Johnny Cash

Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music [DVD]
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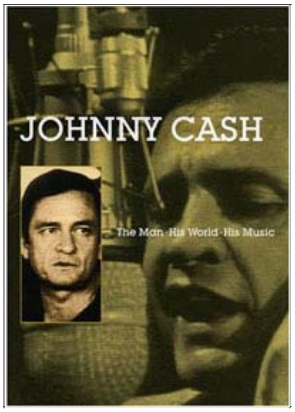
Documenting Cash



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Rebel, outlaw, hillbilly thug. Kris Kristofferson described him as a "walkin' contradiction" who was "partly truth and partly fiction", and Johnny Cash lived up to that billing. He tapped into something about the American psyche—its tendency to swing wildly between polar opposites, never finding its footing. What Cash gave listeners is a sense of productive struggle with his own demons.

More than that, he was content to dwell in contradiction; he didn't try to resolve all his warring selves. He was equally the outsider rockabilly and the establishment patriot, the social protestor and the Billy Graham crusader. He gave us a model of cultural ambivalence that we could all identify with. He didn't solve America's identity problems, he showed us how to live with them.

The singer who would become the Man in Black released the live *At Folsom Prison* in 1968, the album beat its primal rhythm and stark realism into the country's consciousness. The album matched its social protest for prison reform with impeccably conveyed emotion. It sparked something within the '60s counter-culture movement. Listeners wanted authenticity and Cash gave them his version of it. And they loved him for it (at least until the early '70s when his perceived support for Nixon—what Cash would claim was more a support for the Presidential office—lost him some counter-culture converts).

Cash would become the top-selling artist in the world in 1969 (and his reward would be a network TV show that took him into America's living rooms, whether they were ready for a country boy or not). He was touring with great energy, he was freeing himself from the grip of drugs (for a while), and he had recently married June Carter Cash. He told his own conversion story: God and June Carter had saved him from the devil of drugs. Recent biographies insist his recovery from drugs was only temporary and that he was hepped up for most of his life. But in this documentary, which captures the Cash zeitgeist right near the apex, we see Cash in a moment of rising triumph.

Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, and His Music (1969), directed by Robert Elfstrom, is a "slice of life" picture of the singer from this period. Shot in direct cinema style, the film takes the viewer along on Cash's boisterous ride. The scene stretches from adoring fans to bemused reporters, from awed young singers to fellow veteran musical travellers, from the stages of Nashville back to the dirt-poor Arkansas farm where he grew up. The voyage is a bit more respectable than rowdy, with Cash largely playing the family man rather than a disheveled, drug-addled wild man. But you still get flashes of his anger, class critique, and outlaw orneriness as he glares at the invasive camera. And you get odd, transcendent moments. Like Cash dueting with Bob Dylan.

Dylan, who had blown into Nashville to cobble together what would become his *Nashville Skyline* album (1969), rides shotgun with Cash. The two men

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had earlier met on the folk circuit and were mutual admirers. Cash had vociferously defended Dylan's controversial move to go electric. This session is a picking party. The two run through Cash songs, Dylan songs, country standards, and rockabilly numbers as the recording tape rolls. While only one duet would make the Dylan album ("Girl of the North Country"), rabid fans have been circulating the bootleg of the whole session for years. The intrepid Elfstrom was there with his camera, and this documentary is the only footage of the seemingly unlikely, historic collaboration at this session. The shy Dylan tries to emulate Cash while their musical rapport helped generate the merger of two genres into county rock, bringing the roots of rockabilly full circle.

Elsewhere, Elfstrom tracks the country star through his busy schedule. Cash on tour, composing songs, on awards shows, encouraging young singer-songwriters, sitting for interviews, eschewing the clamoring press of attention for walks at his lakeside home outside Nashville (yes, the one new owner Barry Gibb accidentally burned down recently in a rather unfortunate real-life disco inferno—I blame Barry Gibb for disco and now this).

The film uses long, meditative shots of Cash interacting with others to give a sense of his personality. It emphasizes his humane treatment of other artists and fans, while it nevertheless manages to be smart and insightful about Cash's sometime ambivalence towards fame and the intrusions of others. The documentary is understated but lively. When Cash later wanted to make a film about Jesus's life (not at all like Mel Gibson's version years later), he turned to Elfstrom, who directed and starred in Cash's *The Gospel Road* (1973)...as Jesus. So you know Cash must have been happy with this documentary.

Two other key passages in the documentary stand out. One is Cash's trip to the Dyess, Arkansas farmhouse where he grew up. Cash wheels his tour bus, with June Carter Cash on board, into Dyess, talks to old neighbors, peers into the windows of the now-deserted farmhouse, then pensively trolls the fields. As Elfstrom records Cash's rare return to his childhood home he captures, once again, the singer's ambivalence.

The film also conveys a sense of the momentousness of this specific place in the formation of Cash's music. Dyess was a federal colony when Cash grew up there in the '30s, a Depression-era New Deal, cooperative agricultural settlement where the government gave farmers land until they could raise crops and pay the government back. Cash grew up the son of sharecroppers, one of seven children. As a youth, he worked the cotton fields with his family there and they sang constantly.

Dreaming of a better life, Cash obsessively listened to a rich mix of music on the radio, including gospel, spirituals, blues, and hillbilly music (or early country music) by acts like the Carter Family. The music that took him away from this childhood home remained intimately connected to this place and this upbringing. Country music often expresses a complex nostalgia for the rural past people have left behind, and here we see Cash confronting his own.

A second striking moment in the film is concert footage of Cash's performance of songs from his *Bitter Tears* album at a 1968 Sioux Indian reservation concert in South Dakota. This footage illustrates Cash's activism for Native American land rights and also the difficulties of navigating fame and power differentials between the singer and his listeners. At the concert, one of many where he performed to raise money for Native American tribes, Cash smoked a peace pipe, Sioux men and women performed traditional dances and songs, and he told his audience "Let's have the house lights turned up so we can look each other in the eye and tell it like it really was." The unequal power relationship between him and his audience is obvious—they do not have his degree of agency and cultural access to be able to "tell it like it really was", but Cash's commitment to and engagement with this audience is serious. The documentary covers Cash's trip to Wounded Knee, where a Sioux chief asked him to write a song about the 1890 massacre, and we see him composing the song, "Big Foot", which decries the slaughter.

It is not surprising, then, when director Mark Romanek went to the vaults to find historic footage for his acclaimed video for Cash's cover of "Hurt" (2003), he returned again and again to images from this documentary to find Cash in the vigor of his youth. This film captures the Man in Black at a key moment in the history of American culture and in the life of the man himself. It is a unique and important documentary, and not just for Cash fans.

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