



Johnny Cash
by Dave Hoekstra
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HENDERSONVILLE, Tenn. A slow drive from the new steel-and-glass Nashville airport to the old stone-and-timber House of Cash in Hendersonville absorbs a lot of passionate land.

A couple of folks have pulled over to inspect a black honky-tonk piano that has been dumped along the roadway. Cabbie Harold Pylant tells me I am the same age Jesus Christ was when he was crucified. Of course, this is before Pylant hands over a liter bottle of ice water that has been blessed by St. Peter. This is life close to the earth.

Johnny Cash has spent most of his 56 years near the earth, spiritually and physically. He was born in a three-room railroad shack in Kingsland, Ark. Father Ray Cash was an indigent farmer who, when unable to live off the black dirt, worked on the railroad, picked cotton, chopped wood and became a hobo laborer. Under a New Deal program, the Cash family moved to a more fertile northeastern Arkansas in 1935, where Johnny began work as a child laborer on his dad's 20-acre cotton farm. By the time he was 14, Johnny Cash was making \$2.50 a day as a water boy for work gangs along the Tyronza River.

"The hard work on the farm is not anything I've ever missed," Cash admitted in a country conversation at his House of Cash offices here, with Tom T. Hall on the turntable and an autographed picture of Emmylou Harris on the wall. "After I got in the business and life got to be on such a fast pace, I wrote songs about the farm life as I knew it. Songs like 'Pickin' Time,' 'Flesh and Blood' and 'Five Feet High and Rising' were my way of reflecting on the quieter and more peaceful times. I was thinking about the country, the creeks and the hills and I think the country influences come out pretty good in a lot of my songs. I sing about trains and hobos and so forth not because I've experienced it, but because of the stories my dad told. A lot of those things I sang and wrote about, I was seeing it through my daddy's eyes.

"Like when we had to leave our farm when we were flooded out and we had to get on a train to go to the hills. The railroad tracks were covered with water. Those experiences lasted and I wrote songs about them later. I know what I'm talking about when I sing about hard work, but it's been a long time since I've had to work like that manually, of course."

This brings us to another hardworking chapter in Cash's 32-year career, which spans 470 albums, 48 singles on the Billboard Hot 100 pop charts, and

the honor of being the youngest man ever selected for the Country Music Hall of Fame. On Oct. 3, Mercury/Polygram Records will release "Water From the Wells of Home," an ambitious album of Johnny Cash duets. Featured in a project which took nine months to assemble are Emmylou Harris teaming up with Cash on Roy Acuff's "As Long as I Live," the Everly Brothers and daughter Rosanne Cash singing with her father on a remake of Jack Clement's lavish "Ballad of a Teenage Queen" and the unusual combo of Johnny Cash and Paul McCartney singing "New Moon Over Jamaica," a song they penned with Tom T. Hall.

Cash and his 18-year-old son John Carter Cash co-wrote the album's title track and also cover J. J. Cale's "Call Me the Breeze" on the record.

"This is the hardest and longest I've ever worked on any album," Cash sighed while alternating between drags off a cigarette and sips of coffee to soothe his lingering bronchitis. "It wasn't just because I had all these other people to schedule. I must have recorded 30 songs over that nine months, and the concept kept changing as each artist appeared on the record. I had two or three really strong songs I wanted on the album, like Kris Kristofferson's 'Anthem 84' that didn't make the album. But we started getting some duets we were really pleased with, so we decided to make it an album of duets."

"Water From the Wells of Home" begins with Cash and Waylon Jennings covering the country classic "Sweeter Than the Flowers" and Johnny and June Carter Cash singing the Dave Loggins ballad "Where Did We go Right?" Last summer, Cash and his son wrote and recorded "Water From the Wells of Home," and as the album's emotion unraveled, it always returned to that theme.

The album's most surprising track is "New Moon Over Jamaica," recorded in March during Cash's European tour at McCartney's studio in south England.

"It's not what you might expect," Cash said. "Everybody would expect Paul and I to do an up-tempo or rockabilly thing. It's a slow waltz - a front porch sing-along about a new moon over Jamaica. Paul and I sing it together all the way through."

Mercury/PolyGram also has released "Classic Cash," a 20-song album featuring vintage Cash songs he re-recorded with his band earlier this year at a Nashville studio. The project was originally done for PolyGram's German subsidiary, PolyStar, but they were so impressed with the streamlined sound of the record they released it in the States.

The intriguing aspect of "Classic Cash" is hearing Cash's seasoned voice cover material such as "I Walk the Line," "Ring of Fire" and "Tennessee Flat Top Box" (a hit for Rosanne Cash earlier this year), in contrast to the raw

originals. On the early cuts, Cash's booming baritone sounds like a railroad train thundering into a black tunnel. On "Classic Cash," the still-powerful voice rolls out of the other side, assuming the light of an abundant life.

The man in black survived the ride.

In concert Cash has been performing the "Classic Cash" material as well as "Jackson," his hit duet with June Carter Cash. June also does an opening set with the Carter family. Johnny also sings "Call Me the Breeze" and "Water From the Wells of Home" with his son John, who has also professed his love for metal bands such as Iron Maiden and Motorhead. Last fall, Cash met Iron Maiden in Toronto, obtaining autographs for his son. John then took Dad to the Iron Maiden concert, where he had a great time, pointing out how he could feel the music "in my liver."

Don't expect such a radical twist with "Water From the Wells of Home."

"We were on our way to Florida when we wrote that song," said Cash, who was not wearing black, but a sleeveless yellow, red and white striped sweat shirt. "He was doing his first show with his rock 'n' roll band and we were traveling in my bus. We passed a water fountain as we were walking out (to the bus) and I said, 'Let's have another drink from the water from the wells of home.' He said that would be a good song title. So we sat down on the bus and I said, 'Let's write a song together.' He got a guitar, and we knocked it out in 15 or 20 minutes. It really flowed. Then he went back and watched a movie on the video player. I enjoyed writing with him, but we haven't tried it since.

"He's very much into his own music."

It's a textbook case of 'like father, like son.' Johnny Cash was a door-to-door appliance salesman in Memphis when he walked into Sun Records in 1954. He told Sun founder Sam Phillips he was a gospel singer, but Cash was also singing in the high country pitch of Hank Snow and Hank Williams.

"Sam listened to me sing everybody else's songs for an hour or so and then he asked me what I had written," Cash recalled. "He encouraged me to do my music my way and not to try and sound like anybody else - which I did. I never could imitate anybody else, even though I did like Hank Snow and Ernest Tubb. So, Sam didn't have to do too much steering to keep me on course in that regard. I wasn't aware I had a different style. When we went in to record at Sun Records, we just recorded the way it felt right to us. We weren't aware it was so different until people started pointing it out to us."

Whether it was Howlin' Wolf, Elvis Presley or Johnny Cash, Sam Phillips gave

all his artists the freedom of expression. "Yeah, I was kind of surprised that Sam would let me record with just two or three instruments, but it was never brought up I should have more instruments on the records," Cash explained. "He'd get that echo on the paper of the strings of the guitar (Phillips had Cash stick a piece of paper between the strings and fret board of his acoustic guitar to create a sense of percussion) and make it sound like a drum or a slapback. He could make it sound like three or four instruments."

The spiritual roll of the mid-South shines through early Sun material, especially with the stark arrangements applied to Cash's material. "I remember when I recorded 'Folsom Prison Blues' and I saw the piece of paper where Sam (Phillips) was listing songs and he wrote 'Folsom Prison,'" Cash recalled. "I corrected him. It was supposed to be 'Folsom Prison Blues' because it was a blues song. The musical structure was up-tempo 12-bar blues. That's my influence. Blues and black gospel from Memphis and the mid-South. I think you hear a lot of that in my music."

When Cash recorded gut-wrenchers such as "Cry, Cry, Cry," "Get Rhythm" and "I Walk the Line" at Sun between 1954 and 1958, Phillips would emphasize the beat, the bass and the basic emotion of the music. Underrated Sun engineer and producer Jack Clement was into elaborating and experimenting on the sound.

"He's the kind of guy who sees through all the plastic and the glitter," Cash said of Clement, who still lives in Nashville. "Then he lets you see through it to the reality of the situation, musically speaking. He's not a yes man, and I've gotta have people around me who are going to be that way. If I can be a big record seller again - and I think it's just a matter of time before we come up with the right combination - I think Jack Clement is as capable or more qualified than anybody I know to produce me. He knows my limitations and he knows my potential."

The essential catalyst in Cash's career was electric guitarist Luther Perkins, who hooked up with Cash and bassist Marshall Grant in a trio called Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Two. They played gospel music and Hank Snow tunes at church socials and county fairs around Memphis before winning the ear of Phillips.

Perkins' unheralded contribution to country music was his pointed and wide-open leads, which created the guttural landscape for contemporary country music. By augmenting the guitar and diminishing the fiddle, Cash, Clement and the Tennessee Two were the first to create hard honky-tonk country. Perkins died in a fire in 1968 and Cash established a burn research center in his memory at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

`Luther was a radio repairman at this Plymouth dealership called Automobile Sales in Memphis," Cash recalled. "My brother Roy worked there and he introduced me to Marshall Grant and Luther Perkins. Luther said he played guitar. So the three of us got together at his house. Luther had a little tiny Silvertone amplifier that he plugged this Fender guitar into. The plate was falling off the butt of the strings and his hand laid on the strings as he picked and hit the strings. That's where he got that deadened sound on the guitar. A lot of people have done it that way, trying to sound like Luther, but it's been nothing like Luther.

"From that very first time I rehearsed with him (Perkins), I felt right," Cash said. "I loved that beat; I loved that rhythm. I guess it was like a train rhythm or a pile driver. But he would set a beat that wouldn't fail. And he would hold that beat once he set it. He wasn't a very knowledgeable musician and that's why he was so unique. He wasn't such a great musician, but he was a great guitar stylist. In my mind, the greatest."

Did Cash and the Tennessee Two set the table for new country artists such as Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam? "I think so," Cash answered. "Dwight just recorded `Home of the Blues.' I think a lot of those guys go back to those roots and check them out."

And Tennessee roots are closest to the earth.