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CASH



AMERICAN
RECORDINGS
by Tony Tost





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American Recordings



Tony Tost



2011

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In 1967, he drove two separate cars off the high cliff at his Tennessee home and crashed them both into the sea.

Nick Kent,
“The Conflicted Cool of Johnny Cash”

for Simon and Wyatt

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Preface

American Recordings was recorded in Rick Rubin's living room and Johnny Cash's cabin, featuring only Cash and his guitar. Also, two of the songs were taken from a live performance at the Viper Room in Los Angeles. So much for the making of the album.

And so much for music journalism as well. This book concerns itself instead with the Cash myth and the elemental role *American Recordings* played in revitalizing and finalizing it. I have no interest, however, in debunking the Cash myth. First of all, it is a brilliant one, strange and necessary in equal measure. Secondly, one of the most insipid journalistic framing devices is the "truth versus myth" construction, as though myth did not also have a claim to make on the truth. Unless one is willing to exile, like a deranged modern day Plato, both emotion and imagination from the domain of truth, then one will need to go beyond data and facts and names and dates—beyond

empiricism itself—all the way through story and out into myth.

So that is what this book endeavors, not to contrast the mythic Cash with the real Cash, or to conflate different Cashes together, but to try and understand how this once-living, once-breathing man authored one of the great American creations, the mythic version of himself. In attempting to understand and explicate Cash's achievement, I look not just at his greatest album but through it, regarding it as a great late chapter in an ongoing narrative, one in which Cash mingled his creative and biographical pasts with the creative and biographical pasts of his country. Like a stranger standing outside an enormous labyrinth—as good of an image for the workings of myth as any—I pull on threads to see where they lead, intending to get to the beauties and beasts at the center of the Cash myth. In doing so, the book hopefully does not succumb to the random ragbag methodology increasingly prevalent in these sorts of studies—books in which everything from Hitler's mustache to the most recent viral video somehow illustrates the topic at hand—but instead unearths the imaginative American terrain in which a figure like Cash most makes sense. To my mind, I am writing what Joseph Mali calls a mythhistory, full of verifiable data and buttressed by wonderfully tedious hours of research, sure, but also in touch with the spirit of Cash, gathering information not to explain or celebrate him at some remove but to crawl inside his head and love him from there.

PREFACE

In conceptualizing and writing this book, I thought of Cash as a kind of novelist, in possession of his one great character and eager to exploit the words and works of others to further that character's development. I do not delve into Cash's biographical and creative corpuses in order to retrieve an authentic version of the man but to see how he authored an everlasting self through the use of both private materials and cultural inheritances, very often mixing them to a point that they became indistinguishable.

And fixated as it may be on the past, this small book is dedicated to my young sons, Simon and Wyatt. As the world they are coming into is so different from the world their father is coming from, hopefully this book will serve for them as a bridge of some sort, or perhaps just an indirect explanation, or a long excuse.

Tony Tost
Seattle, WA, September 24, 2010

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Chapter One – Permanence (1)

Johnny Cash introduced one great character to the field: the mythic version of himself. It's the Cash we like to prop up as the authentic one, the evil old sanctified soothsayer that Kris Kristofferson called a biblical character, "some old preacher, one of those dangerous old wild ones," a final prophet in a slow fervor at his pulpit. Pistol in one hand, a page of Revelation in the other? Taste of blood rising in his throat? Sort of a stock character by now, one foot on a ladder to paradise, the other on some shitsucker's corpse. This version of the man, being made of myth, answers to a list of names: usually to Cash, sometimes to the Man in Black, rarely to John, never to JR, now and then to Sue. Hounded by prisons and trains and violent regrets, chased onto posters, he's the lean fierce wildman of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the somber leviathan of the final decade. But it wasn't until very late in this dream, until the first *American Recordings* album, that

the mythic Cash finally walked forward and backward at once, carrying himself out beyond his time. He had greater celebrity before this final period, bigger albums and better songs, but not the permanence that hung around him at the end. That's the story we are hunting for—his arrival into permanence. *American Recordings* is the album that did it, and the story is better than true.

Chapter Two – Permanence (2)

Cash had become a mere beloved mortal between *At Folsom Prison* and the return, still a preacher of the gospel of beauty, but an elder now with peers: Willie, Waylon, Kris, Merle, Dolly, Possum, Loretta, Tammy, Orbison, Dylan, Perkins, the Killer. And like his peers, the vigor with which he initiated his career was dissipating, half-returned already to the splendid percolating void from which it had arrived. What was left was the man himself, making the circuit as a souvenir of his former greatness, the pet of a famous face. Then things went strange again. Rick Rubin went off searching for Cash, rolling stones away and—the magazines told us—Cash was missing. Apparently it was some impersonator who had been sleeping near June throughout the 80s, playing to quarter-filled theaters in Branson, Missouri and recording tributes to his own lobotomy (“Chicken in Black”). It was rumored that the one true Cash was to reappear at a seedy club in Austin, with just his guitar and his balls

and his word. And so he did, and then the one true Cash began reappearing again and again, everywhere at once, new song and video in tow.

Yes, the killer from Folsom was back, tall and lonesome in black and white, tossing shovels of dirt on Kate Moss' perfumed body. Suddenly, it seemed as though the one true Cash had been on the run for decades—the song and video suggested this—traveling the countryside, screwing with impunity, killing young women like a country doctor, facing down the firmament and then stepping up to the devil to chew his chewing gum. It was a revelation, perhaps, and too much for television. The impersonator Cash beat the retreat. The video for “Delia’s Gone” was cut up and/or banned. The motive for this was the same in 1994 as it had been in 1965, when the Grand Old Opry first kicked Cash out of the Ryman Auditorium. It might have been thirty years later, he may have been high and heavy with self-regard, but there Cash was again, in his glory, smashing all the lights, acting up like he had a prick the size of Jesse James.

Chapter Three – Americana (1)

Jerry Lee Lewis was a far more carnal beast than Cash; Jimmie Rodgers, more debonair in his brutality. Hollowed out by inner violence and a fury for the Holy Ghost, Hank Williams loved the world with a finer severity. Waylon Jennings had an equally bitter tragedy, more vices and was just as splendid of voice. Merle Haggard outwrote and outperformed our hero, grew up in a boxcar and spent his youth in the sort of cellblock Cash could only see with popcorn grease on his black knickers and Coca-Cola dripping down his chin, agape at a silver screen. Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton were more deeply marked by the gouging ring of a poor childhood. It's doubtful anyone sounds as suavely vicious as Lonnie Johnson in "She's Making Whoopee in Hell Tonight." Gary Stewart scooped up messier spoonfuls of grease on his records. Billy Lee Riley hit the walls of Sun Studios with a wilder sound. The obscure Richard "Rabbit" Brown, at the

end of his “James Alley Blues,” cuts a more fearsome figure than Cash ever did—“sometimes I think you’re just too sweet to die,” Brown growls, “other times I think you ought to be buried alive.” It is possible that Warren Zevon composed from an equally stupefied derangement. Bob Dylan has always been nimbler about his sources, churning his own detachment until it was nothing but sparks. Stranger and spookier, Del Shannon covered St. Hank with a grander felicity and awe. Connie Smith threw more loneliness into her vocals, as if each cut was a long distance run. Bobby Bare was a better drinking partner, cherry-picking Shel Silverstein’s finest songs. The Blue Sky Boys had a more ethereal bearing (O to be rapt in the presence of the sweetness of God) (O to chime like ascendant angels glancing back upon the world) and a higher body count. Emily Dickinson probably knew more chords.

“Don’t go home with your hard-on,” Leonard Cohen intoned on one of his greatest songs—with Dylan, Allen Ginsberg and Phil Spector slapping one another in delirium behind him—casually throwing away pearls of wisdom it is doubtful Cash would even allow himself to comprehend. There is nothing in the Cash catalog equal to Hasil Adkins’ “No More Hot Dogs,” with Adkins laughing atop the rhythmic savagery of his one-man band, promising to pluck off his baby’s head at half past eight and to have it mounted on his wall, at half past ten. Patsy Cline rubbed her notes together more longingly, more languidly, with

a more fatal charm. George Jones was a deeper sage than Cash, broadcasting from even further inside the Penetralium, focused only on the condition of his pet cows, satisfied to be a conduit for a knowing that vibrated miles beyond his minute curiosities. For a few fine early years Tanya Tucker was a superior vocalist, panting and growling through “Delta Dawn” and “Would You Lay With Me (In a Field of Stone)” with a lusty, masterful acquiescence that makes Cash, by contrast, appear to be a domesticated, daydreaming adolescent. Even June had to admit that her first husband Carl Smith was sweeter, and sexier, riding across the hillside and whistling on horseback, finding himself propositioned by every woman at the Grand Old Opry, up to and including Minnie Pearl. Hiccupping and cackling, Charlie Feathers’ rockabilly numbers, like his hillbilly ones, were lacerations across Cash’s very roots, getting strange where Cash turned pompous. Andre Williams was more mobile, agile and hostile. Bobbie Gentry more chillingly called upon the wrath of the Lord, purring for Him to bring forth all backsliders, moonshiners, midnight ramblers, and then, in just half a breath, to cut them down. Having dived more deeply into the honky tonk, Webb Pierce came out the other side with a meatier grin, wearing a rhinestone Nudie suit and driving a silver dollar plated Cadillac. Leadbelly lingered for much longer in the gaze of the great nothing, saw more clearly the pines rising up to rip the sky’s belly and release its good cherry wine.