

Cash and Currency: Requiem for the Man In Black

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Rock musicians have learned how to grow old gracefully. That sucks. If the Rolling Stones haven't earned the right to grow old dis-gracefully, who then? Surveying the aging landscape of rock and roll – growing older, on average, just like the rest of us – I am unable to find examples of older and better. When I voice my distress, friends point to Neil Young, who for a while, hung on to a notion of principle and a sense of fuck-youness. True enough. But these elements on albums like *Arc* and *Ragged Glory* are merely echoes of more fully-realized value and valor in earlier works, like *Tonight's The Night* or, my personal favorite, *On The Beach*. None of my friends are willing to dispute that these 70s albums are, simply-put, better than Neil's work in the late-80s and 90s. But why? We can admire a man in Neil's shoes, at Neil's age in 1990 asking “why do I keep fucking up?” But this is a reaction prompted by Neil Young's age, not in spite of it. It's the equivalent of “pretty good for an old guy.”

For me, growing old dis-gracefully, would consist of carrying on with the work of rock music, paraphrasing the Flaming Lips: to provide needles for our balloons. From the start, rock and roll took aim at deconstructing accepted wisdom and convention. Trouble is, as rock altered culture, culture – in its limitless capacity as the ultimate, adaptable organism – expanded to accept

and conventionalize rock. So, the Rolling Stones' hedonistic misbehavior was subsumed as an archetype. We all had a bit of Mick and Keith in us. The question, as a Stones fan, was whether we were a bit more Mick or a bit more Keith. And the useful lesson (if that's not overstating it) was how to arrange one's priorities to allow the Mick and the Keith within us to peacefully coexist. The hope, of course, was that they might combine within us to produce the personal equivalent of satisfaction.

The real Mick and Keith, in order to assume their archetypal status, had to allow the culture to subsume them. By definition, a myth must live within the culture. The Rolling Stones' subsumption, though, was abetted by the commercial iconization (or branding, if you've read Naomi Klein) of the band-as-product. The easiest thing for a consumer culture to get a handle on (to handle, to subdue) is a product – it's what our culture is good at; it's the culture's fundamental skill. The Stones branded themselves as the hedonistic, devil-may-care alternative. They made themselves the accepted/acceptable, visible edge of the hidden underground of sex, drugs, and selfish positivity. The Rolling Stones' logo – a massive lips and tongue – is understood, almost universally, as a stand-in for the massive cock they couldn't use in mainstream culture. Once the Stones conformed/confirmed themselves as products, once Mick was a product and Keith was a product, once Mick-and-Kelth was a product, their ability to deconstruct anything was rendered ineffectual. The massive cock was impotent.

I mention this only because, after listening to the new Johnny Cash album, *The Man Comes Around*, I am struck by how, at the very end of an unexpectedly long life, Johnny Cash is making rock music which is as vital as anyone's. You can quibble about whether Johnny Cash is, or ever was, rock if you want to. But there's a picture of Johnny Cash at a piano in the Sun studios with Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley which, for me,

settles the argument historically. And there are three Johnny Cash albums on American Recordings (I'm leaving out the album he did with Willie Nelson) which settle it formally. I find myself at odds to explain the miracle of Johnny Cash's late albums. In lieu of explanation I offer the following observations:

- Johnny Cash reaches me as an inevitability. There are those who would call him timeless – and, I must confess, I nearly reached for that word – but it's not the right word. If we know a little about the history and development of 20th Century music, we know that there was a time, not so long ago, when nothing like Johnny Cash's music existed. What's more, most of us have *heard* pre-Johnny-Cash-music. We've ridden in that time machine. And though I'm not idealistic enough to think we can shed the present when we visit the past, I do find it easy to imagine a pre-Johnny-Cash-world. As a result Johnny Cash's music is a historical contingency – that's to say it constitutes a link in an evolutionary chain (or, more accurately, a node in a complex, web-like construct of intersections, re-directions, collisions and influences). Johnny Cash's music inherited DNA from all sorts of sources: from rural music, such as hillbilly music and country and western, bluegrass and country swing; from religious music: European hymns and African-American spirituals; from both delta blues and burgeoning urban blues; from folk forms and work songs and oral history. More recently Johnny Cash's music plucked songs themselves from contemporary sources like Nick Cave, Will Oldham, Trent Reznor and Glen Danzig. According to this description, Johnny Cash was and is, more or less, indistinguishable from rock and roll: both emerged from their precedents as if inevitable.
- I have trouble with my tenses when talking about Johnny Cash, because (and this is where the adjective 'timeless' can more accurately be used) in

the context of his beginning, various middles and his end, Johnny Cash comes to us as a universal world view – his lyrical concerns and his unfettered arrangements are consistent from his earliest to his latest recordings. His voice is the voice of the plain-spoken sage, of a man who has boiled down the nettles and made tea. (No wonder the producers of *The Simpsons* hired him to provide the voice of the mystical coyote, encountered by Homer on a peyote trip.) His themes are the heart, the soul, sin, redemption and death. It doesn't get more fundamental than that. Fortunately, for a man needing to provide 45 minutes of music per album over the course of a fifty year recording career, it doesn't get more inexhaustible than that either.

- The three albums on American Recordings make me question my own opinionated smugness. Does Sting belong in the slag heap of unredeemable hacks to which I've relegated him? If so, why is "I Hung My Head," a Sting cover on *The Man Comes Around* so compelling? The same question can be asked of Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt" and, to a lesser extent, of The Eagles' "Desperado." If you haven't heard the album, I know what you're thinking. Trust me, if I hadn't heard it and you were telling me that Johnny Cash makes these songs meaningful, I'd tell you to stuff it. My opinion of Sting and The Eagles hasn't changed. No one thinks they suck more than I do. But there's an alchemical procedure at work here. Johnny Cash can turn tin into gold. He does it by proving to the listener that all these songs were written for him. He does it by proving, by implication, that every song of heart, soul, sin, redemption and death ever written, was written for him. He does it by proving, by further implication, by having provided the blueprint, by having written and recorded that blueprint over and over again for fifty years, that every song of heart, soul, sin, redemption and death ever written, was written *by* him. Johnny Cash, on what may be his final albums, has staked a claim to

being the embodiment of the central spirit and conscience of every true rock and roll song ever written.

- *The Man Comes Around* takes a few steps falsier than anything else on the American Recordings albums (Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water," with Fiona Apple singing back-up, collapses like the Bay Bridge in 1989; Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus" fails to rise from the dead). But the cover of Nine Inch Nail's "Hurt" is the most moving song I heard in 2002 (and, yes, I've heard the new Bright Eyes). Rick Rubin, who had the foresight to sign Johnny Cash in his late years, also had the good sense to produce the albums himself, keeping the arrangements and instrumentation simple, opting to feature Johnny Cash's voice, singing the fearlessly-selected songs. To our great good fortune, he has eschewed the Daniel Lanois-ization route. On "Hurt" he strips the layers of Reznor production to reveal a primal song of primal emotions – a song which, in retrospect, seems to have been written by, for and about Johnny Cash.
- Johnny Cash has always been preoccupied with death. As a Christian, the end of this life (and the promise of the next) is a scab he can't avoid picking. On *The Man Comes Around*, though, the preoccupation has taken on a fierce presence. The Johnny Cash of *The Man Comes Around* is very near death. The majority of the songs make implicit mention of death. Some, like the title track and "Streets Of Laredo" make specific reference to the singer's own death. On "We'll Meet Again," notably the final track on what sounds as if it is intended to be his last album, Johnny Cash's family joins him on the chorus to sing what must have felt like a premature wake. To a jaunty, yet funereal dixieland arrangement, they sing "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when."

- When we listen to The Man Comes Around, we are listening to the sound of old, wise, whole-heartedly un-graceful rock and roll. Johnny Cash taps the emotions and subjects of old age which still find their truest expression in rock and roll. In so doing, he does nothing less than justify rock and roll as the most apt expression of all the essential facts and fears of being alive. Let's see the Rolling Stones do that.

Johnny Cash (1932 – 2003).