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When Rockers Go Asshole

Once worthy icons, The Boss and Moby find themselves on a pretty short — and unflattering — list

Column by | Tim Paluch

There may have been a time when Bruce Springsteen gave a shit. He used to be that regular guy from Jersey, the populist rocker — Born in the U.S.A. — who conveyed the struggles of the migrants workers and the farmers and the homeless and the unemployed. If your life sucked in the eighties, odds are Bruce Springsteen romanticized it in song.

Now that once venerable icon of a disenfranchised society has descended about as far down as one can get — all the way to the asshole.

Now I take my assholes pretty seriously. I’m not one to toss the term around in casual conversation. I have no problem calling you or anyone else an “ass,” an “asswipe,” a “pain in the ass” or even an “asswiping pain in the ass.”

But an “asshole” is far worse an insult. The ass is bad enough — often flabby and/or hairy cheeks of painfully loose tissue. But the “asshole” is the rectal orifice, the sphincter cavity hidden beneath that tissue, extending far up into the even more unflattering colonic area. It is the most nether of the nether regions. It’s essentially the Arkansas of the human anatomy — everyone knows it’s down there, but no one really has anything pleasant to say about it.

Ever since dismantling the E-Street Band in the ’80s, Springsteen’s transition from working-class hero to asshole was a rapid one. And somehow, Springsteen has managed to squirrel his way back into pop culture yet again, becoming the first asshole musician to release an album dealing with Sept. 11 — The Rising. Springsteen used to tackle relevant issues, like Reaganomics and class equity. Now he’s charging 85 bucks to see him live, hardly an inviting price for anyone with shades of blue on his or her collar.

Springsteen isn’t alone. There are several other assholes in the major music business, once-respectable rock stars who got rich and abandoned the philosophies and ideologies that got them there. Johnny Rotten comes to mind. And no asshole list is complete without Bono.

And then there’s Moby — with his asinine black-framed glasses and asinine Puma windbreakers. The asshole for a new generation, here’s a man who early in his career spoke out against discrimination, rampant corporatization of culture and religious fundamentalism. A vegan and staunch environmentalist. Now he’s a product.

Moby sold every track of his 1999 album Play to corporations, and his songs were featured in several automobile commercials, despite his claims to be against the use of fossil fuel-powered automobiles. He’s appeared in Calvin Klein and Gap ads, wearing leather, no less. Seems like an asshole thing to do when you’re a vegan. He went from profound diatribes on globalization to MTV Cribs in less than three years. That’s like Che Guevara opening up a Starbucks.

Some rock stars will never be assholes. Jon Bon Jovi, Ted Nugent, Celine Dion. All asswipes, but never really important enough to qualify for assholes. See, it takes a little more to earn that asshole. You have to stand for something — whether it be social justice or workers’ rights or third world debt relief. And then, when the MTVs and the Rolling Stones of the world anoint you a cultural icon, you stop caring.

Or, maybe you still care a little, but not enough to do anything about it. There’s money to be made, records to be sold. It’s not easy being an asshole.