



SINNER'S LAMENT

THE COUNTRY NOIR OF JOHNNY CASH Jake Hinkson

The Man in Black made some dark music. From the beginning of his career until the end, his songs are populated with characters who seem like the demented country cousins of Noir City's most twisted citizens. One guy shoots a man in Reno just to watch him die. Another takes a blast of cocaine and then shoots his woman down. The music of Johnny Cash is filled with criminals of all shapes and sizes—from remorseless killers to men and women haunted by their guilt. It would be wrong, however, to say that Cash was simply the Murder Ballad Man. After all, he sang more about love and God than he ever sang about murder. What made him unique was the way these thematic streams ran together to create something all his own. Of the early rock 'n' roll pioneers who exploded out of Memphis in the 1950s, Johnny Cash tapped into the darkest currents of American culture, creating a legacy that still has resonance in our music and film today.



His voice and his guitar was young John R. Cash's ticket out of a life of poverty in rural Arkansas

ARKANSAS BOY

“Before rock ’n’ roll there was country,” Cash would write in his self-titled 1997 autobiography, “and before Memphis, for me anyway, there was Arkansas.” He was born a sharecropper’s son in the Delta region of Arkansas in 1932. Cash’s father had lost his farm at the outset of the Depression, and he would eventually settle his family in a New Deal community called Dyess, created by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. There, young John R. Cash was raised in hardscrabble poverty, carrying water to field hands, picking cotton, and singing gospel songs with his older brother Jack. His brother felt a calling to be a preacher, but while cutting oak trees into fence posts on a table saw, Jack was pulled into a large spinning blade that slashed open his torso. Cash, still just a boy, watched his brother die in agony. Years later he would write that Jack’s death had permanently left “a big, sad, cold place in my heart.”

Cash fled Arkansas as soon as he was able. After a stint in the Air Force, however, he settled close by, just across the Mississippi River, in the hopping town of Memphis, Tennessee.

He’d been singing and writing songs since childhood, but now he gave himself over to music, pursuing it every chance he got. He loved the honky tonk of Hank Williams and the blistering bluegrass of the Louvin Brothers, but his favorite performer was the guitar-shredding gospel juggernaut Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Cash wanted to be a gospel singer—to fulfill, at least in spirit, Jack’s dream of being a preacher—but when he got his chance to record at Sun Records, label owner Sam Phillips only wanted blues or the emerging hybrid of rock ’n’

roll (which had been created years before by blues-based gospel performers like Sister Rosetta herself). Cash did as he was told but the music he made didn’t really sound like anything anyone else had ever done. With no formal training, he simply tried everything he could think of, making it up as he went along.

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SINGING ABOUT SINNERS

His music was stripped down, rudimentary even. It was rural and raw and more than a little weird. His deep resonant voice had more weight than a ball and chain, but over the years his perspective on themes was always skewed. A song like “A Boy Named Sue” was a comedy about a gun-toting ne’er-do-well looking to kill his father. “The Long Black Veil” was a murder ballad narrated by a corpse. And “I Walk the Line” was a love song about taming inner demons—or perhaps it is better to say that it was about the *attempt* to tame inner demons, since in the music of Johnny Cash the demons never quite settle down. His essential persona—the unhinged country boy with Jesus on one shoulder and Satan on the other—derived both from the fact that he was a frustrated

gospel singer and from the fact that by the end of the ’50s he was subsisting on a diet of alcohol and amphetamines.

As the rockabilly era came to a close, he began to get categorized more and more as a country act. It made a certain amount of sense, of course, but in some respects, it’s odd that he wound up working in country music. Classic country was centered around the torch song, and desperate heartbreak ballads were never Cash’s forte. While he cut some sad songs (“I Still Miss Someone” is probably the best), he never visited the romantic depths of country’s consummate balladeer,



June Carter Cash and Johnny leave Kansas State Prison after a 1968 concert performance





Cash performing his legendary concert at Folsom Prison (left) and onstage with his band at San Quentin

George Jones. For Jones, his voice soaked in whiskey and pain, romantic disillusionment was just about all that life had to offer. As a singer, Cash was different. He had a weary voice, a disappointed voice. But it wasn't a broken voice. Cash never cast himself as deeply into the furnace of despair as Jones did, and he rarely portrayed himself as a pure victim. Jones sang like a man staring into a whiskey glass. Cash sang like a man staring at himself in the mirror the next morning.

One reason Cash wound up working in country is because of its link to gospel. Grand Ole Opry superstar Roy Acuff had made gospel an indispensable part of country radio in the late 1930s, and most country performers were expected to occasionally tip their hats toward Christian piety. What differentiated Cash, however, is that when he sang about Christianity, he wasn't necessarily singing about being happy. As often as not, when he sang about faith, he sang from the perspective of a sinner. Even his secular songs (*especially* the murder ballads) hummed with an undertow of guilt and grace.

It's all there in the music. Songs like "Blistered" and "Folsom Prison Blues," are sweaty with sin. When Cash sings about sin, he sings about it with the lusty glee of a man howling at the moon. Sinning is *goddamned* fun—literally—and its pull is powerful. At the same time, there's probably no better singer of the dried-out morning after song than Cash. On tunes like "Sunday Morning Coming Down" or "The Beast in Me," he's hungover spiritually as well as physically.

After leaving Sun Records, he went to Columbia where, in the late '60s, he recorded his biggest hits, culminating in his first two live prison albums, *Live at Folsom Prison* and *Live at San Quentin*. Playing before hundreds of killers, thieves, and rapists, Cash is at his best. His rapport with the audience is natural and bawdy and the music is lean and hard. The song "Folsom Prison Blues" had been one of his first hits in the '50s (Cash based the song on the 1951 Crane Wilbur crime drama *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison* starring Steve Cochran), but on the live album it rocks to life, born anew in the

cold dungeon from which it derived its name. In some ways, it's the ultimate rockabilly song, the ultimate rockabilly performance. On *San Quentin*, we get "A Boy Named Sue," a song written by Shel Silverstein which Cash had never performed prior to the show. It is violent dark comedy, and Cash tears into it with a raw glee. He obviously enjoys performing for the prisoners, and one can't help but feel that part of his joy is the chance to play the badass in front of a room full of hardcore badasses.

Yet God is never far away. One of the odder things about Cash's prison albums is how religious they are. He alternates personas from beginning to end, the killer and the Christian. The audience seems to understand, seems to embrace his entertainment-as-ministry. When he performs "Greystone Chapel," a song about Folsom's chapel which was written by one of the convicts in the audience, you can hear the place turn as quiet as a church.

The prison albums were monster hits for Cash, and part of what one hears on them is the sound of a singer perfectly tapping into the anti-authoritarian ethos of his day. *Live at Folsom Prison* and *Live at San Quentin* were of a piece with prison movies like *Cool Hand Luke*, *The Great Escape*, and *Birdman of Alcatraz*, which were achieving a new level of popularity and cultural importance

in the '60s. By positioning himself as a champion of prisoners—society's literal outcasts—Cash became one of the few mainstream performers of his era to successfully become a figure of respect in the counterculture.

Hollywood

Like many singers of his generation, Cash was recruited into the movies early into his career, and his first starring role was as a psycho in a 1961 film noir called *Five Minutes to Live*. It seems perfect that the most noir of country singers—the Man in Black, no less—should have made his feature film debut in the genre.

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The closest Cash got to onscreen noir was his turn as a psycho killer in the low-budget crime drama *Five Minutes to Live* aka *Door-to-Door Maniac*

movie (which was later re-released as *Door-to-Door Maniac*) is a cheap little production about a nutjob named Johnny Cabot (Cash) who's recruited for a bank robbery by hood Fred Dorella (Vic Tayback, years before he became Mel the diner owner on *Alice*). Dorella's plan is to kidnap the wife of a bank employee and then force her husband to cash a forged check for \$70,000. Dorella chooses a banker named Ken Wilson and sends Johnny Cabot to take Mrs. Wilson hostage.

Regrettably, just about every aspect of the execution of *Five Minutes to Live* is flawed. Tayback isn't terrible as the bank robber, but the rest of the cast is pretty awful. After a fierce opening sequence of Cash gunning down some cops, the film settles into a plodding rhythm it never shakes off. The script—credited to Mrs. Wilson herself, actor Cay Forrester—is goofy without being fun, and dark without being compelling. The movie, in a word, stinks.

But all of this is beside the point, really, since the main attraction here is Cash. Occasionally, you'll come across defenses of his performance in *Five Minutes to Live*, but these apologetics are misguided. It's true that Cash himself makes for a fascinating point of interest—razor thin and twitchy, he was already well into his drug-fueled hellion days—but it cannot be said that he gives a good performance. His delivery alternates between too little and too much, and you can catch him committing the cardinal sin of bad acting: waiting for other actors to finish their lines. He's never fully in a scene with another performer. Waiting to say his lines, he never seems to be thinking, or feeling, much of anything. Acting, the old saying goes, is mostly about reacting. Cash never reacts to anything.

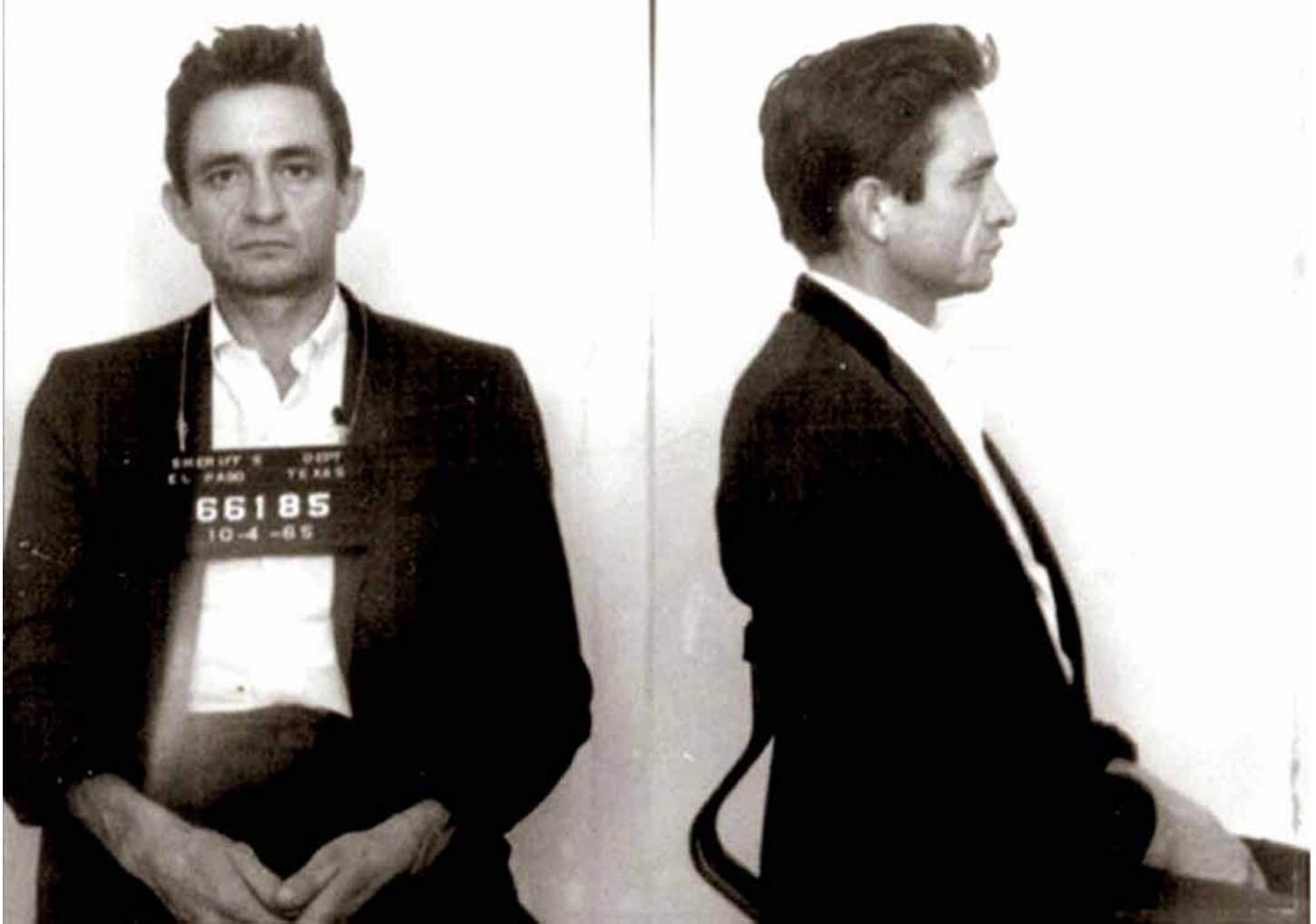
Although *Five Minutes to Live* is flat and uninvolved as a drama, as documentary footage of Cash at the early stage of his legend, it's fascinating. One suspects part of the reason Elvis, for all his limitations, was a better actor than Cash at the start was because, as the bigger star, Elvis received more instruction. Here, Cash looks like he's wandered onto a movie set and picked up a gun. If nothing else, though, the character of Johnny Cabot is a telling choice of roles. While Elvis was playing wholesome good boys who danced and romanced in Hawaii, Cash was gunning down cops and slapping around housewives. This movie isn't good, but you can see the origins of the badass myth already well in place.

He kept acting from time to time, usually playing heavies or lawmen, and while he never became great, he did improve. He squared off against Kirk Douglas in the western *A Gunfight* (1971). In a 1974 episode of *Columbo* he played an evangelist who murders his wife, played by none other than Ida Lupino. His best work onscreen might have been in a taut and effective television film called *Murder in Coweta County* (1983), with Cash playing a lawman trying to bring to justice a wealthy murderer played by Andy Griffith. It was one of the few films to use Cash's innately somber disposition to good effect.

“Somebody’s gonna die here tonight!”

After his musical peak in the late sixties, Cash's career went into a decline brought on by changing tastes and his own deepening commitment to gospel music. Throughout the '70s and '80s he became more respectable, more overtly patriotic, more “country,” and, for a while there,





Cash was busted in 1965 when more than 1,000 uppers and downers were found in his guitar case at the U.S.-Mexico border. No charges were brought; the drugs were prescribed.

he got preachy. He made a clunky movie about Jesus. He wrote a novel about the Apostle Paul. He cut pedestrian gospel albums.

It was all pretty bad. Sin—its intoxicating allure and its violent consequences—was Cash’s best subject. God’s forgiveness was part of that equation, but it was meaningless without the guilt and the sin that preceded it. One doesn’t have to doubt Cash’s utter conviction during this period to observe that he was never less interesting than when he was taking it upon himself to set his audience straight on their theology.

Then, on Christmas Day 1982, Cash and his family were robbed at their vacation home in Jamaica. Three armed men broke in as Cash was saying grace over dinner. One man yelled, “Somebody’s gonna die here tonight!” The group held a gun to the head of Cash’s 11-year old son and demanded a million dollars. Cash, remaining calm, told the men he didn’t have a million dollars but that they could take everything of value in the house. As the robbers dragged him from room to room collecting jewelry and money, Cash noticed that the men were quite young, just boys really, and clearly strung out on drugs.

The robbers locked the Cash family in the cellar and drove away.

Once Cash had broken down the door, he called the authorities. The Jamaican police, eager to discourage copycat crimes on other famous foreign visitors, acted quickly and gunned down the three young men as soon as they were caught.

In his 1997 autobiography, Cash reflected at length on the incident:

“What’s my emotional response to the fact (or at least the distinct possibility) that the desperate junkie boys who threatened and traumatized my family...were executed for their act—or murdered, or shot down like dogs, have it how you will?”

“I’m out of answers. My only certainties are that I grieve for desperate young men and the societies that produce and suffer so many of them, and I felt I knew those boys. We had a kinship, they and I: I knew how they thought, I knew how they needed. They were like me.”

In the months immediately following the robbery and the executions of the young men, Cash recorded the album many critics consider his best work of the 1980s, the melancholy *Johnny 99*. The best song on

the record is his haunting interpretation of Bruce Springsteen’s song “Highway Patrolman,” in which a lawman laments the wild recklessness that drives his younger brother to destroy himself.

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—Johnny Cash
reflecting on a life-threatening home invasion



American Legacy

In 1994, after years in the commercial wilderness, Cash signed onto Rick Rubin’s American Records label and kicked off one of the greatest comebacks in music history. Rubin was a rock and rap producer and the publicity that resulted from his pairing with the 61-year-old country legend was uniformly gushing. Their first album was a stripped down acoustic set called *American Recordings*, featuring Cash originals, ancient murder ballads, and a variety of songs by other writers such as Kris Kristofferson, Tom Waits, Leonard Cohen, and Glenn Danzig. It was followed by three other collaborations and a pair of posthumous albums. Here again was Cash, singing about transgression and ruin, grace and salvation. In reconnecting him to his inner sinner, the American albums reconnected the circle of his art.

In his last decade, he was given practically every award possible for a musician, including Grammys, a Kennedy Center Honor, and induction into several Halls of Fame—among them Rock, Country, Gospel, Rockabilly, and Songwriting. Cash took it all in stride and kept it in the perspective of his long career. At his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, he spent most of his time thanking his family and talking about Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

As his health began to fail, he began to look more and more at his own mortality. In his final years, his great theme was death itself, which he explored on songs like “That Lucky Old Sun (Just Rolls Around Heaven All Day),” “I See a Darkness,” and “I’m Free from the Chain Gang Now.” When he died in 2003, he

seemed to have said all he wanted to say.

Today, Cash is often found on the soundtracks of films, frequently (and unsurprisingly) in crime films. These credits are too long to list in full, but even a partial list demonstrates the way filmmakers utilize his songs as musical shorthand for a certain weary humanity: “Folsom Prison Blues” popped up in *Red Rock West*; “Ring of Fire” appeared in an episode of *The Wire*; “Guess Things Happen That Way” was used in both *A Perfect World* and *American Gangster*; Quentin Tarantino (who wrote liner notes for a collection of Cash murder ballads) used “Tennessee Stud” in *Jackie Brown* and “A Satisfied Mind” in *Kill Bill*; and Cash’s apocalyptic vision “The Man Comes Around” was pretty much the theme song to the George V. Higgins adaptation *Killing Them Softly*.

Part of the reason he appears on so many soundtracks is because he remains a robust musical link from the noir era of the fifties to the neo-noir of today. While America has changed a lot in that time, Johnny Cash’s dark vision still rings true. Like any artist with a comparably lengthy career, he made his share of uninspired filler, but his best work stands outside of genre, divorced from commercial considerations or popular fads. It’s country noir, steeped in sin and searching for the light. ■



Steeped in sin and searching for the light

Jake Hinkson’s latest publication is *The Deepening Shade*, a collection of short stories from All Due Respect Books. His collection of essays, *The Blind Corner: Investigating Film Noir’s Forgotten Corners* features numerous articles first printed in NOIR CITY.