

POTUS BARACK OBAMA VOICE OVER: Talking about race isn't always easy.

Which is why Bruce and I couldn't cover what was on our minds in just one session. We know that bridging America's racial divide is going to require concrete policies to address the ongoing legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

But it also requires each of us – in our workplaces, in our politics, and our place of worship – and in a million daily interactions to make more of an effort to understand each other's realities.

Not to mention our own unspoken attitudes.

As a lot of us have learned – whether from a childhood like mine of growing up different or a lifetime partnership like Bruce had with 'The Big Man' Clarence Clemons. Whether from the great old protest songs or the new kinds of protests movements across the country. That kind of reckoning can be uncomfortable.

Even or – maybe especially – when it's with the people we love.

[Guitar strumming]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: We talked about racial tension in Freehold, but when you start what becomes the E Street Band...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: This was a integrated band. How intentional was that? Or was it a matter of just, "Man, I'm trying to get the best musicians I can. This is the sound I want..."?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The integrated aspect of the E Street Band obviously was when I saw Clarence.

[Clarence Clemons - Road to Paradise fades in]

Clarence was just great. He just had a sound that raised the roof.

[Clarence Clemons - Road to Paradise plays]

He was just one of the greatest sounding sax players I'd ever heard.

[Clarence Clemons - Road to Paradise fades out]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Was he older than you?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, Clarence was about eight years older than I was—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: OK, so he's already... he's well into his 20s.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: He's been around. He's seen some things.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Well he was a ah... he almost went into pro football, and he'd been to college and he had some experiences already and ended up somehow an itinerant sax player on the edges of Asbury Park playing in the Black clubs at the time, you know?

And uh... walked into the club one night, walked up on stage, stood to my right, started playing. I said, "There's something about him and I together." You know? We struck up a friendship, started to play with the band and people started to come and respond. And eventually the band developed, it was for a year or two into...into it being three white guys and three Black guys.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And that was around '74 I think. And—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Which nobody would know today, by the way.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Nope. And—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And I mean... And I didn't know that cause look, I hate to date ya brother, but Born to Run I was still—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You were a child. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I was in high school so... *[laughs]*

So I didn't know that, you know, you got half Black, half white band. Like I knew the Average White Band was all white—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Well...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Those are some Scottish guys. And those guys can jam by the way.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yes, they could. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Loved. Loved them. They're outstanding. You knew Earth, Wind and Fire were all Black guys. But part of the reason that I wouldn't necessarily know that is, not only did you not have obviously the Internet and video but music was still pretty... there it was categorized.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Very much! And we had a primarily white audience.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You know?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And and and... Clarence isn't on the cover of TIME Magazine, right?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: No.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So it's Bruce Springsteen looking all with his curly hair looking...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA:... with his bandana and all that. You know, how was the power balance inside the band? Because I'm assuming every team, any group has some dynamics, and Clarence on the one hand is very... he's a...an iconic figure in the E Street Band but he is also still a side man and you are still the frontman. You know, I always used to talk about how I did notice early on when Black folks did start appearing in, you know, bigger roles.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: They were still always like – the second guy, right?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It's a funny thing because it was a dynamic that both... it both happened naturally and we contrived together at some point, you know, Clarence and I. And... There was a moment when I say, "Hey C, ya know, tomorrow night when I go to the front of the stage and I play this, come on up with me and play it next to me."

[Bruce Springsteen and The E Street Band - Born to Run plays]

And we took those steps the next night.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It's like a buddy movie on stage.

[Bruce Springsteen and The E Street Band - Born to Run plays]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And the crowd went crazy..

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Mhmm.

[Bruce Springsteen and The E Street Band - Born to Run plays under]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: There was an idealism in our partnership where I always felt our audience looked at us and saw the America that they wanted... wanted to see and wanted to believe in.

[Bruce Springsteen and The E Street Band - Born to Run plays fades out]

And this became the biggest story I ever told. I've never written a song that told a bigger story than Clarence and I standing next to each other on any of the 1,001 nights that we played. He leant his power to my story, like I said the story that we told together, which... was about the distance between the American Dream and the American Reality.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: But part of what you're describing also though is... he provided something to you – personally – and to the band that helped capture what would end up being your sound, your...ah spirit. But what you're also saying though is that its... some level, look, here's an older Black man that's been hustling out there for a long time—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah... different life experience.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: He's gotta— He's gotta— He's gotta hook up with a young white teen—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: A little skinny white kid, you know?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Who is less experienced than him. Now, it works out beautifully for the both of you.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: But... you know, there's also complications, right? To that whole relationship. And I don't know if you guys ever talked about it.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: He had to give a little more than I had to give in the sense that once our keyboardist and drummer left, it left Clarence as... he was the only Black man in the room a lot of the time.

[Archive tape of Clarence Clemons: You know, being in a band, you know – you see very few Black people in the shows, you know? And, I look for it. You know? But he's not being marketed that way and so very few Black people get a chance to hear him. I don't know whether...]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: He had to swim in white culture for most of his work life—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You know?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I actually wrote about this in my first book. Those friends of mine that I was talking about who had been friends of mine at school, they're white, Hawaiian, Filipino. I'm making friends with these older Black kids who were taking me to parties on the base, and I tell the story about inviting those guys along. And we get out to the party. And I look over at those guys, and they are cool but they are also experiencing for the first time in their lives what I have to go through a bunch.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Where they're the only white guys in the room.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[scoffs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Or non-Black guys in the room. Right?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: This happened to us on the Ivory Coast.*[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: We went and it was during the Amnesty International Tour and we came out to a stadium of entirely Black faces.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And we stand there for a moment, and Clarence comes over and he says, "Well...now you know how it feels."

Both: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* Did he say that?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah! *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: How'd the concert go?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And we started to play...

[Archive of Amnesty International tour performance fades in]

And it was about sixty seconds of everybody just kind of staring at each other's eyes...

...and then the place exploded *[laughs]*... exploded!

[Archive of Amnesty International tour performance plays - "Is there something you need? That you just don't have? Well just don't sit there. A-feeling bad..Come on now get up...]

It was simply the most generous audience we've ever played in front of to this day.

[archive audio fades]

But Clarence... it was difficult for him and it was painful for him at different times and we did talk about it usually on evenings when, for some reason or another, we were reminded of it, you know?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Such as...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Um... Well Clarence and I went out one evening to a local club – a friend of his. And I was watching the band. And the next thing I see is Clarence is at the front door and there's a scuffle going on. I go up and... And uh Clarence has got a couple of guys pinned down and the owner has got a guy pinned down and everybody breaks apart and the owner obviously throws them out.

On the way out, one of the guys says, the n-word. You know? Um... he was funny, you know, Clarence. He had been around. He was a pretty wordly guy, but... disappears. And I go out in the parking lot looking for him because I don't know where these other guys have gone. I don't know where he might have gone. And he was just standing on... near the hood of a car... just... and he looked at me, I remember he said, "Brucie, why'd they say that? I play football with those guys every Sunday." Same people. Says, "Why'd they say that?"

And... rather than saying, you know, "Well, they're assholes." Or er er er I just said, "I don't know. I don't know what that's about." You know –

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Where's it come from?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And— And— And— why... Why would you pull that out? Because the same thing happened to me. Listen, when I was in school, I had a friend. We played basketball together. And one time we got into a fight and he called me a coon.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[groans]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Now first of all, ain't no coons in Hawaii, right?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You know... it's one of those things that where he might not even known what a coon was— what he knew was, "I can hurt you by saying this."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* And I remember I popped him in the face and broke his nose and we were in the locker room.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Well done. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And suddenly blood is pouring down. And it was just reactive—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah!

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I said, "What?" And I popped him. And he said, "Why'd you do that?"

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And I explained to him – I said, "Don't you ever call me something like that."

[guitar picking plays]

But the point is that what it comes down to is... an assertion of status over the other - right? The claim is made that "no matter what I am—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right....

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I may be poor. I may be ignorant. I may be mean. I may be ugly. I may not like myself. I may be unhappy. But you know what I'm not?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I'm not you." And that basic psychology that then gets institutionalized, is used to justify dehumanizing somebody, taking advantage of 'em, cheatin' 'em, stealin' from 'em, killin' 'em, raping 'em.

Whatever it is, at the end of the day it really comes down to that. And in some cases it's as simple as, you know, "I'm scared I'm insignificant and not important. And this thing is the thing that's going to give me some importance."

[guitar picking fades out]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: When I first saw you, you sort spoke to a broad sense of American hopefulness. And there was something in Clarence's presence of that quality, and it's what made our band so powerful when we came to your town at night. We addressed all these issues. We didn't speak necessarily directly about them—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: But you're telling stories that...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: But there was something...yeah. And that partnership was... it was just real, you know? I was at his bedside when he took his last breath and... he was such a strong figure for me. Um... But um...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You miss him.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, yeah, of course.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You loved him.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN:C – It was 45 years of your life you don't... you know, you don't uh... it's never something that comes again. You know? It...

[guitar strumming fades in]

45 years. And the only thing we never kidded ourselves about was that race didn't matter. We lived together. We traveled throughout the United States, and we were probably as close as two people could be. Yet at the same time, I always had to recognize there was a part of Clarence that I wasn't ever really going to exactly know and ah... it was a relationship unlike any other that I've ever had in my... ever had in my life.

[guitar strumming fades out]

[AD BREAK]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: After George Floyd's murder, I started reading James Baldwin and this passage always stuck with me: *"White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other. And when they have achieved this, which will not be tomorrow and maybe never, the Negro problem will no longer exist for it will no longer be needed."*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Necessary.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah. The legacy of race is buried... but it's always there, right?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It's... depending on the community you're in, how far near the surface it is, is not always clear. And I think a lot of Black folks always talk about how what's hardest is not dealing with a clansman. That you know. *[scoffs]* That you can figure out. You are prepared and you are geared up. What cuts is people who you know aren't bad people, and the fact that that card is still in their pocket and that... at some unexpected moment it might be played...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: ...is heartbreaking.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Because that's where you realize, "Oh, this is a deep, big piece of business" and it's not a matter or not using racial epitaphs and it's not just a matter of, you know, voting for Barack Obama. That's why that movie— Did you see the movie *Get Out*?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I did.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So when the father who turns out to be crazy...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right? Starts saying, "Man, I'd vote for Obama a third time!" I mean that's part of the point that...that line is making.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And this is a moment when it feels... as a country we've got to have that conversation, you know? If we want to create a more honest and adult and noble America. And one that's worthy of its ideals, and on the day that John Lewis was...was buried is certainly not a day you can be cynical about the possibilities of America.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: No—You know that... But I think John embodied... this very particular brand of courage, right?

[guitar plays]

It was a courage and trust in the redemptive power. The ability to say, "Here I stand. Do your worst. I believe that at some point there is a conscious that will be awakened. That there is a force in you that will see me." Right? And he never gave up that hope...

And this summer to see the protests that were taking place...

[Audio of 2020 Summer Protests: Black Lives Matter! Who's lives matter? Black Lives Matter! Who's lives matter? Black Lives Matter!]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I told John and I said this in the eulogy, "John, these are your children. They might not have known it..."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "But you helped give birth to that sense of right and wrong in them. You helped infuse them with that... expectation that we're better than we are." You know, my mother used to say sometimes if I wasn't acting right, she said, "Listen, I don't necessarily care if you believe in what I've told you to do..."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: But if you do it often enough—" *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah... *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "That's who you're going to be." And I think there's a little bit of an element of young people saying, "You've told us this is who we're supposed to be. That all people are equal and we treat everybody with respect and—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: ...and you've told it to us often enough that maybe you didn't even believe it but we do now believe it. And we're going to force you to adapt your behaviour, your policies and your institutions and your laws to what you told us was true. Because you may have been painting a fantasy to make yourself feel better, but we believed it. And now we're going to try to make it true.

[guitar plays]

And that's why as long as protests and activism doesn't veer into violence, my general latitude is – I want and expect young people to push those boundaries and to test and try the patience of their parents and their grandparents. And you know uh... I... I remind young activists that I meet with, I said, "Look, if you want my advice about how you can get a law passed or get enough votes to put in power people, I can give you some practical advice. But that doesn't necessarily mean um that that should be your goal. Sometimes your goal may just be to..."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Stir shit up. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* Stir shit up. And— And— And— open up new possibilities.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: How do you hold the same country that sent man to the moon with being the same country of Jim Crow? You don't make peace with that obviously, but... how do you sort of hold that being the same America?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: I think that... it is... partly because we never went through a true reckoning, and so we just buried one huge part of our experience and our citizenry in our minds.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Now you mentioned a reckoning hadn't taken place, so here we sit today where it feels like a reckoning is being called for - you know? Is the country ready to deconstruct its founding myths, its...its mythic stories, its mythic history? Or is it prepared to consider reparations? Do you think we're at that place right now?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So if you ask me theoretically, "Are reparations justified?" The answer is yes. There's not much question. Right? That the wealth of this country, the power of this country, was built in significant part, not exclusively maybe not the even majority of it, but a large portion of it was built on the backs of slaves.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The White House—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: They built the house that I stayed in for a while.

What is also true is that even after the end of formal slavery, and the continuation of Jim Crow, the systematic oppression and discrimination of Black Americans resulted in Black families not being able to build up wealth, not being able to compete, and that has generational effects. So if you're thinking of what's just, you would look back and you would say, "The descendants of those who suffered those kinds of terrible, cruel, often arbitrary injustices deserve some sort of redress, some sort of compensation — a recognition.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: How do you as president, knowing all of the above—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Right.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: ...push or prepare the nation for something that feels, as you say, "so justified" or not?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Well... And so, this then brings us to "Could you actually get that kind of justice? Could you get a country to agree and own that history?" And my judgment was that as a practical matter, that was unattainable. We can't even get this country to provide decent schooling for inner-city kids.

And what I saw during my presidency was that the politics of white resistance and resentment. The talk of welfare queens and the talk of the undeserving poor... And the backlash against affirmative action... All that made the prospect of actually proposing any kind of coherent,

meaningful reparations program struck me as politically, not only a non-starter, but potentially counterproductive.

[keyboard synths fade in]

And it's perfectly understandable why working-class white folks, middle-class white folks, folks who are having trouble paying the bills or dealing with student loans... or you know, don't have healthcare. Where they feel like government has let them down. Wouldn't be thrilled with the idea of a massive program that is designed to deal with the past but isn't speaking to their future.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You're saying we live in a country where we could do that for bankers on Wall Street, but we can't do it for a part of the population that's been struggling for so long...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Well, I promise you white folks don't like that either... But even though I was convinced that reparations was a non-starter during my presidency. I understand the argument of people I respect like Ta-Nehisi Coates. That we should talk about it anyway. If for no other reason to educate the country about a past that too often isn't taught... and let's face it, we'd rather forget.

[Archival clip of Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee: "Has not been remedied; it has only deepened. And H.R. 40, the commission to study and develop reparations proposals is the answer to the original sin. It is in fact...]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And it goes back full-circle to everything we've been talking about. The bridge between America as it is -

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: [off-mic] Yeah.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: - and as we mythologize it to be. The only way that you can bring those two things together is to do an honest accounting and then do the work. I'm not willing, and I know you're not either, to abandon the ideal because the ideal is worthy.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Mhmm.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: But the ideal, this more perfect union of ours, is far from where the reality has been.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Mhmm.

[keyboard synths fade out]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And so there's some who argue, "Let's just get rid of the ideal." I think you need a North Star, you need some place to point to—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I'm completely with you on that.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: But what I also think is you can't get to where you want to go if you don't know where you are.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Absolutely.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: First thing is to get your current coordinates.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: And I think, what I've been shocked about recently, is finding our current coordinates. *[chuckle]* We're not quite as... as...

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: As firm? Fixed?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: As firm as I thought they were, you know? *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You thought we already... we'd already...we'd already passed some of those landmarks?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The marching with the polo shirts with your tiki torches.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I thought that that was kind of over, you know?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah, you thought— you thought we weren't debating Nazism anymore? *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, that sort of—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* You thought that was settled back in '45.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Those little things, you know? *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I had been led to believe like—Well...you know. So to find out that these are not just, you know, meandering veins in our extremities but that continue to be...In our... running through the heart of the country. That... that's a call to arms and, you know, let's us know obviously how much work we have left.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah, I always say to people, "I believe in the upward, forward trajectory of humankind."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I'm with you on that.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: But I do not believe that it is a straight and steady line.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It's very crooked.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]* You are zigging and zagging—

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

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: and you go backwards and you do some loops—

[guitar plays]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The arc of - the arc of history, was that it? *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: The arc of the moral universe, as long it bends towards justice but not—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Not in a straight line.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* Not in a straight line.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You can bend down. And that's been true throughout our history.

[guitar plays and fades]

[AD BREAK]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: We talked about civil rights.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah. *[strums guitar]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: We talked about Rock n' Roll, music and social change and-

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Lightning round: Best protest songs.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs and strums guitar]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Huh. So, top 3, or 4 or 5, how many you can think of—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I would say “Fight the Power,” Public Enemy.

[Public Enemy - Fight the Power plays: ‘1989...The number...’]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: That is a great song.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: I would say “Anarchy in the U.K.” The Sex Pistols. Or “God Save the Queen.”

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[laughs]*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That’s a— those are great protest songs.

[The Sex Pistols - Anarchy in the U.K. plays] I am an anti-christ...I am an anarchist...]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Maggie’s farm is a great protest song—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Fabulous! *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[singing] I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s farm no more.*

[Bruce strums guitar]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You sound good. *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[singing] I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s farm no more...*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: “A Change is Gonna Come”—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Oh yeah I, I love it —

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Sam Cooke.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Beautiful.

[Sam Cooke - A Change is Gonna Come plays - “I was born by the river...]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: That song can make me cry.

[Sam Cooke - A Change is Gonna Come plays - in a little tent...]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: There's something about when he starts singing.

[Sam Cooke - A Change is Gonna Come plays - Oh, and just like the river I have been running ever since...]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The historical pain that's in it. And yet the elegance and generousness of his voice.

[Sam Cooke - A Change is Gonna Come plays - A long time coming but I know... I know...]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit."

[Billie Holiday - Strange Fruit plays: "From the poplar trees...]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Boom, to the top of the list. You know?

[Billie Holiday - Strange Fruit fades out]

[Bruce strums guitar]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: You know what's a great protest song?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Although people don't think of it as a protest song.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Go ahead—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "Respect" Aretha Franklin.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Fabulous. One of the best.

[Aretha Franklin - Respect plays underneath]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: *[singing]* R E S P E C T, right? I am... that's a protest song.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* That is one of the best.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: She was saying to every man out there—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]*

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: "Get your act together"

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That is one of the best. That's for sure.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: It's not— you know... It's not a lecture.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: No. I think my favorite protest songs are the ones that capture... captured spirit more than any particular - a particular diatribe or a dogma.

[Bruce strums guitar]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: No, that doesn't— that doesn't work.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: You know, that that that doesn't work. But um...

[Bruce strums guitar]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: HWell here's a good example. "41 shots" is about a very specific event that happened, and by the way we should remind everyone what happened. You know, it's a sign of our age that although the story sadly has been repeated—

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Many times—

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Many times since then. A lot of folks might not remember exactly what happened.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Well, Amadou Diallo was an African immigrant who, in a case of mistaken identity, was stopped by the police. He was in his vestibule of an apartment building. He went to reach for his wallet and was shot nineteen times — forty one total shots being fired by the officers who were acquitted.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: And— And— And— important for context, these officers were in plain clothes.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: That's right.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: So, Diallo doesn't even necessarily know why these four guys are telling him to stop and suggesting that they somehow got business with him.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Possibly not. But...but where the song came from was... this incident occurs and I start to think about it and I go, "OK, skin. Skin is destiny." It's like what a privilege it is to forget that you live in a particular body.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Yeah.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: White people can do that. Black people can't do that. So, that was what was at the center of that piece of music. And the rest was addressing our mutual fear of one another. It all starts with fear. Hatred comes later, but it all starts with fear. Everything that we've got going in our systemic racism we have here in America today, where does it come from? People are scared. What are they scared of? Demographic change. They're scared of the country becoming some place where Black and brown voices become louder, more influential, more powerful, more equal.

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Losing status.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah, losing status. That's a big part of what we have. I'm gonna—

[Springsteen plays guitar strings]

Maybe play a little bit of this... should I?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Go ahead, man

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Yeah?

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Let's get a little sample.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Alright.

[Springsteen plays guitar strings]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[singing]* 41 shots... And we'll take that ride... Across this bloody river... To the other side... 41 shots... Cut through the night... You're kneeling over his body... in the vestibule. Praying for his life... Is it a gun...

[Springsteen playing American Skin (41 Shots) underneath]

POTUS BARACK OBAMA: Did you get any kind of reaction after you wrote that?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[laughs]* There was some booing. We took a lot of heat from the police after... for several years after that. There were some police officers giving us the New Jersey state bird, which I always felt was a result of not listening to it *[laughs]*... really. You know?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[singing and strumming]* 41 shots...

[Springsteen playing American Skin (41 Shots) underneath]

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: So if you listen to it, it's... it never felt fundamentally controversial. It wasn't a diatribe. It wasn't a finger pointing song particularly, you know? It just tried— it tried to

tally up the human cost in what we all pay for in blood of those kinds of killings and murders that go on day after day. I mean this song is 20 years old. This song is 20 years old.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: [singing] Is it a knife? Is it a wallet? This is your life... It ain't no secret... It ain't no secret... No secret, my friend... You can get killed just for living... You can get killed just for living... You can get killed just for living... in your American skin... 41 shots...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: This is what we're paying in blood for not having sorted through...

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[singing] 41 shots...*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: These issues.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[singing] 41 shots...*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: For not having come to terms with - with one another.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[singing] 41 shots... 41 shots...*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: It just goes on.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *[singing] 41 shots...41 shots...*

[Guitar stops strumming]

[Credits music comes in]

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 USA.

– End of Episode –