is when I was... I was really in high school. And, uh, so that was kind of where I— I personally experienced it the most, you know, was uh—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Just the dynamic in school.



BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, it was Freehold Regional High School. It was a totally integrated high school, and your— it was filled with mostly working class kids, a few that were a little better than that but not so much. What happened is immediately after grammar school, if they didn't want— if people didn't want to send their children to integrated schools, well you went to the—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Catholic school—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The Catholic high school.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And that's true pretty much in cities all across the country.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And that's, you know— my parents wanted me to go to, I think it was Trenton at the time. I said, "Trenton? I going to ride a freaking hour on the bus every day?"  
[laughs]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Plus you're not going to class anyway, so it didn't matter!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: [laughs] That's right!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: 'Cause you're going to be a Rock n' Roll star!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: [laughs]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Which raises an interesting question. So, right around this time you're starting to get serious about music, and it's shortly thereafter you start putting your bands together and—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: This is.. 1964 is when I picked the guitar up, and I'm playing it all through high school.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: We started... we had a band in 1964. So you had The Rolling Stones and you had The Beatles, but very shortly you also had Sam & Dave and you had Motown, you know, and you learned how to write from the great Motown songwriters. You learned how to perform from Sam Moore from Sam & Dave.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So, if there aren't African American artists who are helping you to discover Rock n' Roll. They're certainly African American-influenced artists that are opening this door for you.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Absolutely, of course. We had a band that... to play down what was called— what is Route Nine, which was South of Freehold. You had to know some Soul music

because it was called “Greaser territory.” Greasers were the guys with  $\frac{3}{4}$  length leathers, sharkskin suits, ties, hair slicked back, pointy black shoes, nylon see-through socks. All of it taken from the Black community. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And that was the style for Greasers?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yes, including the music that they loved.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

***[Gene Chandler - Duke of Earl plays]***

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: So when you went south on Route Nine you had to be able to play Soul music and Doo-wop music or else you wouldn’t survive on a Friday and Saturday night. You just wouldn’t survive.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* Everybody is like, “Who are these folk?”

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You know, that was just the nature of Rock n’ Roll and Rhythm and Blues played by our little band in those days, you know?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And how are you processing that?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: As a young musician, you know, you were immersed in... in music and—and in the African American culture that inspired the music that you loved. You know, high school was very strange because the Black kids in my high school were both envied and were also— suffered tremendous prejudice against them at the same time. You know? I mean—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: What were they envied for?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The young guys— the way they dressed...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: They looked sharp.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Everybody tried to dress!

Both: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You know, we used to go to Springwood Avenue to this place called Fishes. That was where the clothes were. You know? And so it was a strange imbalance that was, uh, difficult to sort of... to sort through, you know.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It makes me think, though, ‘cause Spike Lee makes a movie, “*Do the Right Thing.*”

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Great picture.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Great picture. One of the protagonists, who he plays, a guy named Mookie.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And he's working for this Italian guy and his sons who are trying to run a small business, a little pizza joint. And one of the sons is a sweet kid, loves the African American community that they're serving. And the older one is cynical and more blatantly racist. And at one point, Mookie, who despite not working real hard is insightful about the neighborhood he's living in, he starts asking the racist older brother—

***[Do the Right Thing clip plays] Can I talk to you for a second?]***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "Who's your favorite basketball player?"

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "Magic Johnson."

***[Do the Right Thing clip plays] Who's your favorite movie star? Eddie Murphy. Who's your favorite rockstar? Prince.***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Prince.

***[Do the Right Thing clip] Wrong, Bruce. Prince.***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "So why is it that you're always using the N-word? When all these folks, you're always talking about how much you love them." And I always thought that was—such a brilliant and simple way to capture something that's always been true and complicated about America, which is this notion of Black folks are the other, they are demeaned, they are discriminated against, looked down upon, and yet the culture is constantly appropriating and regurgitating and processing the style that arises out of being an outsider and knowing the blues. *[laughs]*

And—and having suffered these scars, and having to, you know, live on Mother wit and make stuff up out of nothing. And Rock n' Roll is a part of that process. I'm wondering, whether as a

teenager that's something that you're even processing, or is it something that you kind of just think, "You know what? This music's cool, and I like it, and it moves me in some way."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, no, I think that if you were a teenager in the '60s, you were processing all this intensely.

*[guitar picking plays]*

***[NEWS CLIPS - The president's advisory commission on civil disorder warned that race hatred threatened to tear this country apart. Events this month...***

***Race riots, violence, looting and hate. For five days...]***

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You couldn't be a teenager in the '60s and not be aware that race was... race was the fundamental issue of the day. You know? In America, you know, we have loved Black people and brown people when they're entertaining us, but when they want to live next door we remain a tribal society, you know? It's part of our tragicness that continues, obviously, to this day, you know. And... I don't think... I don't think it's ever been more... more essential a subject as it is at this very moment... umm... I think, "Why is it so hard to talk about race? Why am I... Why am I pausing here?"

*[laughs]* You know? Um, to talk about race you have to talk about your differences. Talk about race you have to talk about, um, to some degree, the... um... deconstructing the myth of the melting pot, which has never fundamentally been true. Admitting that a big part of our history has been plunderous and violent and rigged against people of color. We're ashamed... ashamed of our collective guilt. We would have to admit and to grieve for what's been done. We would have to acknowledge our own daily complicity, and to acknowledge our group membership in that we are tied to the history of uh...of racism, of that racism.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Of a great wrong.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, you know.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Those are all hard things for people to do. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Well, you know... it... the interesting thing for me has been how, in part because my upbringing was so unusual, I had to figure this stuff out. But it wasn't right in my grill on a day-to-day basis in the same way. There were no riots in Hawaii.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: There was no other side of town where Blacks had to live. So I'm absorbing this, and I'm experiencing my share of day-to-day ignorance and slights, right? I still remember, I played tennis. I'm 11, 12 years old, and I still remember, you know, they used to put the seedings up for the tournaments that you'd play in. And I was not a great player but I was good enough to be in some tournaments, and I remember running my finger down to see where my name was on the seeding, and the tennis pro, who was basically the coach of the tennis team at this high school, he says, "Better be careful. You might rub off on the chart, and make it dirty." *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: OK.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah. This is probably '74, '75. I still remember. I turned to him and I said, "What did you say?" And it was an interesting moment of being an 11 or 12 year old talking to a grown man...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Really?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: ... and watching him process and calculate what he should do. And then him saying, "I'm just joking" is what he said.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Who were your friends at this time? What were—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So, so, the interesting thing is, so, my best friends ended up being a bunch of misfits and outsiders themselves. Kids like you, who were, maybe, a little bit emotionally displaced. I realized that my best friends in high school, who are – to this day – some of my best friends, all of them came from broken homes.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: All of them, economically, was at the lower end of the totem pole relative to the other kids in the school. And one of the unifying things was basketball. We all became huge basketball fanatics, and sports became the place where a Black kid and white kid could meet on equal terms and be part of a community that wasn't free of race, but was an arena in which issues of who's up, who's down, status, you know, all that it came down to who could play.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Where did your mom fit in all of this, though?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: She... infused me with a basic sense of who I was and why I was blessed to have this beautiful brown skin I had and to be part of this grand tradition.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And some of it, she romanticized. But you know, she would bring me these kid's versions of the biographies of Muhamed Ali and Arthur Ashe —

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And you're like 10 or 11 or 12 at the time—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah, 10 or 11 or 12. So I think instinctually she understood I need to inoculate him early from what might be coming. You know, she gave me enough of a foundation of confidence. I was loved, cherished and special, and being Black was something to be proud of and to be cherished and special. And, in fact, the very struggles that Blacks in America were going through were part of what made Black folks special.

*[guitar and drums fade in]*

Because they had, in some ways, been fortified by suffering. And they had experienced cruelty, and as a consequence could help all of us transcend that.

*[guitar and drums fade in]*

**[AD BREAK]**

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: We started the conversation talking about us both, in some ways, feeling like outsiders, and part of my politics, part of a lot of the speeches I've made in the past has always been to claim America as a place where you don't have to look a certain way, you don't have to come from a certain family, you don't have to have a certain religious background. You just have to have fidelity to a creed — a belief. You know, folks sometimes ask me what's one of my favorite speeches of the speeches I've given, and it may be the speech I gave on the 50th anniversary of the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Starting in Selma—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's a great speech...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It was... at a time when you were seeing this ramp up of criticism.

*[guitar strum plays]*

Not just of me, but of progressives as "un-American," "not real Americans," "Don't love America."

*[guitar picking plays]*

And... I thought it was a good moment to capture a different idea of America. I thought that anniversary, me being down with John Lewis, and by the way, George W. Bush — a whole

bunch of folks celebrating this moment in our history. You got on one side outsiders: Black students and maids and laborers and busboys.

***[ARCHIVAL CLIP OF BLOODY SUNDAY: Disperse, you're ordered to disperse. Go home or go to your church. This march will not continue...]***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And on the other side: the power of the state.

***[ARCHIVAL CLIP OF BLOODY SUNDAY: Troopers, here, advance toward the group.]***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And there's a standoff. This historic clash of two ideas of America. On one side, you've got the idea that, "No, America is just for certain people who have to be and look a certain way." And on the other side, led by this 25-year-old kid in a trench coat and a knapsack, this idea "America's for everybody."

***[ARCHIVAL CLIP OF John Lewis: We're marching to our state capital to dramatize to our nation and to the world, our determination to win first-class citizenship.]***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: In fact, what makes America, "America," is all the outsiders and all the misfits and the folks who try to make something out of—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Out of nothing.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Nothing. So that became the theme of my speech. I started talking about, "Let me tell you about America. We're Lewis and Clark and Sacagawea. We're the pioneers and the farmers and miners and the entrepreneurs and the huxters — that's our..."

***[NEWS CLIP POTUS BARACK OBAMA SPEECH: ...That's our spirit. That's who we are. We are Sojourner Truth and Fannie Lou Hamer, women who could do as much as any man and then some. And we're Susan B. Anthony, who shook the system until the law reflected that truth. That is our character. We're the immigrants who stowed away on ships to reach these shores, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free — Holocaust survivors, Soviet defectors, the Lost Boys of Sudan.]***

***[Both POTUS speech and live]: We're the slaves who built the White House and the economy of the South...***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "...We're the ranch hands and cowboys" and then a part that I know you'll like: "We're the storytellers, writers, poets, artists who abhor unfairness..."

*[Bruce strums improvised guitar gently... ]*

...and despise hypocrisy, and give voice to the voiceless, and tell truths that need to be told. We're the inventors of Gospel and Jazz and Blues and Bluegrass and Country and Hip-Hop and

Rock N' Roll, and our very own sound with all the sweet sorrow and reckless joy of freedom. Right? We are Jackie Robinson, enduring scorn and spiked cleats and pitches coming straight to his head, and stealing home in the World Series anyway. And we are the people Langston Hughes wrote of who "build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how." We are the people Emerson wrote of, "who for truth and honor's sake stand fast and suffer long," who are "never tired, so long as we can see far enough."

That's what America is. Not stock photos or airbrushed history, or feeble attempts to define some of us as more American than others. We respect the past, but we don't pine for the past. We don't fear the future; we grab for it. America is not some fragile thing. We are large, in the words of Whitman, "containing multitudes." We are boisterous and diverse and full of energy, perpetually young in spirit. That's why someone like John Lewis at the ripe old age of 25 could lead a mighty march.

***[NEWS CLIP POTUS BARACK OBAMA SPEECH: We honor those who walked, so we can run. We must run so our children soar. And we will not grow weary, for we believe in the power of an awesome God. And we believe in this country's sacred promise...]***

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: That's what John fought for. That's what you sing about, and that's what those kids out there are organizing for.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: All right?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Amen.

*[Credit Music Plays]*

ANNA HOLMES: *Renegades: Born in the U.S.A.* is a Spotify Original. Presented and produced by Higher Ground Audio in collaboration with Dustlight Productions.

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This is Renegades: Born in the U.S.A.

*[Credit Music Ends]*

ANNA HOLMES: And thanks again to our sponsors Dollar Shave Club and Comcast.

**– End of Episode –**