

“The Man in Black: Johnny Cash and the Struggle to Save the Soul of America”--A Study in Religion, Music, and Public Discourse

Frederick Downing, Professor, Valdosta State University and Jonathan Downing, Screaming Shih-Tzu Productions, US*

He’s a poet and he’s a picker
He’s a prophet and he’s a pusher
He’s a pilgrim and a preacher. . .
He’s a walkin’ contradiction
Partly truth and partly fiction
Kris Kristofferson

ABSTRACT

In the fall of 2019, filmmaker Ken Burns released a sixteen-hour documentary on American country music. As the history of a uniquely American art form, this long narration focuses on the biographies of the characters who brought it into being. One of the central figures in this American drama was Johnny Cash, who in some sense epitomized this music and tradition. His contemporary Emmylou Harris put it this way: “Take every piece of American music. . . . from blues, gospel, bluegrass, rock and roll. . . I mean, that was all in John.” For many, at a time in the 1960s -1980s, Cash was country music. And he would embody everything that this era came to be remembered for—“heedless self-destruction and a concern for social justice; an eagerness to experiment with new ideas, and a yearning for old-fashioned personal redemption.” Cash’s music explored major American themes: “prisons, railroads, Native Americans, the lowly and depressed, the open road, love and life and death, and damnation and salvation. And God.” Cash had an explosive life and career that seemed to move from a quest for self-destruction to personal redemption. It was as if he lived “with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other.”

The thesis of this paper is that Johnny Cash is part of a long and continuing tradition of artists creating a public square and beckoning us to come close and dialogue about life in America. Toward that end, Cash was an artist who attempted to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice with songs like: “The Man in Black,” “Folsom Prison Blues,” “The Ballad of Ira Hayes,” “Sunday Morning Coming Down,” and the American Recordings Albums where the “Man in Black” side of Cash becomes even darker. Using the theory of Martin Marty on the public church and Walter Brueggemann on the prophetic imagination, we will show that like Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Cash created a public church that articulated a vision with which he invited all persons to participate in a new reality. His music often critiqued the status quo, but enlivened the members of

* Dr. Frederick Downing, Valdosta State University, US, Professor of Philosophy & Religious Studies, Head of the Department, fdowning@valdosta.edu and Mr. Jonathan Downing, Screaming Shih-Tzu Productions, US, jonathandowning@me.com

his public church, which included especially the poor, prisoners, minorities, people struggling with drug addiction, and the elderly. On one hand he embodied a sense of American traditional values, but he was also in touch with the counter-culture, which looked to the future to see where we still needed to go. Through his work in the musical public square, Johnny Cash took his place in the historic struggle to save the soul of his country, and urged his listeners to follow the better angels of our nature.

INTRODUCTION

The recent years in the US have been a study in “politics and public discourse” culminating on January 6, 2021 when the President of the United States fomented insurrection and incited a group of violent partisans to attack and breach the capitol building in order to interrupt the Congress which was attempting to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election. Historian Jon Meacham recently characterized the current American situation as a “grave moment”: “A deadly virus is ravaging us. Our jobs are evaporating. Our faith in the things that bind us is fraying for our democracy is under assault. . . .”¹ Meacham went on to say that “Extremism, Nativism, Isolationism, and a lack of economic opportunity. . . are preventing us from realizing our nation’s promise.”² So as a nation, America will have to decide what kind of country will we be—one driven by the better parts of our soul or the worst. The new President-Elect described this situation as a struggle to save the soul of America.

Fifty-two years after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., his proclamation that the arc of the moral universe inherently bends toward justice is being tested. The answer seems clear that nothing bends toward justice without someone actively shaping that arc toward justice.³ In his First Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln hoped that “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched as surely they will be by the better

¹ Jon Meacham, “Speech to the Democratic National Convention,” August 20, 2020, Located at <https://www.nbcboston.com/news/politics/decision-2020/john-meachams-full-speech-at-2020-dnc/2181210/>. Meacham emphasizes the concept of the American soul in in his recent book, Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America: The Battle for our Better Angels* (New York: Random House: 2018) 7-8. Meacham describes the soul as “the vital center, the core, the heart, the essence of life.”

² Ibid.

³ Chris Hayes, “The idea that the moral universe inherently bends towards justice is inspiring. It’s also wrong.” *Think: Opinion, Analysis, Essays*, published online at <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/idea-moral-universe-inherently-bends-towards-justice-inspiring-it-s-ncna859661>.

angels of our nature.”⁴ The better angels of our nature have at times been beckoned from unusual places and persons, as we propose from the chords of American music.

THESIS

The thesis of this paper is that Johnny Cash is part of a long and continuing tradition of artists creating a public square and beckoning us to come close and dialogue about life in America. Toward that end, Cash was an artist who attempted to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice with songs like: “Man in Black,” “Folsom Prison Blues,” “The Ballad of Ira Hayes,” “Sunday Morning Coming Down,” and the American Recordings Albums where the “Man in Black” side of Cash becomes even darker. Gifted songwriters are like the great poets, argued Edward Curtain. They seem to be possessed by a certain “passionate melancholic sensibility” as they seem to describe a home that they cannot find or precisely define but which points to the “presence of an absence” central to their work. It is in the telling of this “unnamable” place that draws the listener in to hear the story.⁵ For Johnny Cash, a part of that “passionate melancholic sensibility” seems to have been his desire to draw the listener in to hear about the defining and re-defining of America, all of which came out of his own struggle to save himself, and his native land.

Using the theory of Martin Marty on the public church—beyond sectarian demand and open to all—and Walter Brueggemann on the prophetic imagination, we will show that like Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Cash created a public church that articulated a vision with which he invited all persons to participate in a new reality.⁶ His music often critiqued the status quo, but enlivened the members of his public church, which included especially the poor, prisoners, minorities, people

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address, (Washington, D.C., March 4, 1861). For a summary, see The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, published online at https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln1.asp.

⁵ See Edward Curtain, “Partly Truth and Partly Fiction—Totally Genius: Kris Kristofferson,” *Counter Currents.Org* (December 12, 2020) published online at <https://countercurrents.org/2020/12/partly-truth-and-partly-fiction-totally-genius-kris-kristofferson/>.

⁶ For the image of a “public church,” see Martin Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline—Evangelical—Catholic* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981) 3. For an introduction to the work of Walter Brueggemann, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 11-79. For the view on Bruce Springsteen and the public church, see Frederick L. Downing and Jonathan W. Downing, “Religion, Politics and Public Discourse: Bruce Springsteen and the Public Church of Rock and Roll,” *Journal of Academic Perspectives*, Volume 2014 No. 2.

struggling with drug addiction, and the elderly.⁷ On one hand he embodied a sense of American traditional values, but he was also in touch with the counter-culture, which looked to the future to see where we still needed to go. Through his work in the musical public square, Johnny Cash took his place in the historic struggle to save the soul of his country, and urged his listeners to follow the better angels of our nature.

RELIGION, MUSIC AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The bard's music, like good literature, can create a type of public square or a form of public discourse where urgent matters of human survival, like the nature and nurture of a just state, are expressed, a call for social justice can be heard, and faith and hope for the future can be assimilated.⁸ From this perspective, while Johnny Cash was an American song writer and musician whose involvement in political discourse was not well known, and his music tended to defy genre and category, yet one of the things that stood out in his work was his social awareness, and his concern for the life of the common man. Because of that concern, a call for social justice can be heard in his songs, as well as a need for faith and hope for the future. As one listens to the music of Johnny Cash, one senses that he or she has walked into a musical public square where outsiders can come up close to hear a dialogue concerning important matters such as the conditions important for human survival and the concerns of a just society.

CASH AS BARD AND THE MUSICAL PUBLIC SQUARE

The kind of human suffering that Johnny Cash knew tends to bind people together. Some of the most important lessons of life come from the deepest pain.⁹ In that sense, Johnny Cash was bound to the people of the south and middle America. Cash never forgot those lessons connected to pain and the people. Consequently, like one of the Bards of old, steeped in traditions of clan and country, Johnny Cash seems to have taken up the role of the poet/musician of America's poor and chronicler of the disadvantaged. In so doing he brought the ongoing narrative of the American people into

⁷For a description of Cash's concerns for social justice in a context of cultural criminology, see Kenneth D. Tunnell and Mark S Hamm, "Singing across the scars of wrong: Johnny Cash and his struggle for social justice," in *Encompass—Justice Studies* (2009): 268-284.; published online at https://encompass.eku.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=cjps_fsresearch.

⁸ See Robert Detweiler, *Uncivil Rites, Religion and the Public Square* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996) 1, 213.

⁹ See the comments of Al Gore and Sheryl Crow in *Johnny Cash's America* (Sony Legacy 2008) published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsNyiS03jc0>.

the musical public square for all to hear. He had “a way of reaching out and singing songs for everyone in need and becoming the spokesperson if need be for those who couldn’t speak.”¹⁰ It is, in part, this role of the poet/musician as a bard that helps Cash resist being typecast.

THE CRUCIBLE OF POVERTY IN DEPRESSION-ERA ARKANSAS

Johnny Cash was born in 1932 in south-central Arkansas in the heart of the Great Depression, the son of sharecroppers and one of seven children. Johnny’s father was so poor that he could not pay the poll tax in order to vote, and his mother played the piano at the Baptist Church three times a week. When Johnny was three years old, his parents moved to the Dyess Colony, which was a community created by FDR’s New Deal. Here people got a new start with a home and 20 acres of land with a stipend for food and clothing. They repaid the money when the crops were harvested. The move of the Cash family to the Dyess Colony was like a scene out of the Steinbeck novel, The Grapes of Wrath. Johnny Cash remembered: There were “six of us in a truck with all of our earthly possessions and it was like we were bound for the promised land.”¹¹ But life was precarious in Dyess, Arkansas, for the Cash family. At any point, livelihood could be lost due to floods from the Mississippi River or from bad crops. To stem the onrush of poverty, the entire family was needed to work the fields. Johnny was picking cotton by the time he was eight years old.¹²

HARD TIMES AND THE DEATH OF BROTHER JACK

Johnny’s early years were hard.¹³ The Cash family was “dirt poor.” Johnny’s father “rode the rails” across the country looking for work.¹⁴ The only luxury was a battery-powered radio. At the end of the day, the family gathered round to listen to that radio—the blues, gospel, and country music.

¹⁰See the comments of John Carter Cash in *Johnny Cash’s America* (Sony Legacy 2008) published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsNyiS03jc0>.

¹¹ See the comments of Johnny Cash in *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019), located online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>

¹² Robert Hilburn, *Johnny Cash: The Life* (New York: Little, Brown And Company, 2013) 4. See also Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 4. See also the comments of Neil Pearson in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk.

¹³ A poignant portrayal of Cash’s stark poverty-stricken childhood is given on his 1963 release of “Christmas As I Knew It,” originally recorded on *The Christmas Spirit* (New York: Columbia Records, 1963).

¹⁴ See also the comments of Neil Pearson in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk

The music from the radio was the only light in Cash's life—music was survival. Music, for Cash, was essentially spiritual. It was the place he would go in the darkest hours. Johnny Cash spoke of how he and his family would sing in the fields as they worked in the cotton fields. "I would start off in the morning singing hillbilly songs. By mid-afternoon, I was into gospel."¹⁵

During those early years, Johnny Cash always looked up to his brother, Jack whose ambition in life was to be a minister. When Johnny Cash was 12 years old, his brother was killed in a tragic accident while he was cutting fence posts. Jack's death took its toll on the family. The family had to go back into the cotton fields the day after the funeral. Johnny's mother would work for a little while and then drop to her knees and cry out, "I can't go on." Then the family would sing a spiritual.¹⁶ Dan Rather thought Johnny Cash was "haunted his whole life" by Jack's death.¹⁷

JACK'S DEATH AND THE CRUCIBLE FOR JOHNNY CASH

The death of his older brother was indeed a central part of the crucible from which the public life of Johnny Cash was formed. Cash's son, John Carter, came to the conclusion that "If it hadn't been for losing Jack, there's no telling if he ever would have gone on to sing songs that he sang with such heartache and related to so many people. . . his suffering so easily because it was on his sleeve."¹⁸ Cash's daughter, Rosanne, was even more specific about the centrality of Jack's death to the crucible for Johnny Cash's public life. "He was absolutely tortured. He wanted to redeem himself. And that goes back to Jack. That is where it all started."¹⁹ Rosanne Cash continued her analysis by saying that her father "always had this idea that part of Jack's death was why he became who he was. He felt that Jack was a sacrificial lamb in some ways. It was a deep wound and fueled

¹⁵ *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019), located online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>. See also Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 4.

¹⁶ Hilburn, *Johnny Cash: The Life*, 14-17. See also Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 4.

¹⁷ Dan Rather, *The Gospel Music of Johnny Cash: A Story of Faith and Redemption* (Alexandria, IN, Gaither Music Group, 2007).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See the comments of Rosanne Cash in *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019), published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>. Roy Orbison's wife, Barbara, put Cash's struggle this way: "Johnny had a long fight with Johnny." See her comments in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk.

his restlessness and fueled much of his writings and music.”²⁰ As a young teenager, Cash was looking for a model to help him shape his life. But his father, Ray Cash, could be cruel and distant.²¹ Ray Cash’s relationship with Johnny grew worse after Jack’s death. After a heavy bout of drinking, Ray Cash came home and told Johnny: “Too bad it wasn’t you instead of Jack.” Rosanne Cash saw that her father carried a heavy burden of survivor guilt for a lifetime.²² In contrast to his father, Johnny’s mother inspired him with her love for music. The distance and cruelty of his father pushed him toward a brooding search for answers to deeper questions.²³ As Roland Barthes puts it, the very basis of narrative is the son’s search for the father. Narrative is always a searching for one’s origins.²⁴ If so, for Johnny Cash, there was another theme prevalent in the grammar of his life—that of the search to be a dutiful brother, perhaps also in an effort to redeem himself from the guilt he felt over Jack’s death. Cash continued to dream about Jack for the entirety of his life. Jack would be, as Cash said, “a guiding light. . . . a minister,” and a powerful influence from beyond the grave.²⁵

A VOW TO THE MOTHER

After being pushed away from his father, Cash retreated into his high school studies, especially history and poetry. Cash would take long solitary walks at night. He returned from one of those walks to make a vow to his mother. He would do honor to his fallen brother by becoming a gospel singer. Somehow Jack’s death was central to the musical journey of Johnny Cash. Until the end of his mother’s life, Cash would go to visit his mother on the anniversary of his brother’s death, and

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The violence of Cash’s father Ray has been recorded by his biographers. See especially, Steve Turner, *The Man Called Cash* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 2004) 15; and Mikal Gilmore, *Stories Done: Writings on the 1960s and Its Discontents* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008) 182.

²² *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>.

²³ Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 4. Rosanne Cash framed her father’s quest by saying that her father “was somewhat of a brooding figure. He had as much darkness as light.” John Carter Cash put it differently saying that their father “had a duality.” See their comments in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk. See also comments of Michael Streissguth in *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 10 and 47.

²⁵ *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>.

he would sit with her all day long. Cash would dream of Jack his whole life, and Jack would continue to grow older with Johnny—always two years older.²⁶

DEATH AND REDEMPTION

Johnny Cash experienced the loss of his brother in the same way that M.K. Gandhi reacted to the death of his father in the form of an existential, and life-long curse. Just as Gandhi sought redemption by becoming the dutiful son to all society (and eventually to become the father of his country), Cash sought to become the dutiful brother to those around him and ironically, later in life, he was nicknamed “the father of our country” by The Highwaymen..²⁷ Like Gandhi, Cash’s existential curse was life-long and chronic. Heedless self-destruction was always near, but so was the ongoing compulsion to be the person he thought his brother would have become.²⁸ Consequently, Johnny Cash sought redemption in ongoing fashion. For Cash, this drama was played out on stage and in the public view of his musical career. Cash’s daughter Roseanne put it this way: “He worked out all of his problems on stage. That’s where he took all of his anguish and fears and griefs, and he worked them out with an audience.”²⁹

CASH AND THE ANCIENT CHURCH IDEA

The music of the church permeated the fields as they worked the cotton. That music provided a rich array of symbols and the idea of the church as an agent of social justice. The idea of the church as an agent of social justice began in the Hebrew Bible with the call to create an alternative community which was a radical, revolutionary, counter-community with a counter-consciousness.

In this tradition, the poets of the church have the task of offering symbols adequate to the horror of oppression, to bring to public expression fears that have been suppressed, and to speak metaphorically about the deathliness that hovers over the community. The language of the poet then is a critique of the status quo and the positive force of energizing the birth of a new reality.³⁰

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For the reaction of Gandhi to the death of his father, see *Mahatma Gandhi: Pilgrim of Peace* (New York, A & E Television Networks, 1997). For Gandhi’s life-long curse, see, Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi’s Truth: On The Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1969) 128. For Cash’s nickname as “father of our country,” see Kris Kristofferson in *Johnny Cash’s America* (Sony Legacy 2008). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsNyiS03jc0>.

²⁸ Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 5.

²⁹ Ibid., Episode 8.

³⁰ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 11-79.

This force from the ancient church was the impetus behind Cash's innovative effort in the song the "Man in Black" which describes his attire as a statement of solidarity with the poor and downtrodden, as well as a critique of poverty, racism, and injustice.

I HEAR THE TRAIN A COMIN': THE MUSICAL ROOTS OF THE MAN IN BLACK

The music which helped Johnny Cash survive the hard times of Dyess, Arkansas and came to him on that battery-powered radio was a pluralistic utopia that shaped generations of artists toward an integrated, multicultural soundscape that blended traditions and histories, and formed a key component of the American identity quickly at odds with the stark segregated realities of American life off the airwaves. Cash was deeply affected by radio and learned to combine the elements of all that he heard on the radio, incorporating the many forms of traditional American music. As John Carter Cash put it, "The radio became a place that he could escape to. The thing that drew him the most to the music was the characters that the music would bring to his mind."³¹ As a developing writer and artist, Johnny Cash was, at a very young age, attempting to emulate what he heard on the radio and in the folk songs. The songs also helped him begin to understand himself and touch an emerging sense of identity and purpose.³²

Even in childhood, Cash was taking in many influences, and a large amount of material. Those influences informed him of song traditions. He seemed to develop an almost encyclopedic knowledge of all this music and later throughout his career Cash acted as a type of historian and custodian of an authentic American music. In addition to the escape and exposure to the larger world that radio provided him, the gospel music of the south, and the hymns of the church where his mother played the piano provided a language for the soul. Gospel music would become integral to what made Johnny Cash the Man in Black.

BEFORE THE MAN IN BLACK: FOLSOM PRISON BLUES AND CREATING THE PUBLIC CHURCH

Cash was stationed in West Germany in the US Air Force at Landsberg, Bavaria when he saw the film *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison* (1951). Cash then imagined the story of a potential inmate

³¹ See the comments of John Carter Cash on *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>

³² Ibid.

and set his words to the tune of the song Crescent City Blues. The song became “Folsom Prison Blues,” which would later be one of his first big hits with Sun Records. Johnny Cash was able to add his unique flavor to the music by drawing on the multiple Country and folk styles of train songs, prison songs, and murder ballads.³³ These became a staple for Cash as his career developed. And as his persona developed he was able to embody all the complications of the characters he sang about and he began to develop a strong empathy for the men incarcerated across America.

Cash perhaps more than any other artist in his time seemed to embody the fictional character he would sing about. His acceptance of people and his need for repentance and redemption rang true to his audience. The seed would be planted there in Cash’s mind to perform for the prisoners all over the United States.³⁴

THE EARLY MUSIC OF JOHNNY CASH

The music came first from the cotton patch where the family sang gospel music to comfort themselves. His artistry had a primitive, elemental force given with a voice that was like rough sawn lumber. The voice itself was a low bass-baritone that was hard-edged like a loosely chiseled stone fallen from the Tennessee hills. He first wanted to be a gospel singer, and his music took on a spiritual quality. But he was also a man with a message, like a minister or preacher. Little Richard put it this way: “His records said something. He wasn’t just jiving, he said something. . . .”³⁵ That message was: no matter how many problems you have or how much suffering you encounter, regardless of the sins committed, don’t give up or lose faith. Better times are coming!³⁶ So

³³ Jonathan Silverman, *Nine Choices: Johnny Cash and the American Culture* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010) 92. The song “Folsom Prison Blues” is a good example of how a multitude of cultures could come together in the early music of Johnny Cash. The musical elements of the song had already passed through several hands before Cash began adapting it. “Crescent City Blues” was a 1930’s instrumental tune written and recorded by Eurreal Wilford “Little Brother” Montgomery who was from Kentwood, Louisiana and whose parents were both of African American and Creek Indian ancestry. The Song was then built on and adapted to the vocal song “Crescent City Blues” by Gordon Jenkins a popular composer and arranger of Jazz and Big Band music from the 1930’s to 1950’s. See Bob Eagle and Eric S. LeBlanc, *Blues: A Regional Experience* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishing, 2013) 106-107.

³⁴ Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004) 21.

³⁵ See the comments of Little Richard in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk

³⁶ “How Johnny Cash Spoke to the Heart of America”—Interview with Robert Hilburn, *PBS Newshour* (December 16, 2013). Published online at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-johnny-cash-spoke-to-the-heart-of-america>

sometimes his singing slipped into the rhetoric of a preacher-- like a sweaty sermon from a southern pulpit. But he preached not as a saint, rather as a sinner, and he spoke to other sinners -- to the lost souls who were down and out, forgotten. His recordings felt loose and spontaneous as if he and his band mates were taking a break on the factory floor to blow off steam.

Yet Cash was a historian and custodian of American Country and Folk music. His personally written songs filled the gaps he saw in what he thought needed to be said or expressed. If someone else like Kris Kristofferson wrote the right song for his feeling, he would make it his own, such as “Sunday Morning Coming Down.” His music was also complex as Rosanne Cash noted--he was working out his problems on stage: the loss of his brother, a father who did not love him the way he should have, his own abandonment of his wife and daughters, the destructive nature of his addictive personality.

Consequently, as Kris Kristofferson wrote, Cash was a “walking contradiction” struggling between his powerful demons and his better angels.³⁷ His own public image became partly truth and partly fiction—authenticity and myth making. In 1955 Johnny Cash auditioned for Sam Phillips at Sun Records as a gospel singer. Phillips didn’t think gospel would sell so he told him to go home and sin a little and come back when he had some new songs. Cash played “Hey Porter” for Phillips and he was impressed and made a record with “Cry, Cry, Cry” as the B-side. “Folsom Prison Blues” was to follow next. It didn’t take long before he was churning out hits and touring the country with the Tennessee Three. However, the dark temptations that came with a grueling life on the road soon started to take a toll on Cash. The darkest of the temptations that came to him was the addiction to amphetamines and barbiturates. Success came to him as a double-edged sword.

JOHNNY CASH—THE EPITOME OF COUNTRY MUSIC

In the fall of 2019, filmmaker Ken Burns released a sixteen-hour documentary on American country music. As the history of a uniquely American art form, this long narration focuses on the biographies of the characters who brought it into being. One of the central figures in this American drama was Johnny Cash, who in some sense epitomized this music and tradition. His contemporary

³⁷ See Kris Kristofferson, “The Pilgrim” (1971) which appeared on the album, Kris Kristofferson, *The Silver Tongued Devil*.

Emmylou Harris put it this way: “Take every piece of American music. . . . from blues, gospel, bluegrass, rock and roll. . . I mean, that was all in John.”³⁸ For many, at a time in the 1960s -1980s, Cash was country music. And he would embody everything that this era came to be remembered for—“heedless self-destruction and a concern for social justice; an eagerness to experiment with new ideas, and a yearning for old-fashioned personal redemption.”³⁹ Cash’s music explored major American themes: “prisons, railroads, Native Americans, the lowly and depressed, the open road, love and life and death, and damnation and salvation. And God.”⁴⁰ Cash had an explosive life and career that seemed to move from a quest for self-destruction to personal redemption. It was as if he lived “with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other.”⁴¹

COUNTRY MUSIC AS SOUL MUSIC

Cash found a pluralistic environment on the radio played in the evenings in his Arkansas farmhouse in the delta region. In this melting pot on the airways, Cash found a way to bring it all together as a form of music that fed his soul. In later years, Cash would understand, that like the Blues and other truly American art forms, his music should hold a mirror up to the audience. For Cash came to see that music is made by and for the Everyman and reflects their joys, troubles, darkness, and heartache. It sees them and they see themselves represented. Like any Soul Music it comes from the heart and is made for the heart.⁴²

Johnny Cash became a master of the many sub-genres of Country and Folk music and its many musical tropes such as the Prison Song, the Murder Ballad, the Train Song. In time, his music would become a masterclass in the simplistic, succinct art form famously described by Harlan Howard as containing only “Three Chords and the Truth.” These songs became Cash’s templates to express himself. If he didn’t know a particular song that expressed what he wanted to say, then he would write it himself.

³⁸ Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 8.

³⁹ Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 5

⁴⁰ Dan Rather, *The Gospel Music of Johnny Cash: A Story of Faith and Redemption* (Alexandria, IN, Gaither Music Group, 2007).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Johnny Cash Interview, “The Mike Douglas Show” (1971). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1ZhbI1CvaU>. Cash was sitting next to James Brown.

Johnny Cash's songwriting is often overlooked or overshadowed by his persona, stage presence, and perhaps because any song he sang became his.⁴³ "Busted," "Doin' My Time," "Delia's Gone" and "Folsom Prison Blues" were some of the early archetypal songs he recorded that began to lay the foundation for the building of his ultimate persona, the "Man in Black." Cash's music would contain a plethora of themes just as he himself would embody a multitude of personalities. His music like his life embodied tragedy, destitution, darkness, despair, as well as redemption and reinvention.

JOHNNY CASH AND THE AMERICAN DREAM: A DREAM DEFERRED

Like Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash epitomized the American Dream.⁴⁴ And to some extent Cash was an incarnation of America—a representative figure, an American icon. He represented America in all of its complexity and contradictions.⁴⁵ Something happened to Cash, however, along his way to the status of an icon. He came to embody all the different facets of the American culture. He came to know that the American mythic tradition had a dark side: the noble experiment was built on a primal crime. Native Americans were driven off their land, and African-Americans were enslaved in a system that became a nightmare.⁴⁶ Cash's discovery of these realities also fueled his quest for personal redemption and to save the soul of his native land.

CREATING THE MUSICAL PUBLIC SQUARE

Because of the existential nature of his curse and quest for redemption, the outline of Cash's career and public trajectory took on extraordinary dimensions. His battle with drugs was near deadly and was ongoing. Yet his sensitivity to the plight of others and his drive for discovery of his own humanity, gave his odyssey a heroic dimension until very late in his own life. His music and

⁴³ *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>.

⁴⁴ See Gelry Opena, "The American Dream Through the Music of Johnny Cash and Elvis," (May 27, 2016) Published online at https://prezi.com/lrvwqij_a67f/the-american-dream-through-the-music-of-johnny-cash-and-elvi/.

⁴⁵ Edwin Dutilleul, "Johnny Cash: The Incarnation of America," (May 8, 2016). Published online at <https://americanconstemple.wordpress.com/2016/05/08/johnny-cash-the-incarnation-of-america/>.

⁴⁶ For a review of the concept of the American Dream, see especially Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) XVI, and 1-35; and Robert Benne and Phillip Hefner, *Defining America: A Christian Critique of the American Dream* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 2-16.

performances recorded his quest. From the first show at Folsom Prison, it was clear that Cash was a man with a message—a message about truth concerning life, our common humanity.⁴⁷

BITTER TEARS: CASH SHINES A LIGHT ON THE HISTORY AND PLIGHT OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN

In 1964 Cash fought against his own label to finally record a concept album focused entirely on Native American culture and America's troubled relationship with that heritage. The album was called "Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian." Antonino D'Ambrosio describes the making of the Bitter Tears album in *A Heartbeat and a Guitar: Johnny Cash and the Making of Bitter Tears* and in a companion documentary *Johnny Cash's Bitter Tears*.⁴⁸ He says "Johnny Cash's decision to place himself squarely in the middle of the fervent social upheavals of the time was not taken lightly" by Cash.⁴⁹ In fact, "Cash immersed himself in the issues surrounding the native movement using the penetrating songwriting of little-known folksinger Peter La Farge."⁵⁰ Peter La Farge had been signed to a contract with Columbia Records by the same producer who signed Bob Dylan a short time later. La Farge's music was described as truthful, powerful, and poetic so that his music was able to speak directly to the human condition. Johnny Cash took the song and made it his own, and used it to sing about injustice.

In detailing why Cash made this album D'Ambrosio said "It really came down to a clear, basic mantra for Cash: If any group of people face injustice and are denied their rights, then there is no freedom or justice for any of us."⁵¹ Columbia Records and the radio stations both participated in a type of 'soft censorship' of the record. When he learned about this Johnny Cash wrote a protest letter and published it in *Billboard Magazine*. Then he bought up thousands of the records and began to hand deliver the records to radio stations. His protest letter was stuffed inside the sleeve with the record. The first line of the letter was "Where are your guts?" When he reflected on this

⁴⁷ See the comments of Emmy Lou Harris in *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019), Published online @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>.

⁴⁸ Antonio D'Ambrosio, *A Heartbeat and a Guitar* (Philadelphia: Nation Books, 2009) XI-XV; and *Johnny Cash's Bitter Tears* (Burbank: PBS SoCal, 2020).

⁴⁹ Stephen Pevar, "'Where Are Your Guts?': Johnny Cash's Little-Known Fight for Native Americans," An Interview with Antonino D'Ambrosio, American Civil Liberties Union, published online at <https://www.aclu.org/blog/racial-justice/american-indian-rights/where-are-your-guts-johnny-cashes-little-known-fight>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

time, Cash stated: “I dove into primary and secondary sources, immersing myself in the tragic stories of the Cherokee and the Apache, among others, until I was almost as raw as Peter. By the time I actually recorded the album I carried a heavy load of sadness and outrage.”⁵²

The fifth song on the album and one of the most successful was “*The Ballad of Ira Hayes*” written by Peter La Farge. Cash interprets the song with an almost unsettling personal embodiment of the shame and disrespect cast upon Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian who served as a U.S. Marine and fought in the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II and was one of the six soldiers who were famously depicted raising the American flag after the battle. Cash seems to spit the words out at those who had denied Ira Hayes his respect. He scathed more than sang, reminding the listeners of the valiant deeds that outshone the stereotypes and the sad state Ira Hayes was reduced to before his death. His performance of the song seemed to demand social justice and promise a reckoning.

JOHNNY CASH BRINGS THE PUBLIC CHURCH TO PRISON

As early as the late 50s, Cash began performing concerts for the inmates in prisons across the country, and in 1958 in San Quentin Prison, a prisoner by the name of Merle Haggard was in Cash’s audience. Haggard said of that night: “He identified with us.” And that night Merle Haggard and many other prisoners joined the musical public church created by Cash. The show in San Quentin was on New Year’s Day, 1958. Haggard described the magic and simplicity of the experience. “I was a young . . . boy. . . in prison looking for somebody to idolize and Johnny Cash was really that guy and . . . somehow or another he had identified with the prisoners there.” Haggard goes on to say “we felt like he cared about us. That he was honest with us and he was playing the kind of music that was . . . a form of raw soul. . . .”⁵³

In 1968, again fighting the judgement of his record label, Cash decided to record a live album in Folsom Prison. What he recorded became a summation of who he was as a man and an artist at that point in his career. He sent a message on that album that even the men serving time in prison deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Emmylou Harris said, “He felt that he had something in common with those men. He could have just as easily been in there himself. He would sing, ‘I see you, I know you.’ The record company thought it was a terrible idea, but for

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Merle Haggard in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk.

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John, a true artist is gonna follow his vision no matter what.”⁵⁴ At another point in the same interview, Harris gave an estimate of the value of Cash’s Folsom Prison album. She said: “Johnny’s album *At Folsom Prison* was incredibly powerful. He had a message. And his message was truth about being alive in this world, and all the things that we experience. He was acknowledging our common humanity.”⁵⁵ Cash’s son, John Carter Cash, saw the album a bit differently: “The Folsom Prison show is really a distillation of my dad’s life. It is a performance that brings it all together. There were periods of great clarity in my father’s career. And 1968, at Folsom Prison was one of those times.”⁵⁶

For Cash’s daughter, Rosanne, her father was “being his real self.” In her estimation, the show was “rustic, raw, and primitive art. The essence of him.”⁵⁷ In the estimation of Bruce Springsteen “The magic was in the simplicity of it. Johnny’s music at the Folsom Prison was a combination of singing and salvation.” From an outsider’s perspective, Springsteen found that to be the rule in the music out of Nashville. “Saturday night, Sunday morning. Sunday morning was about repenting--repenting for the fun you had on Saturday night. It was this idea of redemption. With Johnny that was an enormous part of his whole career.”⁵⁸ Following the success of “*Live at Folsom Prison*,” Cash arranged to record another album for prison inmates, this time at San Quentin. He wrote a song specifically for the inmates of San Quentin. The lyrics found Cash imagining he was an inmate there and detailed the hardships and frustrations he would experience. He held the authorities to account for their treatment of prisoners and demanded they acknowledge their failures.

So when Cash went to Folsom and San Quentin, it was clear-- he was deeply concerned with issues of justice for society and respect and regard for all people regardless of circumstance. He saw the prisoners as children of God. The magic of Folsom and San Quentin was in the courageous simplicity of a man like Cash, demonstrating inclusion and regard for fellow human beings, which broke out in the celebration of singing and salvation. The paradigmatic metaphor of

⁵⁴ *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019), published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the public church is therefore relevant for Cash's redemptive work in the Folsom and San Quentin performances and albums. These occasions brought salvation beyond sectarian demand or particular prejudice, and described Cash as a man deeply committed to a public ethic in pursuit of a common good of the citizenry, as one especially sensitive to the public order of a society. The people gathered were concerned with bringing about a just society, and concerned with the God beyond the gods.

At the end of the Folsom Prison show, Cash sang a song written by one of the prisoners, a "lifer" by the name of Glenn Sherley. The song was titled "Greystone Chapel." John Carter Cash said that "the first time that [his dad] shook Glen Sherley's hand, he connected to the goodness that was there. The hope that was in the man, despite the darkness that was very real."⁵⁹ The connection that Cash made with Sherley motivated Johnny Cash to work for Sherley's release, despite Sherley's life sentence. Cash went to the governor and petitioned for Sherley's pardon and release. Cash promised to help Sherley on the outside. He gave Sherley a job on his show, and Sherley worked with Cash for a time.⁶⁰

THE MAN IN BLACK GETS A TV SHOW

After the Folsom and San Quentin shows and recordings, Cash's popularity was at an all-time high.⁶¹ On New Year's eve in 1968, Johnny Cash sat down and wrote himself a letter—a type of annual reflection. He admitted that he still thought about the pills, and that he needed to pray more. He told himself that there were some big deals coming in the new year, possibly a television show. But he reminded himself that the biggest deal he had going was his family. "You'd better hang with God," he wrote, "if you want the other deals to work out." He signed the letter "your friend, Cash."⁶² "The Johnny Cash Show" began on the ABC television network in 1969. The show became a popular musical variety show which ran for two years.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Unfortunately, Glen Sherley's later experience followed the fictional reality of another prisoner, Brooks Hatlen, from the film *Shawshank Redemption*. Neither character was able to live well on the "outside," and both men took their lives through suicide.

⁶¹ See the estimate of Neil Pearson in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk.

⁶² See Dan Rather, *The Gospel Music of Johnny Cash: A Story of Faith and Redemption* (Alexandria, IN, Gaither Music Group, 2007).

Cash was sober, his mind was clear and he had become an icon and mythical figure after success at Folsom and San Quentin.⁶³ He had an opportunity to create the kind of show that he thought should be on the air. The south had been accustomed to segregated audiences and television shows. Martin Luther King, Jr., had just been assassinated in the spring of 1968. Racial and social tensions still ran high in America. Johnny Cash was determined to have shows that were pluralistic in nature, and to invite the artists that had been ignored by other shows. His guests included legends like Eddy Arnold, Stevie Wonder, Eric Clapton but also James Taylor, Odetta, Louis Armstrong, and Joni Mitchell. The network did not want Pete Seeger, but Cash invited him anyway.⁶⁴ Concerning his guests, he said “the more I performed with black people, the more I’d hear from the Klan. It was Charlie Pride that I hugged on my television show. The letter came the next week from the Klan, written in blood. It would be dangerous to become complacent and think the attitudes changed.”⁶⁵

In what was to be another unprecedented move that went against the political correctness of the time, Johnny Cash planned an all gospel night, and he included the appearance of the Reverend Billy Graham. Cash had first met Billy Graham in Hendersonville at a luncheon meeting. They would become lifelong friends. Cash was inspired by their meeting and would later write the song “What is Truth,” and would later produce a film, *The Gospel Road*. By 1971 Cash was beginning to reflect on the nature of his purpose and mission in music—a reflection that would conclude with the writing of a signature song, “Man in Black.”⁶⁶

THE MAN IN BLACK FULLY REALIZED

The way Johnny Cash described the writing of the song “Man in Black” is a fascinating look at the symbiotic relationship Cash had with his audience. He claimed that he was always getting questions about why he constantly dressed in black. So then wrote a song that plainly laid it out.

⁶³ See the comments of Rick Rubin in *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>.

Rubin says “after that album (*Johnny Cash Live at Folsom Prison*) came out, he became Johnny Cash the mythical figure, the man in black.”

⁶⁴ See the comments by Peter Coyote in Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 6.

⁶⁵ *The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash* (Youtube Originals, 2019). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cMVNtmbwyo>.

⁶⁶ See Dan Rather, *The Gospel Music of Johnny Cash: A Story of Faith and Redemption* (Alexandria, IN, Gaither Music Group, 2007).

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Perhaps it is not that simple though. That question from a fan, for Cash, seems to have sparked an internal dialogue about who he was and what he stood for. He saw this as a moment to present his musical manifesto, his artistic thesis. Cash began the song, “you wonder why I always dress in black.” Then he goes on to answer. “I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down,” those who live “on the hungry side of town.” Then Cash wrote, “I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime but is there because he’s a victim of the time.” Or for those who never heard “the words that Jesus said.” The he said, “I wear it for the sick and lonely old, for the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold.” I wear it, Cash affirmed “for the lives that could have been, each week we lose a hundred fine young men.”

The song was released in March 1971. With that recording Johnny Cash began to fully realize a mythic persona and solidify his stance on many social issues. Cash’s daughter, Roseanne said “There’s so many levels to that. One is the song and wearing this symbol for the down trodden and the poor. The other was much more subtle to me, it reflected the sadness, the compulsions, just that kind of mythic, dark night of the soul that he went through so many times.”⁶⁷

The music of “Man in Black” is as much a musical thesis statement as the lyrics are. He uses the sparse stripped-down sound that has become the Johnny Cash sound. The rhythm is the steady rolling train of sound that carries Cash’s message to its destination. Like in the recording of “The Ballad of Ira Hayes” Cash’s emotion and conviction is upfront exuding the necessary intensity to hold the weight of his message.

Even though Johnny Cash himself had the power and flare of a southern preacher at times, he enlists the help from evangelist Billy Graham for the album of the same name in 1971. After rededicating himself to Christ, Cash became friends with Graham and he and his wife June participated on several of Billy Graham’s Crusade TV specials. This friendship led to the production of *The Gospel Road: The Story of Jesus* a film and companion album Cash wrote and produced in 1973.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Johnny Cash’s America* (Sony Legacy 2008). Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsNyiS03jc0>.

⁶⁸ See Dan Rather, *The Gospel Music of Johnny Cash: A Story of Faith and Redemption* (Alexandria, IN, Gaither Music Group, 2007).

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In the 1960s Johnny Cash toured all around the world. His sense of social awareness was keen. He was opposed to the war in Viet Nam. So he did a tour of Viet Nam to entertain the soldiers but also to make his views on the war known. In 1969 it was not fashionable to be against the war. But Cash took a stand. As Kris Kristofferson put it: “You can support the warriors and not support the war.”⁶⁹ The same was true of his support for prisoners. Cash did not support crime, but he did go support the prisoners. Basically he was trying to support the underdogs. As

Neil Pearson put it: “For Johnny. . . [the] heartbeat [of life] was most easily located in the lives of the poor and the down trodden. The flotsam and jetsam of the American Dream.”⁷⁰

Johnny Cash recorded several anti-war/ pro-soldiers’ songs like “Singing in Vietnam Talking Blues” from the *Man in Black* album and later “Drive On” from the 1st American Recordings album. When Johnny Cash dressed in Black and went on stage, his performance included an invitation to dialogue about public discourse concerning the nature of life in America. Sometimes those performances were transformational—the singing led to a type of salvation as Springsteen noted. Sometimes, as with “Sunday Morning Comin’ Down,” it led to mourning and perhaps repentance. But the stories about prisons, Native Americans and other minorities, the poor, and the elderly were also invitations to rethink stereotypes and find new ways to respect and value all living. When people came up close and listened to the man in Black, they heard him define and re-define America. Some old images were shattered, and sometimes new visions were born.

SUNDAY MORNING COMIN’ DOWN

Johnny Cash battled his demons publicly for a large part of his career, turning his life around only to slip back into the darkness. He related to others who faced such struggle and tried to give solidarity and strength to them through his music. In 1969 Kris Kristofferson, wrote a song that Johnny Cash would later say felt so personal to him as if he had written it himself. Johnny Cash made “Sunday Morning Coming Down” his own and it became a staple of his shows and an anthem for all those that battled addiction, alienation, and pain.

⁶⁹ See the comments of Kris Kristofferson in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk.

⁷⁰ See the comments of Neil Pearson in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk.

The musical arrangement on Cash's recording, which was taken from his television show, perfectly balances the sentiment of the song's longing for redemption through the haze of a hungover morning. The orchestral backing that slowly builds throughout becomes a counterpoint to the rough-edged voice of Cash's character that sings of wishing he was stoned rather than facing Sunday, and seems to underline the subtle strain of hope, laying there between the lines of the song. Cash's monologue before his best known performance of the song on the Johnny Cash Show in 1970 demonstrated the ongoing relevance of the song:

You know, not everyone who has been on 'the bum' wanted it that way. The Great Depression of the 30s set the feet of thousands of people—farmers, city workers—it set 'em to ridin' the rails. My Daddy was one of those who hopped a freight train a couple of times to go and look for work. He wasn't a bum. He was a hobo but he wasn't a bum. I suppose we've all....all of us' been at one time or another 'drifter at heart', and today like yesterday there's many that are on that road headin' out. Not searchin' maybe for work, as much as for self-fulfillment, or understanding of their life...trying to find a meaning for their life. And they're not hoppin' freights much anymore. Instead they're thumbin' cars and diesel trucks along the highways from Maine to Mexico. And many who have drifted...including myself...have found themselves no closer to peace of mind than a dingy backroom, on some lonely Sunday morning, with it comin' down all around you.⁷¹

THE RETURN OF THE MAN IN BLACK

By the early 1990s, Johnny Cash's career seemed to be fading slowly away in the American public's consciousness. He had been dropped by his record label and had just had a decade of continuous drug addiction, and problems with his family. In 1992 producer Rick Rubin saw Cash perform and thought he was still a strong and vital performer. This meeting sparked conversation of a potential collaboration. He offered Cash a contract with *American Recordings* and gave him creative control over the recordings.⁷² What followed was a return to form where Cash regained, reinvented, and reimagined his career and public persona. The Man in Black was back and making some of the most direct, poignant and personal music of his life.

In the stripped-down collection of albums that have become known as the American Recordings, Rick Rubin put the focus squarely on Cash's voice and helped add to his already eclectic oeuvre. Reimagining his standard repertoire, Cash covers alt-rock songs such as "Hurt"

⁷¹ Johnny Cash monologue on *The Johnny Cash Show* (February 25, 1970).

⁷² Graeme Thomson, *The Resurrection of Johnny Cash: Hurt, Redemption and American Recordings* (London: Jawbone Press, 2011) 181.

by Nine Inch Nails, “Personal Jesus” by Depeche Mode, and “The Beast in Me” by Nick Lowe as well as songs by great contemporary writers such as Leonard Cohen, and Tom Waits. As always, when he covered a song the song became a personal poignant song that seemed to have always belonged to Johnny Cash. These last recordings validated his art for a new generation and brought to a conclusion a life of meaningful music. The Public Church was broadened once again and continues to grow today.

JOHNNY CASH, THE MAN AND THE MYTH AND HIS LAST VISION OF SELF AND SOCIETY

After the release of the live recordings of Johnny Cash at Folsom and San Quentin, Johnny Cash began to embody the mythic status of the “Man in Black.” But by the early 1990s the luster began to wear thin on Cash’s mythic armor. When Rick Rubin began to work with Johnny Cash, he said “I was real interested in getting into the heart of who he was and really exposing that and showing the world who he really was.”⁷³ Indeed, after Rubin had produced those last American Recordings, Cash’s new songs themselves cry out for a statement of clarity on the man and his vision of himself and the world around him. The range of themes in the music of his last years is extraordinary. He sang songs like “The Beast in Me,” and a song “Hurt” that emphasized the pain he had endured. He continued to play in prisons and to sing “about shooting a man in Reno just to watch him die.” Cash sang about “Delia” and how he shot her down. “He sang outlaw lyrics and related to an outlaw sensibility.”⁷⁴ But he also recorded Kristofferson’s “Why Me, Lord,” “Personal Jesus” and the apocalyptic “The Man Comes Around.” Both Rosanne and John Carter knew that their dad had a sense of duality in him. Rosanne also thought that there was a mythic element in his life beyond the “Man in Black” myth. “He was more . . . a universal figure. He’s almost an archetype. I mean, he is mythic to the point of being . . . one of the figures that you read about in something by Carl Jung, you know. He was the hero and the warrior.”⁷⁵ The theme in Jung that helps to understand Cash in his later years is the Jungian theme of the union of opposites. As Rosanne put it, her father

⁷³ See the comments of Rick Rubin in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ See the comments of Rosanne Cash in *Johnny Cash: The Last Great American* which originally aired on BBC 1 (2/24/2004). Published online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp_g3KBF7Fk.

“could hold two opposing thoughts at the same time and believe in both of them with the same degree of passion and power.”⁷⁶

In 1996, Johnny Cash was given a “Lifetime Achievement Award,” at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. He was nominated by Vice President Al Gore for his work “as an artist whose music examines the entire range of existence, failure and recovery, entrapment and escape, weakness and strength, loss and redemption, life and death.” In her comments before singing for her father at the Kennedy Center Honors (1996) Rosanne Cash gave a brief outline of his journey. She said “My father is a man of many paradoxes,” and one of those is that while he was brought up as a Baptist, “he has the soul of a mystic.”⁷⁷ The mystic is one who comes, later in life, to see the world as a unity, as a whole. In so doing, he has to learn to hold opposites together. For example, Cash was opposed to the Vietnam War and was vocal about it. Yet he agreed to go to Vietnam to entertain the troops and to further explain his position.⁷⁸ Such a world view can be described as “Mystic Communal” because it is held among human beings “who are most aware that the world is a community and realize that what divides us into warring camps is precisely the *lack* of this awareness.”⁷⁹ What this means for Johnny Cash is that the world view of his later years was a complex, mature vision involving the acceptance of diversity, mystery, and paradox. Cash exemplified the union of opposites after a journey into the deeper self.⁸⁰

Johnny Cash’s last vision of self and society required a complex vision of faith and commitment to a pluralistic society. Cash left behind a legacy of defining and re-defining America. Indeed, he himself was an American story that emphasized transformation, that most American of stories—that people could change and therefore should have a land where that change was valued and accepted, a land where prisoners are seen as children of God. The complex vision of self and

⁷⁶ See the comments of Rosanne Cash in Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 5

⁷⁷ See the comments of Rosanne Cash in “Rosanne Cash Sings for Her Father,” Published online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wu1EFVX03eU>.

⁷⁸ See the comments of Rosanne Cash in Ken Burns, *Country Music: A Film* (Boston: Public Broadcasting Service, 2019) Episode 5

⁷⁹ M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) 193.

⁸⁰ This stage of faith is described by James W. Fowler as “Conjunctive Faith.” See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981) 184-198.

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society also included the inevitability of human frailty and mortality. Though all are the children of God, there is an element of human duality—a beast within. Cash’s vision of faith included “a personal Jesus,” just as it involved the awareness of an end to injustice when “the man comes around—the reality of God in human judgment. But last of all, Cash left behind the sense of fidelity to the gift—one must do one’s best to the end.

The music of Johnny Cash was a primitive and elemental force in American public life. It was not music for entertainment’s sake. The music was meant to be a message as his song “Man in Black” articulates, and was in search of redemption for the singer and for the country. It told the story of life in America during his time, and as such sought to define and re-define what makes for a good society. The songs came first from the cotton fields of Arkansas, and later shaped and created a legend—the Man in Black. Johnny Cash, the man, as Dan Rather put it, seemed to have an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Cash struggled for a lifetime to rid himself of his demons and to listen to the better angels of his nature. Cash was haunted by the death of his brother, Jack. Johnny Cash carried a burden of guilt—survivor guilt from having survived the death of his brother. That profound sense of guilt sent him on a search to find redemption, salvation from that heavy burden. Cash was pushed to be the dutiful brother to others, and to recreate the human family. The place he carried his struggle for redemption was the stage or recording studio. One way he sought salvation was to write and perform songs that called his country to re-define itself as a more just and humane society, and thereby show his care and sense of empathy for the children of God. His songs about the poor, the sick, the elderly, the prisoners, the soldiers, the minorities—all had a message for humanity. A better day is possible when life is lived for justice and basic humanity.

When Cash sang, his songs often held up a lyrical mirror for the audience. He led the audience into a musical public square where the nature of the music brought an invitation to dialogue about life in America. Often these performances in the musical public square were transformational, and broke out in a type of public church which through the infusion of his own particular faith and joined with the wishes and hopes of listeners created change in the life of individuals. Merle Haggard, a young prisoner in San Quentin, saw the Cash performance and identified with him, and changed his life. Haggard went on to become a Country Music superstar. Kris Kristofferson met Cash backstage in Nashville and was so enamored and intrigued about the

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possibility of a music career that he resigned his academic position at West Point, and came back to Nashville where Cash became his mentor. Kristofferson became one of the most important contemporary writers in American music. Sometimes, as with “Sunday Morning Comin’ Down,” the performance led to mourning and perhaps repentance. The album, *Bitter Tears*, became an artistic effort to fight for the rights and dignity of Native Americans. “The Johnny Cash Show” was a model of inclusion before a national audience at a historically troubled time. The songs and stories about prisons, minorities, the poor, and the elderly were also invitations to rethink stereotypes and find new ways to respect and value all living. When people came up close and listened to the Man in Black, they heard him define and re-define America. Sometimes old images were shattered, and sometimes new visions were born. Johnny Cash took his place in a long line of bards who have told the stories of their countries. Cash became a model for inclusion for those who knew him well, especially in the music industry. He joined his life’s work for personal redemption with a tireless effort to save the soul of his troubled land. Cash’s life was a struggle with the darker forces of his own soul. He sought to transform his life and, in the process, to change his country through musical performance and the embodiment of a vision that sought to change the world around him.
