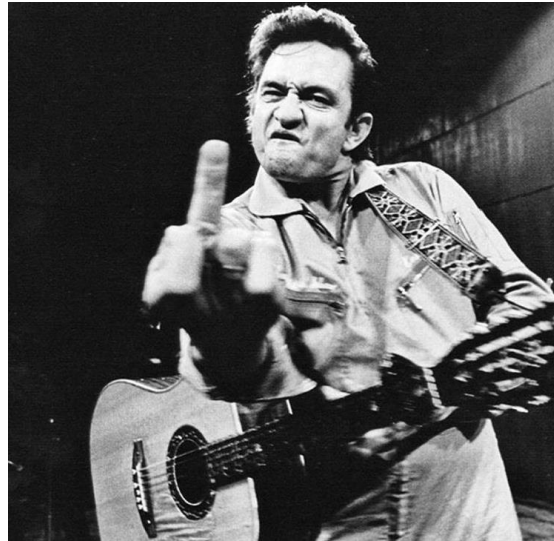


JOHNNY CASH



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1955-2003</i>	<i>Country / Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Big River (1958)</i>

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- [Now, There Was A Song!](#) (1960)
- [Now Here's Johnny Cash](#) (1961)

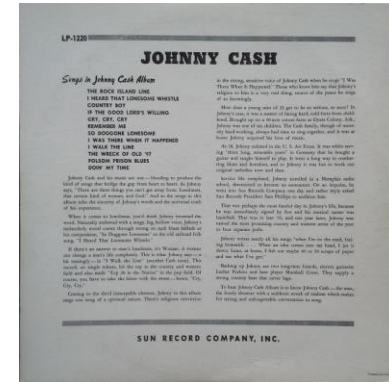


WITH HIS HOT AND BLUE GUITAR!

Album released:
Oct. 11, 1957

V A L U E
2 4 3 4 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Rock Island Line; 2) I Heard That Lonesome Whistle; 3) Country Boy; 4) If The Good Lord's Willing; 5) Cry, Cry, Cry; 6) Remember Me; 7) So Doggone Lonesome; 8) I Was There When It Happened; 9) I Walk The Line; 10) The Wreck Of The Old 97; 11) **Folsom Prison Blues**; 12) Doin' My Time; 13*) Hey, Porter; 14*) Get Rhythm.

REVIEW

I often wonder about the implications and consequences of the fact that the initial phase of the musical career of Johnny Cash, a folk-and-country man through and through, took place under the roof of Sun Records, the birthplace of the classic rockabilly sound. Contrary to what one might suspect, in fact, contrary to what one might have anticipated in 1957 just by looking at the album sleeve, Cash did not actually begin his career as a rockabilly artist — this album is *not* rockabilly, nor is anything else Cash recorded for Sun. In fact, he came to Sam Phillips as an aspiring gospel artist, and was politely (or, perhaps, impolitely) asked to come back with more commercial (and less boring) material. But even when he did, this material was nowhere near close to a ‘That’s Alright Mama’ or a ‘Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On’. In seeking out a middle ground behind mature gospel and teenage rock’n’roll, Johnny settled on middle-o’-the-road country — a fairly natural choice given the country roots of Sun’s other major star, Carl Perkins. Whatever be, Johnny Cash was *not* going to sing for rebellious teenagers: from the very beginning, he was pining for an adult audience, albeit not a particularly sophisticated one — this music is as barebones-simple as it gets, be it country, rockabilly, or something else.



What made this early brand of Johnny Cash music suitable for Sun Records was not so much the singing and songwriting as Johnny's main playing companion, guitarist Luther Perkins (no relation to Carl). As in many legendary cases, Luther owes his sound to an accident — a defective Fender Esquire guitar with broken volume and tone control, which he had to play while muting the bass strings. The resulting scratchy «boom-chicka-boom» sound was low, thick, and grumbly, and it made most of the songs sound like an old, overweight, but still muscular stallion running cross country — an early «punk» take on the country idiom if there ever was one. It's a really cool, earthy, dirty, rusty lo-fi sound that has never been properly recaptured by anyone since, not even Cash himself, and, honestly, it is the main thing that I remember from the record, given how the actual songs are relatively generic and rudimentary.

'Cry, Cry, Cry', Johnny's debut single for Sun, is included here, and you could easily picture it as a Hank Williams song, except Hank would certainly have a larger, more polished band, replete with steel guitars and fiddles. The Tennessee Two, however (with Marshall Grant on bass), trim the instrumentation down to the essentials of a rockabilly band, and all it takes to *not* make that treacherous last step is the determination to preserve some, well, let's old-fashionably call it «dignity»: neither the guitar player nor, most importantly, the singer ever get out of line while delivering the goods. Technically, this is danceable music; in reality, you are supposed to sit back and listen to the lyrics, as Johnny essentially takes on the role of the preacher man. Elvis was inviting you to meet him and a-hurry behind the barn, because he'd heard the news there was some good rockin' tonight; Johnny, on the other hand, is your guardian angel, warning you that "everybody knows where you go when the sun goes down" and that "soon your sugar daddies will all be gone". And given that deep, paternal bass tone in which the warning was delivered (even though he was only 23 at the time!), you might want to heed it — not to mention admire the tenacity with which this man still succeeded in putting out a streak of moralistic music on the Sun label, then-currently one of the Devil's main tools for corrupting innocent American youth.

The second single was 'So Doggone Lonesome', not a particularly interesting Ernest Tubb rip-off, and its B-side was 'Folsom Prison Blues', a quite particularly interesting Gordon Jenkins rip-off — I mean, nobody ever kidded anybody that Johnny mostly lifted his melodies from traditional patterns or other artists, being a word man through and through, and if we have a problem with that, we might just as well pack up and leave right away. It is instructive, though, to hear Gordon Jenkins' and Beverly Maher's [original version](#) of 'Crescent City Blues' (beginning with the same "I hear the train a-comin', it's rollin' 'round the bend" line), just to watch it die, I mean, just to see how Johnny transformed a smoky film-noirish blues tune into one of the most famous prison anthems ever, and it is not *just* the words: it is also how the boom-chicka-boom sound matches the train imagery, and it is also how each line delivered by Cash is like a straight-up gunshot, and how

he delivers each punchline at the lowest range his voice can muster — symbolically denoting the protagonist's downfall into hellflames. I mean, all the fame has understandably gone to the "I shot a man in Reno" line, but the true kick in the guts is actually delivered by "I hang my head and cry", doesn't it?

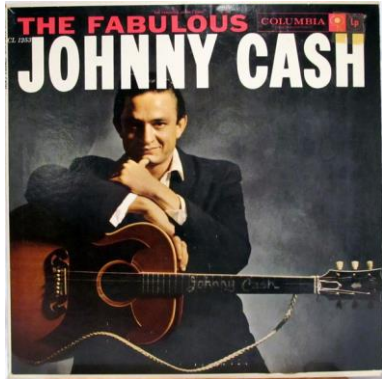
That single went to #4 on the country charts, and it obviously paved the way for 'I Walk The Line', Johnny's first #1 on the country charts and first Top 20 entry into the general charts. This was his most «experimental» number to date, due to the slightly unusual chord sequence and the constant changing of key between the verses (which explains the humming before each verse as Johnny is slowly getting in tune), but, of course, the lyrics, with their overriding theme of marital fidelity, are anything but rock'n'roll — and the way they are delivered, you get a feeling that here indeed is a man who finds it very very easy to be true. (Never mind that he would be sued for divorce by his wife a decade later on the grounds of adultery — it's the original feeling that counts, right? right? okay then). I am still a bit confused as to the huge popularity of the song, though, since it does not particularly stand out from the general quality of Johnny's Sun-era material — maybe there is something magical about that humming that does not work on everybody's brains. I personally prefer the B-side, 'Get Rhythm' (not present on the original LP, but included as a bonus on subsequent re-releases) — it is the closest Cash got to proper rock'n'roll back in the day, since the song's melody essentially rips off Chuck Berry's 'Maybellene': BUT it (a) is a 'Maybellene' delivered in classic Tennessee Three-style and (b) even here, Johnny manages to be smart and sly and come up with lyrics that turn a former teenage car-lovin' anthem into an indirect condemnation of racism and exploitation (*very* indirect, but *very* damning when you poke it with a magnifying glass).

Finally, coming to the album itself and the songs specifically recorded for it (or, at least, not found on contemporary singles), we should notice that most of them are covers — emphasizing Johnny's infatuation with his folk, country, and gospel roots. The selection is modestly diverse, as we get some Leadbelly ('Rock Island Line'), some Hank Williams ('I Heard That Lonesome Whistle'), and a batch of lesser country idols (Stuart Hamblen, Jimmie Davis, etc.), all of them put through the chicka-boom treadmill, though none of these songs truly slay the way 'Folsom Prison Blues' does. Honestly, both then and later Johnny Cash was never a great interpreter of other people's material, as much as he loved to interpret other people's material — his primary strength is the combination of his deep voice with his own words. But if you really, *really* love this kind of sound, you will probably enjoy each single song, because, well, they sort of all sound the same, don't they? Sometimes a little slower, sometimes a little faster, but that's about it.

The strangest thing about the album, actually, is its title: **Johnny Cash With His Hot And Blue Guitar!** (do not forget

the exclamation mark!) seems like a title more fit for somebody like, say, Gene Vincent — there is nothing particularly blue or particularly hot about Johnny's guitar, and even if it is actually Luther's guitar we are talking about, well, I'd rather call it a *black* than a *blue* type of sound, if you get my meaning. Apparently, Sam Phillips still wanted to market Cash as one of his rockabilly artists — to which he was somewhat entitled, given how this is all country music played from a rockabilly-ish perspective. Fortunately, this slightly misguided move did not spoil the artist's commercial recognition — which would have been easy if he had found himself ignored by the country market and booed by the genuine rockabilly fans. Yet in the end, Cash won both of them over with his deep charisma, becoming the single most famous and accepted link between the country music scene and the rock music scene (or, at least, the roots-rock music scene) — and there is no better way to understand why that was than to digest these early Sun recordings. They might not be all that great, per se, but in 1955-57, there was nothing else around that sounded quite like that, and this is quite a compliment for a guy who never thought of himself as any sort of «innovator» in the first place.





THE FABULOUS JOHNNY CASH

Album released:
Nov. 3, 1958

V A L U E
2 4 3 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Run Softly, Blue River; 2) Frankie's Man, Johnny; 3) That's All Over; 4) The Troubadour; 5) One More Ride; 6) That's Enough; 7) I Still Miss Someone; 8) Don't Take Your Guns To Town; 9) I'd Rather Die Young; 10) Pickin' Time; 11) Shepherd Of My Heart; 12) Supper-Time; 13*) Oh, What A Dream; 14*) Mama's Baby; 15*) Fool's Hall Of Fame; 16*) I'll Remember You; 17*) Cold Shoulder; 18*) Walkin' The Blues.

REVIEW

Of all the famous artists who recorded for Sun in the 1950s, Cash was the odd one out. While he clearly did not have anything against the rockabilly style as such, being always open to a bit of fast, danceable, and moderately aggressive playing, he never intended to be marketed along the same lines as Elvis or Carl Perkins — yet his struggle to record more and more country and gospel tunes was always met with negativity on the part of Sam Phillips, and by 1958, with Sam mostly preoccupied about the career of Jerry Lee Lewis, his biggest star at the time, Cash was clearly ready for bigger time.



Not «big time» as such — for Johnny, stardom and popularity in general were only important in that they allowed him to spread the message to larger groups of people. But there is hardly any doubt that he *did* want to spread the message, and that the move from the smaller Sun label, where it was hard for him to do his thing, to the much larger Columbia Records where he was relatively free to pursue his own muse, was an inspiring move at the time: he would stick with Columbia for almost thirty years after that, releasing the absolute majority of his classic songs and albums for the label. He probably did not have a say in picking the album title — few artists would have the gall to use the word *fabulous* as a self-reference, and

none of them could be named Johnny Cash — but the *music* on the record is clearly all Johnny, doing exactly the kind of schtick he'd wanted to do all along.

Unlike **Hot And Blue Guitar!**, which had enough rocking power to it to be labeled as a rockabilly album with shades of country and folk, **The Fabulous Johnny Cash** has precisely one song that could bear even a faint resemblance to the rockabilly style ('One More Ride'), and can fairly safely be classified as country — minimalist country, lo-fi country, even «proto-country-punk» if you so desire, but country it is, albeit with shades of general folk and gospel as well. Where it does not depart from **Hot And Blue Guitar!**, however, is in the overall approach to its sonic effect: the Tennessee Three are still chugging out the same *boom-chicka-boom* attack, making all songs sound very similar to each other and extremely dissimilar from everybody else's. In all honesty, precious little has changed, except that this time around, it is clear that you are invited to *sit* while listening to the songs — otherwise, you might miss something important.

The *most* important thing is, of course, that it is on this album that Johnny Cash fully discloses himself as the conscience of rural and small-town America. The very first couple of songs that open it already deliver a lesson in morality. 'Run Softly, Blue River', on which Cash is backed by the angelic-sounding Jordanaires, is a love song, but not just *any* love song — like 'I Walk The Line' before it, it is a love song about fidelity and family, the main motive of it all being "I pray that as peaceful as you is our life", in which love is seen as an element that brings peace and stability, not excitement and chaotic passion. The next track is even more telling: 'Frankie's Man, Johnny' is Cash's own inversion of the old murder ballad 'Frankie And Johnny', with lyrics which, instead of a tale of faithlessness, jealousy, and revenge, tell a tale of temptation, redemption, and happiness — because, according to Johnny, that's precisely the way it should be.

Further along the line, we have 'Don't Take Your Guns To Town', a song that does for country-western music more or less the same that those Gregory Peck-starring movies like *The Big Country* did to the Western genre — the «anti-outlaw» country, debunking the myth of the gunslinging hero for all it's worth. And then, even when we get to the songs that Cash did not write himself, it is still clear that he largely favors those with a healthy dose of preachiness in them: 'I'd Rather Die Young' is a variation on one's wedding vows, 'Shepherd Of My Heart' is a recognition of one's significant other's moral guidance (rather than, say, physical hotness), and Dorothy Coates' 'That's Enough' is a gospel tune, plain and simple — I mean, family is important and all, but let's not forget who is *really* in charge.

The magic of Johnny Cash is that he was one of the very, very few people who could make this stuff *work* — at least, to a certain degree. One could, of course, always point out that the man himself was far from an ideal example of a devoted and

loyal family man, with a long story of drug abuse and outside affairs and what-not, yet this is completely irrelevant because he clearly believes in what he preaches — at least, as long as he is preaching it, and "that's enough". Much more important is the way he preaches — the one-of-a-kind combo of his powerful, booming, earthy vocals and the minimalistic, unadorned, scratchy, crunchy musical backing, so crude and simple compared to the capabilities of slick and sturdy Nashville country professionals. Discussing the actual notes that are played is meaningless — you might as well dissect and overanalyze the compositional genius of the Ramones; what is somehow miraculous is that the songs, no matter how simple they are or how similar they are to each other, tend to stick with you after they are over. I myself thought that I was deadly bored with the record after I first heard. After I heard it for the third time, I was surprised to understand that I actually remembered most of the tunes as individual entities with individual musical and emotional personalities. «Fabulous» indeed.

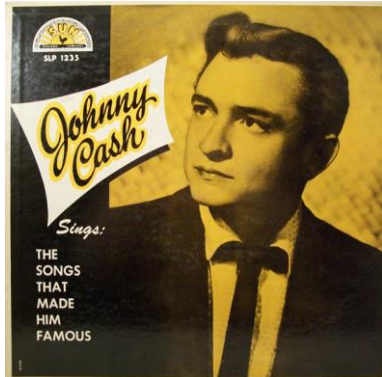
At the same time, while the album is not formally a conceptual piece, it can easily be construed as one — an album about finding inner and outer peace with oneself, about overcoming and outgrowing youth's passion and settling into maturity, saying a nostalgic goodbye to one's past ('One More Ride') and quietly preparing to meet your maker ('Supper Time'), all of these topics being just as alien to the youthful rockabilly genre from which Cash had just freed himself as they are integral to the roots music of America. Yet it is precisely by setting all of them to the essential components of that same rockabilly music that Johnny is able to breathe new life into the old values — and thus setting a sort of proto-example for people like Bob Dylan, who would do the opposite thing, setting modern words to old-fashioned music rather than old-fashioned words to modern music. This is what makes him such a non-standard artist in the country genre, and, ultimately, why I bother writing about him at all when straightforward country has always been low on my list of priorities.

Picking out highlights from this collection — or even from the expanded CD edition, which adds on six more outtakes from the July-August '58 sessions for Columbia — is pretty useless: 'Don't Take Your Guns To Town' and its B-side, 'I Still Miss Someone', may be the best known tunes but this does not really mean that they stand head and shoulders above the other selections. Just about every song is modestly catchy, dropping a tiny lyrical hook to keep you intrigued, or maybe even enchanted. Songs that feature the Jordanaires on backing vocals are just as soft and sentimental as the ones that don't — because, I think, Johnny's vocals and Luther Perkins' softly chuggin' electric guitar resound with even more tenderness than the backing band's soft lullaby vocalizing. Don Helms, the famous steel guitarist from Hank Williams' Drifting Cowboys, contributes one or two extra parts on songs like 'Supper Time', but it does not really even matter — by the time they come along, the sound of the Tennessee Three is so deeply rooted in your brain you might not even consciously realize there is an extra instrument out there. Honestly, I do not know how to write about these tunes individually — I only feel it in my guts

that they are all loaded with different «micro-emotions», but trying to explain these differences with words is a gargantuan and most definitely ungrateful task.

Some of the critical opinions I have encountered on the album actually condemn it for being too soft and unremarkable — a tough opinion to hold if you desire to «get» Johnny Cash *in toto* rather than just catch the frenetic vibe of his launching ‘Folsom Prison Blues’ into a crowd of freedom-hungry inmates. But it is highly likely that in order to catch *this* vibe from the 26-year old prophet of peaceful family life, you yourself should be at least around 40, with a long story of career fuck-ups and failed relationships behind your back. Also, you must not prepare yourself for any subtly hidden layers of artistic or philosophical complexity, because there are none: Johnny Cash does know that life is not just black and white, yet he is never going to burden you with way too complicated answers. Let others entangle you in their intricately woven nets of conundrums and paradoxes; you know there will come a time when all you want is for somebody to give it to you straight, and that’s precisely when you might be ready to accept Mr. Cash as the ‘Shepherd Of Your Heart’.





SINGS THE SONGS THAT MADE HIM FAMOUS

Album released:
Dec. 1, 1958

V A L U E
2 4 3 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Ballad Of A Teen-Age Queen; 2) There You Go; 3) I Walk The Line; 4) Don't Make Me Go; 5) Guess Things Happen That Way; 6) Train Of Love; 7) The Ways Of A Woman In Love; 8) Next In Line; 9) You're The Nearest Thing To Heaven; 10) I Can't Help It; 11) Home Of The Blues; 12) **Big River.**

REVIEW

For just one moment, you might be left wondering how on Earth it was possible for an artist (at least, not a jazz one) to put out two completely different LPs in the space of less than two months in the year 1958. The answer, however, lies on the surface and is extremely clear: while the first LP was indeed a new one, put together by Johnny for his new record label (Columbia), the second was merely an instinctive reaction from his old one (Sun Records), which he had just turned his back on due to lack of attention. Belatedly, Sam Phillips turned around and, seeing how quickly Johnny's fame and fortune began to grow with Columbia, ordered the release of this compilation — under a title that simply screams out J-E-A-L-O-U-S in big neon letters, but which, in a way, is also true, since it puts together six of Johnny's Sun singles from 1956–1958, all of which made it to the Top 10 of the US country charts, and some of which made it to the Top 20 of the general Billboard Hot 100.



The only redundancy here is 'I Walk The Line', which was already included on **Hot And Blue Guitar**, but I guess that, since this was *really* the song par excellence that had «made him famous», Sam just couldn't resist putting it on the LP as well (not that it helped — despite all the bravura, the LP failed to chart). The album would have been better rounded out if it also included 'Come In, Stranger', the original B-side to 'Guess Things Happen That Way', and 'Give My Love To Rose', the

B-side of 'Home Of The Blues' — for some reason, both were left out, even if it would be hard to prove that they are in some way inferior in quality to most of what is on here. (Cash would later re-record both of these, even multiple times, but the original performances all come from the early Sun days). Instead, we have this extra fix of 'I Walk The Line', and one other outtake, the decently recorded, but predictable and not particularly necessary cover of Hank Williams' 'I Can't Help It If I'm Still In Love With You', which Johnny tries to perform as close to Hank's original inflection as possible.

Anyway, all of this is typical Sun-era Cash with the Tennessee Two, but if you arrange the songs in chronological order, you will notice signs of evolution which prove that his stylistic change from Sun to Columbia was, in fact, gradual and already predetermined before he switched to the bigger label. The first two singles after 'I Walk The Line' are still completely in the old minimalistic style: 'There You Go' (the "you're gonna break another heart, you're gonna tell another lie..." one) is strict boom-chica-boom with a note-for-note vocal-imitating solo from Perkins, and 'Next In Line' only sounds a little bit denser because Cash's acoustic guitar is brought higher into the mix than before (also, if you focus your attention on Perkins' solo, he plays a few bars of 'Baby Shark' in there... why don't we all go to YouTube and slam a few billion views on [this sucker?](#)) So are their respective B-sides, of which 'Train Of Love' is the bouncier and catchier one, and 'Don't Make Me Go' is the slower and Hankier one.

However, 'Home Of The Blues', recorded in July 1957 in Memphis, gives us a bigger sound — fattened up by a lively piano track that runs through the entire song and ghostly whoo-whooping backing vocals. Although both the piano and the voices are still kept deep in the mix compared to the Trio, it is still a clear 180 degree turn, and one that may not necessarily have been appreciated by fans of the old Johnny Cash sound; fortunately, the song itself is one of Johnny's best from that period, his own bitter take on the 'Heartbreak Hotel' aesthetics, nowhere near as flashy as Elvis', but pretty piercing when he gets to that "I just want to give up and lay down and die" bit in the bridge section. Not sure if the piano track was really necessary here, but the gloomy backing vocals do lend the recording a useful ghostly atmosphere.

This is followed by something completely different — 'Ballad Of A Teenage Queen', a little sentimental tale with no piano and no electric guitar (just the bass), but with several overdubbed sets of vocal harmonies, including what sounds like a barbershop quartet echoing Johnny's vocals, and some quasi-operatic falsetto wailings from a lady called in to add a few extra strokes to Johnny's portrait of "the prettiest girl around, golden hair and eyes of blue". The song is almost childishly simplistic in melody and attitude, which may have been one of the reasons why it quickly became Cash's biggest hit up to date — and I think that people are still debating whether he was being perfectly serious or deeply ironic when recording it,

because there is clearly no obvious answer. I mean, if 'Home Of The Blues' was Johnny's equivalent of 'Heartbreak Hotel', then 'Ballad Of A Teenage Queen' is more or less his 'Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da', meaning that you are entitled to hate this song today, love it tomorrow, and stay on the right side of justice every time. One thing's more or less for certain: back in 1958, it gave every boy next door working at the candy store something to hope for.

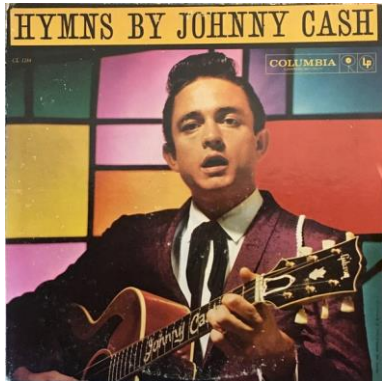
As a solid piece of music, however, the B-side 'Big River' is unquestionably stronger — one of Cash's gutsier and rockabilly numbers, possibly the fiercest of his musical statements after 'Folsom Prison Blues' (if nowhere near as socially relevant). The fierceness in question is generated by the opening «mini-battle» between Perkins and Cash, the former «taunting» Johnny with his thin electric riff and the latter «chasing» Luther with his battered acoustic rhythm chords, as if playing out the protagonist's chase after the mysterious elusive woman in the lyrics. (Funny thing is that [here](#) Johnny sings an extra verse in the song, complaining that they originally forced him to cut it out because the song was too long — but then why the hell does he *repeat* the opening "now I taught the weeping willow..." verse at the end of the song instead of using the extra one? something about those memories just doesn't add up, if you ask me).

The doo-woppy vocal harmonies *and* the rollickin' piano, now much louder than before, make their return with 'Guess Things Happen That Way', which went on to become an even bigger hit than 'Teen-Age Queen' (incidentally, both were written by one and the same songwriter, Jack Clement, who kind of became Cash's own Max Martin for a short while) and was also infamously banned by the BBC for lines such as "*God gave me that girl to lean on, then he put me on my own*" (apparently, the Force was way too strong with the BBC's religious supervision back in 1958). Are the harmonies fitting or not? I have no answer to that question, but they do give the song an odd flavor, mixing country and doo-wop in a rather novel way, which probably also contributed to its success, so I vote stay for now.

Finally, we have 'The Ways Of A Woman In Love', the last Sun single that was on the way to stores and radio stations while Johnny was already negotiating his future with Columbia — no backing vocals, but the piano still stays, delivering a soft and soothing accompaniment to what sounds like a soft and soothing pro-woman song (Johnny delivers the line "you've got the ways of a woman in love" with the same kind of delightful purr with which men comment on women's glowing beauty during pregnancy, or something like that), but is in reality a bitter complaint that she likes him instead of me. The backing vocals do return on the B-side, 'You're The Nearest Thing To Heaven', in the form of a gospel choir — because you're the nearest thing to Heaven, after all, and Johnny was never short on religiously stylized compliments to his ladies, though he certainly did this in his own way, rather than, say, Ray Charles'.

As usual, all of this stuff sounds way too deceptively primitive (or even bland) upon first listen, but opens up in more and more intricate details as you press on, and particularly when you start spending a little time analyzing it for another record review. In a more solid narrative of Johnny's evolution than the one I am offering, **The Songs That Made Him Famous** should have naturally been covered *before* his Columbia debut, since they are the obvious not-so-missing link between his earliest rockabilly period at Sun and his emergence as America's leading no-bull moralist at Columbia. But even if you just arrange all the tracks in decent chronological order, they still come together as a little mini-journey of their own, quite involving and intriguing without any context. The same could not be said about subsequent Sun releases, most of which had to scrape the bottom of the barrel, but with this one, they *almost* got it right.



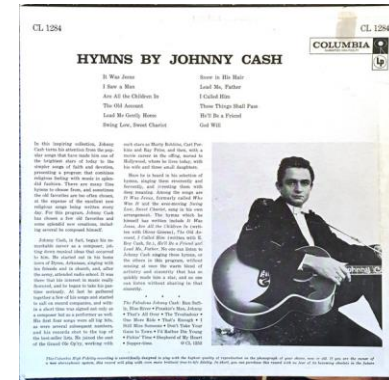


HYMNS BY JOHNNY CASH

Album released:
May 1959

V A L U E
1 3 3 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) It Was Jesus; 2) I Saw A Man; 3) Are All The Children In; 4) The Old Account; 5) Lead Me Gently Home; 6) Swing Low, Sweet Chariot; 7) Snow In His Hair; 8) Lead Me, Father; 9) I Called Him; 10) These Things Shall Pass; 11) He'll Be A Friend; 12) God Will.

REVIEW

I have a strong suspicion that the majority of people who idolize Johnny Cash as the quintessential spirit of Genuinely Virtuous Americana usually do so on the strength of a handful of Johnny's radio hits ('I Walk The Line', 'Ring Of Fire', that sort of thing) plus, of course, **At Folsom Prison**, the only Johnny Cash LP most people have ever listened to, for reasons only tangentially related to the music itself. The ironic fact is that at least in the early days of his career, the one thing Johnny Cash wanted to be more than anything else is the «Godfather of Christian country»; faith was such an integral component of his being that it took the collected effort of all his record labels and managers to keep steering him in the direction of a more secular path. Had Sam Phillips not expressly prohibited him to record straightforward gospel during his years at Sun, that Folsom prison setlist might have looked just a tad different — and, most likely, significantly harder to endorse and worship by progressively-oriented art lovers all over the country.

So how many people have actually heard *this* record — Johnny's first all-around gospel album, recorded for Columbia after his deal with the label expressly set the condition that he would be allowed to record gospel songs from time to time? Not too many, I guess, judging by such things as the number of ratings and reviews at RYM, for instance. Yet if you actually love the early, classic style of the Tennessee Three, there is hardly a serious *musical* reason why one should bypass it in favor of **The Fabulous Johnny Cash** or anything else he did for Columbia at the time. The arrangements are largely the same, the melodic structures of both covers and originals are not particularly different from Johnny's secular songs, and the level

of passion and commitment, if anything, is even higher than on the secular stuff — after all, when Johnny entered the studio in January 1959, this was finally like a dream come true: two complete recording sessions where he could finally settle ‘The Old Account’ and deliver the Lord’s message to his flock directly and concisely, rather than through moralistic ballads of teenage queens and subverted reinventions of the story of Frankie and Johnny.

The typical complaint about **Hymns** goes something like «I’m not necessarily against Christian music as such, but this record is just so dang *monotonous!*» News flash — *all* Johnny Cash records, and *particularly* the early ones with the minimalistic format of the Tennessee Three, are monotonous; creative variations of melody and arrangements were usually the last thing on Johnny’s mind when he entered the studio. The real reason, of course, is not that the *music* is monotonous, but that the *lyrical* aspect of this particular album is understandably restricted. On his casual secular days, Cash keeps you interested with his little lyrical stories and cleverly engineered vocal hooks, but when you know in advance this next song is going to be about Jesus Christ our Lord, too, yes, that is precisely the moment when you realize — «hey, that boom-chica-boom sound is actually getting on my nerves, you know?»

This psychological illusion is most likely responsible for **Hymns** getting one-star ratings in such editions as *The Rolling Stone Album Guide* and *The Encyclopedia Of Popular Music* — which, I think, reeks of hypocrisy, because the only thing that really makes these songs musically less impressive than their predecessors is the simple fact that the predecessors were there *first*, and that this stuff sounds like a bunch of re-writes in comparison. Yet with Cash, you can hardly operate within this logic — the man has always run on story-telling ideas and a sense of devotion, rather than the urge to push country and roots music into unexplored directions, and from that point of view, **Hymns By Johnny Cash** was every bit as innovative for the artist as any of his previous records.

I mean, let’s face it, ‘It Was Jesus’ is catchy as hell. That simple "who was it, everybody? who was it, everybody? it was Jesus Christ our Lord" chorus will almost certainly make you feel as embarrassed as a first-grader standing before a demanding teacher in Sunday school, but if you have already accepted Johnny Cash as your teacher in other subjects — and if you have not, you have no reason to listen to the man in the first place — hey, one extra lesson about the man from Galilee won’t hurt. "Pay close attention, little children, it’s somebody you ought to know". Not every artist in the world gets the right to address his (mostly grown-up) audience as "little children" at the age of 27, but if there was one such artist in 1959, well, you know who it was. It was Johnny Cash, our Lord. He healed the sick and he raised ’em from the dead... oh, wait a minute.

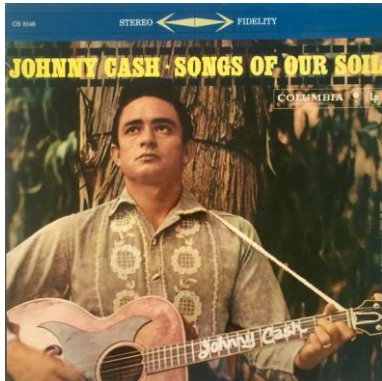
Anyway, it’s actually interesting that, in addition to covering old gospel classics, Cash himself wrote not less than four songs

for the album. 'It Was Jesus' was the first of these; two more are upbeat country-rockers ('He'll Be A Friend' and 'I Call Him') and one is a slow prayer — 'Lead Me Father', melodically a rewrite of 'Long Black Veil' and lyrically quite clichéd, but then wouldn't putting an original lyrical twist inside a prayer be a sign of excessive pride? **Hymns** is an album supposed to celebrate humility in the face of the Lord, and that's precisely what it does.

Of the covers, a few seem to evoke the Christmas spirit rather than anything else, despite the album being released in sunny May: Craig Starrett's 'Are All The Children In', for instance, is a slow, piano-driven waltz with a heavenly gospel choir, on top of which Johnny recites the lyrics rather than sings them — and the same gentle backing vocals (I think it's not *just* the Jordanaires, but the credits list nobody else) return on 'I Saw A Man', 'Lead Me Gently Home' and other tracks, weaving a gentle midnight carol atmosphere rather than an air of agitated exuberance. If there is any exuberance to be shown, in fact, it is subtly revealed in Johnny trying to reach and sustain the topmost part of his range while belting out 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' — if you actually doubted that the man could properly «sing» at all, this recording will certainly prove you wrong, because, well, if the Lord tells you to sing, you sing, goddammit. If the Lord could feed five thousand people with five loaves and two little fishes, surely he could provide his humble servant with a singing voice as well.

To sum up, if you are one of those 'Ring Of Fire' + **Folsom Prison** types, you shouldn't even be browsing this review, let alone listening to this album. But if you «get» the collective charisma of the Tennessee Three in their classic years, there is no reason to specifically stay away from it just because of the gospel lyrics, the angelic choirs, and the (strictly relative) lack of original songwriting. This is something that Johnny really wanted to do, did with as much fervor as anything else he did, and is actually not any more «moralistic» than anything else he did. If you are moved by 'I Walk The Line', you might as well be moved by 'Lead Me Father' — both songs want equally strongly to help make you a better man, and both do so by celebrating humility and self-sacrifice above everything else. Personally, I think I am more of an admirer of the «Johnny Cash Style» rather than individual Johnny Cash songs which all ultimately tend to merge into one anyway, highlights and lowlights alike — so hey, if we need to throw a bunch of «hymns» into the equation, then I guess hymns it is.





SONGS OF OUR SOIL

Album released:

July 6, 1959

V A L U E
2 4 3 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Drink To Me; 2) **Five Feet High And Rising**; 3) **The Man On The Hill**; 4) Hank And Joe And Me; 5) Clementine; 6) The Great Speckled Bird; 7) I Want To Go Home; 8) The Caretaker; 9) Old Apache Squaw; 10) Don't Step On Mother's Roses; 11) **My Grandfather's Clock**; 12) It Could Be You; 13*) **I Got Stripes**; 14*) You Dreamer You.

REVIEW

Here is yet another short, but sweet collection, reflecting just how much «the Spirit» stayed on Cash's side in his early years — nothing here could be called a stylistic or musical departure from his average pattern of the time, yet most of the songs still manage to be charmingly endearing after a couple of listens or so. Perhaps the most innovative thing about it is the title — if you notice, for the first time ever here is a Johnny Cash LP whose title in no way refers to the name or personality of Johnny Cash himself, but instead makes it look as if that personality has been humbly dissolved in the vastness and depth of the American «soil». In reality, this is but an illusion — everything Johnny ever recorded gets filtered through the lens of his own personality, and I wouldn't dare place an equality sign between «Johnny Cash» and «Americana». But it is still nice to see him come out with an album title that does not place full emphasis on individual star power.

Actually, the title itself might be a little misleading: «soil» here has to be understood in the overriding sense of «homeland» rather than specifically having to do with tilling the earth — there's a bit of that, too, but in general, **Songs Of Our Soil** is a series of musical-lyrical vignettes whose characters are all over the place, and if there is one central theme to it all, it's the



matter of toiling through life, growing old, and meeting your maker. In his autobiography, Johnny admitted himself that death was very much on his mind at the time (largely due to the demise of his brother); still, if this were really an album about death, most of the songs would have some sort of proto-‘Sister Morphine’ vibe, which they do not — and it would be a rather strange thing to make Death the central topic of an album called **Songs Of Our Soil**, as it could, in a way, imply that America is *the country par excellence* where people come to die, think about nothing but death, and get death served to them in a faster and more assured way than anywhere else. (A picture not wholly alien to at least some people of the extreme-left persuasion, but, to the best of my knowledge, Cash never associated himself with such people).

In fact, the album is about Survival just as much as it is about Death — take one of the record’s most classic and well-known songs, for instance, which is ‘Five Feet High And Rising’. Johnny intentionally sets the verses to an old «dance-blues» melody stemming from songs like Robert Johnson’s ‘They’re Red Hot’ and others, as if to emphasize the «game» aspects of an endangered family fleeing from the water element — the constantly repeated, impending, ever-growing threat of "two feet high and risin'", "three feet high and risin'" does not feel so much as impending doom as it feels like the «cat element» in a dangerous, but unpredictable game of cat-and-mouse. The steady threat of the chorus keeps interlocking with the busy hustle of the verse, yet there’s an air of humorous irony rather than despair about it ("looks like we’ll be blessed with a little more rain"), which is certainly a very American thing to have — most of the pre-war country blues songs about tough times share pretty much the same attitude.

In ‘The Man On The Hill’, the central motive is that of God’s will — each verse sets up a living problem with a lively country rhythm ("I ain’t got no Sunday shoes that I can wear to town", that sort of thing), then slows things down as if in a state of brief deliberation on the subject, then picks up speed again with the universal answer ("Yes I will, I’ll ask the man on the hill"). Once again, there’s nothing particularly complicated, but Johnny’s use of speed and pause brings in an extra level of theatricality and symbolism that you will rarely encounter in true old-time «Americana». It’s also a nice way to bring back the importance of *faith* without blaring too much Jesus Christ in your face.

When, eventually, we get around to the songs in which Death, like it or not, is the main theme, it is still surrounded by an aura of calm, if not humble, acceptance. In ‘Hank And Joe And Me’, a tale of an unfortunate ending to a treasure hunt in the desert, neither Hank, nor Joe, nor the protagonist seem to express much discontent with their lot; judging by the lyrics, the phrasing, the vocal tone, the melody, it’s more of a «well, we blew it, tough luck, meet you in the next world or something» attitude. I think that nobody has ever pronounced a phrase like "leave him there and let him die, I can’t stand to hear him

cry for water" in a more emotionless tone than Johnny does in the chorus. It's not a song about being punished for greed, or about the silliness and hopelessness of man's grand plans, or about unendurable suffering for inadequate reasons. It's just a song about how life sometimes ends in death sooner than we'd probably expect it — nothing particularly horrible or unjust about it, just the way of nature. "Death is a natural part of life, rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force", that kind of thing.

The same feeling of un-sentimental acceptance of one's fate runs through the entire mini-gallery of characters portrayed in the album, be it the old gravedigger presaging his own death ('The Caretaker'), the Indian woman with her baggage of suffering accumulated through the years ('Old Apache Squaw'), or the ninety-year old clock, belonging to the protagonist's grandfather, which "stopped short, never to go again, when the old man died" ('My Grandfather's Clock'). These songs are not nearly as well (or at least, not as intriguingly) construed as 'The Man On The Hill' or 'Five Feet High' (although 'My Grandfather's Clock' nicely incorporates the sound of a pendulum into its stop-and-start structure), but thematically, they are perfectly integrated with the rest; if the first few songs have already sucked you in, they will simply go on to be part of the same journey through a portrait gallery of tired and exhausted faces who, despite all the beatings they have taken, still believe in the inevitability of the life-and-death cycle.

Right in the middle of the album, Cash inserts a sequence of three cover songs. Billy and Buddy Mize's 'Clementine' (little to do with the traditional 'My Darling Clementine' as heard in the 1946 Western, other than the chorus), a rather generic tale of yet another senseless shootout, is the least notable of the three; but the inclusion of 'The Great Speckled Bird', the only song here that actually puts a positive twist on the idea of Death, supposedly brings a bit more sense and purpose to the life-and-death cycle. Johnny knows best not to overuse the cliché of «death as liberation», but being a good Christian and all, he can hardly allow himself not to mention it at all, now can he?

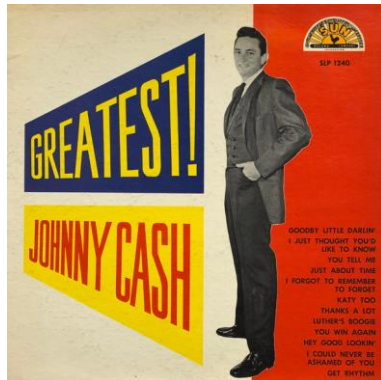
The most curious addition, however, is that of 'I Want To Go Home', which is the way Johnny retitled 'The John B. Sails', even better known to us as 'Sloop John B' after the **Pet Sounds** version. By surrounding the song with all those portraits of toilsome lives and inevitable deaths, and by placing the emphasis on the last line of its chorus, he somehow manages to transform the song into a plea for liberation from this world's suffering — the entire "I feel so homesick, I wanna go home" idea really locks into the "I'll be joyfully carried to meet him / On the wings of the great speckled bird" message of the previous song. In the hands of Brian Wilson, it would become a song about the insufferability of alienation — an allegory for the same thing that was more directly sung about in 'I Just Wasn't Made For These Times' — but in the context of **Songs Of**

Our Soil, it's just another song about how we (a) are born to suffer, (b) have to accept death as a natural and, sometimes, welcome end to our suffering, (c) and what's wrong with that?

Yet in spite of this stoical life philosophy, Johnny still decides to end the record with 'It Could Be You', which could thematically be perceived as an outtake from **Hymns** — the only song on the album that actually constitutes a call to action rather than a statement of fact. The plea to the listeners that we should "lend a hand, say a prayer, give a smile that he might share" applies to pretty much all the protagonists of these vignettes, giving life a bit of a more colorful outlook. In fact, the conceptuality of the album is even more reinforced by the fact that each of its two sides is rounded off with one of the only two properly «optimistic» — not to mention Christian-themed — songs: 'The Great Speckled Bird', which teaches one to view Death as merely the beginning of something much grander, and 'It Could Be You', which gives one a recommendation on how to make Life more acceptable to those who have a hard time going through it. This detail might be very easily overlooked, but for an epoch in which conceptual cycles of songs with a well thought-out sequencing were largely unheard of, it is actually quite important.

Some CD issues of the album throw on a couple bonus tracks, the most important of which is 'I Got Stripes', one of Johnny's most famous jail-themed anthems; released as a non-LP single in mid-1959, it could have *very* easily fit right inside **Songs Of Our Soil**, what with its fast-paced and humorous presentation of an inmate's life story and its consequences. (On the other hand, 'You Dreamer You', the original B-side to 'Frankie's Man, Johnny', is a completely different story — way too romantic and sentimental to be compatible with the record's aura of cheerful darkness). Of course, plenty of other songs from Johnny's other singles and LPs could have fit in just as well — the «Man In Black» began earning his title way earlier than he granted it to himself, after all. But the fact remains that this is the first time in Cash's history when he created his own personal thematic collection based around an artistic theme rather than a pre-established genre (as on **Hymns**), and for many, given the relative freshness and youthful strength of his genius at the time, it might forever remain the best one.



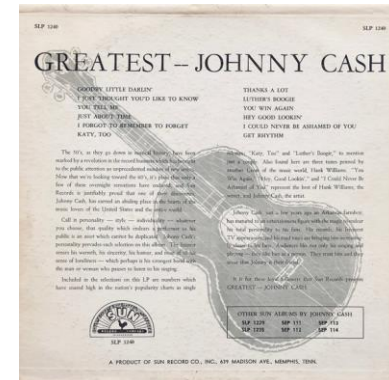


GREATEST!

Album released:
Oct. 19, 1959

V A L U E
2 2 3 1 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Goodbye Little Darlin' Goodbye; 2) I Just Thought You'd Like To Know; 3) You Tell Me; 4) Just About Time; 5) I Forgot To Remember To Forget; 6) Katy Too; 7) Thanks A Lot; 8) Luther Played The Boogie; 9) You Win Again; 10) Hey, Good Lookin'; 11) I Could Never Be Ashamed Of You; 12) Get Rhythm.

REVIEW

While Johnny was continuing his winning streak on Columbia, his old *alma mater* of Sun Records went on going through its own archives, throwing out single after single, LP after LP with such verve that one might indeed have thought the man was having two different recording careers at the same time — «Johnny Cash» on Columbia and «Johnny For Cash» on Sun, that is. Seriously, it feels like Sam Phillips already had a premonition that things would eventually go that way and had Johnny and the Tennessee Two locked up in his basement every weekend so that the guys could record another bunch of sloppy demos for him to polish in later years. To add insult to injury — what's with the album title? This is definitely *not* a «greatest-hits» or a «best-of» compilation, provided the word *greatest!* refers to the included songs. If it refers to Johnny himself, then it's certainly debatable, but even if we agree that he *is*, in fact, *greatest!*, this particular album does a rather mediocre job of upholding that claim. Don't record executives know that employing dishonest marketing strategies reduces one's chance of going to Heaven?



The only good thing to be said about **Greatest!** is that at least all the songs on here had not been previously released on any other Sun LPs — and only one song out of twelve, ‘Get Rhythm’, had been previously released as a single while Cash was still legally bound to Sun (in 1956; it was already mentioned in the review of **With His Hot And Blue Guitar!**). Of the remaining eleven tracks, eight represent A- and B-sides released by Sun in between late 1958 and the fall of 1959, and three are covers of classic Hank Williams tunes which Phillips liked so much, he would later add one more and release all four again on a new LP called **Johnny Cash Sings Hank Williams** (where, of course, only those four tracks would be songs by Hank Williams and the others would be old Cash classics, probably making the customer wonder if Hank Williams really wrote ‘Folsom Prison Blues’ and if so, why the heck don’t they ever play Hank’s original on the radio?).

Anyway, the eight new-old songs are nice, but nothing too special. Some of them were released with extra overdubs, adding backing vocals to originally sparser tracks — a practice frowned upon by loyal fans, yet not too much of a crime in the light of the original recordings not being all that great to begin with. Jack Clement’s ‘Just About Time’ and Charlie Rich’s ‘I Just Thought You’d Like To Know’ are two fairly ordinary tales of love-gone-wrong, with heavy emphasis on the piano (quite similar to Jerry Lee Lewis’ playing style on his country records, but actually played by someone else) and not a lot to add to the legend of Johnny’s story-telling skills. More interesting in that respect is the better known ‘Luther Played The Boogie’, Johnny’s own tribute to his good friend Luther Perkins whose repetitive chorus will either amuse you or annoy you, but it’s at least novel how Johnny makes his voice match the up-and-down boogie-woogie scale of "Luther played the boogie-woogie, Luther played the boogie-woogie" — it’s a bit of a sentimental musical joke, and it gets me in a good mood.

Another musical joke, a bit too close-to-home this time, is ‘Katy Too’, a lightweight hymn to swinging and infidelity which sort of makes an uncomfortable contrast with ‘I Walk The Line’ (I’d love to see *those* two combined as an A- and B-side!), but then nobody ever said that Johnny Cash himself was a «comfortable» man. Of course, he’s actually playing a character and all, holding up the old folk tradition of ramblin’ men ballads, but given Johnny’s difficult history of relationships with his women, there is certainly a piece of himself in here as well. "I like Mary’s barbecue / But I still like ol’ Katy too" is not nearly as removed from the man’s life creed as one would hope to think. Then again, you can just take it as a lil’ ol’ catchy country ditty and leave it at that. The B-side was ‘I Forgot To Remember To Forget’, which he seems to sing as close to the Elvis original as possible, so I’ll probably not forget to remember to forget. Nor is there anything particularly outstanding to remember about ‘Goodbye Little Darlin’, backed with ‘You Tell Me’ — regular country patterns with regular bitter feelings scattered across the notes.

As for the Hank Williams covers... well, pretty much the only situation in which I could understand somebody covering Hank Williams would be a complete reinvention of one of his songs in an entirely different style (like, for instance, Jerry Lee Lewis' conversion of 'Jambalaya' into breakneck-speed, maniacal rock'n'roll). *These* songs are more like a dutiful tribute to Hank Williams, and you'd have to really go gaga over Johnny's deep voice to have a single reason to put on this cover of 'You Win Again' ever again. Even worse is the simple, bare-bones and truncated version of 'Hey Good Lookin'', which, in Hank's original version, might just be *the* single most joyful, uplifting, and hilarious country tune of all time — here, it sounds like something Johnny might have absent-mindedly played in rehearsal, then left it forgotten on the shelf until Sam Phillips picked it up and packaged it as one super-important artist's personal vision of another super-important artist, which it simply isn't. It's just the kind of cover that any of us might produce if we were learning guitar, putting together a little band, and taking Hank Williams as a role model.

Overall, this is a predictable disappointment; perhaps 'Luther Played The Boogie' and 'Katy Too' are salvageable for those who really appreciate Johnny's somewhat stiff, but amicable humorous side, but the other songs are either way too derivative or simply way too pointless to linger on for long. At least, as I said, most of them had been previously unreleased on LP; most of Sun's subsequent Johnny Cash albums would be horrendous mix-ups of previously released tracks with absolute barrel scraps «sweetened up» with extra overdubs, so, with your permission, I shall probably omit most of them as we continue to trace Johnny's recording career (rich enough, might I say, *without* having to pay close attention to every trifle Sun Records thought it necessary to make some extra money on).



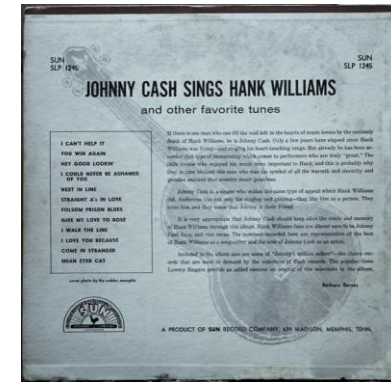


SINGS HANK WILLIAMS

Album released:
September 1960

V A L U E
1 2 2 1 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) I Can't Help It; 2) You Win Again; 3) Hey Good Lookin'; 4) I Could Never Be Ashamed Of You; 5) Next In Line; 6) Straight A's In Love; 7) Folsom Prison Blues; 8) Give My Love To Rose; 9) I Walk The Line; 10) I Love You Because; 11) **Come In Stranger**; 12) Mean Eyed Cat.

REVIEW

Honestly, having never held the full-size non-virtual LP in my non-virtual hands, I cannot even tell with certainty that it is Johnny Cash on the front sleeve — could just as well be Hank Williams, or some nameless janitor at Sun Records whom they dressed up appropriately and set up in the classic «country boy goes out to conquer the world with his hot acoustic guitar against the sunset» pose. In any case, the cover is totally phoney-baloney, as is the title of the album, as is pretty much everything about it — one of the most, if not *the* single most embarrassing travesty to ever be committed by Cash's original label in Cash's name.



The idea of Johnny Cash as the spiritual heir to Hank Williams might have some degree of sense — to the extent that any great artist could ever be defined by his relation to another great artist — and it is hard to judge Sun Records for attempting to exploit its commercial potential, but there were just two tiny problems with it: (a) during his tenure with Sun, Cash had apparently only recorded four Hank Williams songs and (b) *all* of them had previously been released on various Sun LPs. How could those be circumvented? Simple as heck. First, fill the remaining space on the album with *non*-Hank Williams songs; then, when the customer flips the record over and looks real hard (*if* he looks real hard, that is), there's the **...And**

Other Favorite Tunes added in the proverbial small type — the oldest trick in the book since the invention of typescript, if not writing itself. At the end of the liner notes promoting the Cash-as-next-Williams idea, Sun's publicity agent Barbara Barnes «humbly» adds: "*Included in the album also are some of 'Johnny's million sellers' – the choice records that are most in demand by the collectors of Cash records*". Umm, if they were 'million sellers' in the first place, what's the deal with putting them on yet another LP instead of just re-releasing the originals?

Reading on, we find this: "*The popular Gene Lowery Singers provide an added element on several of the selections in the album*". Ah-ha! That's the secret: these are not *just* the original recordings re-released, these are the original recordings with new overdubs — and boy, you *really* haven't lived until you've heard 'Folsom Prison Blues' sung with a mighty chorus going "*wah-ouh-waaaah, oo-waah oo-wah oo-waaaahh!*" to fill in all that empty space between the individual lines in each verse. I can only hope that the Gene Lowery Singers were well paid for their meaningless butchering jobs, so that at least some of them, after yet another tormented night spent crying into the pillow, could redeem themselves by thinking "*well, yes, I did go ahead and spoil a perfectly good song, but at least I managed to pay off my mortgage!*" Seriously, that particular vocal style, I think, went out of fashion even before 1945, and while I could visualize The Gene Lowery Singers adding some color to, say, a Duane Eddy instrumental, having them creep behind Johnny Cash is a stylistic incongruence on the level of having Yoko Ono creep behind Chuck Berry (as did actually happen in 1972).

In the end, what we have here is: (a) four previously released songs by Hank Williams, none of them particularly good next to the originals *and* most of them spoiled further by the addition of backing vocals; (b) three previously released songs by The Bastard Son And Spiritual Heir of Hank Williams ('Folsom Prison', 'I Walk The Line', and 'Next In Line'), all of them spoiled by the addition of backing vocals; (c) two previously released obscure B-sides ('Come In Stranger', 'Give My Love To Rose'), with the second one also spoiled by the addition of backing vocals; (d) finally, three previously unreleased outtakes from the bottom of the barrel, which Sun would also release as singles ('Straight A's In Love', 'I Love You Because', 'Mean Eyed Cat'). Only the last five songs are worth discussing on their own, and even that discussion shall have to be cut short, since most of them add little to what we already understand, respect, and love about the man.

Easily the oddest one is 'Straight A's In Love', which, in terms of lyrical content and general swagger, feels like a blueprint for AC/DC's Bon Scott — "*if they'd give me a mark for learnin' in the dark I'd have straight A's in love*" would have nicely fit in on **Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap** or any of those other early albums. Given that Cash was usually described as a near-perfect student in high school, we may assume the song is not exactly autobiographical, and honestly, he should have

probably given it away to somebody like Jerry Lee Lewis — it's possible that that was exactly what he intended to do, except that those nasty Sun people found the demo, beefed it up and released it as a Cash single, forever ruining his good boy reputation in the process (not really). For the B-side, they chose Johnny's cover of Leon Payne's 'I Love You Because', a song that probably requires crooning to be effective, so there's little hope of Johnny's version rubbing out the memories of the classic Elvis cover from way back in 1954.

Not surprisingly, the best songs here are the ones personally authorized by Johnny, i.e. the original B-sides released while he was still under the Sun contract, and, fortunately, the best of the two is included here without the awful vocal overdubs. 'Come In Stranger', the flipside to 'Guess Things Happen That Way', is another classic example of how, with minimal effort on his side, Cash can convey that touching combination of quiet suffering and soulful warmth, and from a female perspective at that — we never get to learn where exactly the "stranger" in question is coming from, and we apparently do not even need to as long as "*the one I love is not a stranger to me*", a sentiment of forgiving endurance that might probably feel completely alien to modern day young audiences but is, in fact, directly derived from the "prodigal son" trope. The melody is completely generic — no big surprise here — but the hookline of "*she said come in, stranger*" is delivered in just the right tone, with that particular mix of tiredness, scorn, and empathy that few people could convey on Johnny's level.

'Give My Love To Rose', the 1957 B-side to 'Home Of The Blues', is a little worse for wear, because (a) it has the awful vocal overdubs and (b) it's a bit more of a generic Western ballad, portraying a tale that you could easily see in the cheapest Western soap rather than a classic John Ford movie. This did not prevent it from — actually, more like encouraged it to — become a popular favorite, going on to even bigger fame when he performed it at Folsom Prison a decade later and everything. Not *my* favorite sub-genre of the world-according-to-Johnny-Cash, but if it helped brighten up the day of a bunch of inmates at least once — hey, whatever works.

Finally, 'Mean-Eyed Cat' is the oldest of these songs, going all the way back to 1955 and telling a rather twisted story of two lovers' relationship being (almost literally) crossed by a feline — unless the "mean-eyed cat" is really a metaphor, in which case the reconciliation finale ("*and now we're curled up on the sofa, me and her and that mean-eyed cat*") could look like an early veiled celebration of *ménage à trois*, pretty daring for a down-to-Earth, God-fearin', old-fashioned gentleman like Mr. Cash but then again he *was* only twenty-three at the time. On the other hand, the song has little interesting going on other than its narrative yarn, so it is not difficult to see why it stayed in the can for so long before getting exhumed by Sun. Again, thanks at least for not letting the Gene Lowery Singers walk all over it.

Returning to the album title, it would not be too difficult to make the case that, even if most of the songs on the album were not written by Hank Williams, quite a few of them could be inspired by Hank Williams, as they explore pretty much the same themes that Hank was obsessed with for most of his life. Change the verb **Sings** in the title to just about anything else ("*Remembers*", "*Honors*", "*Pays His Dues To*", "*Commissions A Church In The Name Of*", etc.), and the record might make better sense, though definitely not before all of the Gene Lowery Singers have been placed on the chain gang and hauled away to Folsom Prison for some healthy rock-breaking. On the other hand, overrating the connection between Hank and Johnny does no good to either of them — the differences in their musical personalities far outweigh the commonalities, and it would be just as hard for me to imagine Hank Williams, had he managed to hold on to life for another decade, to give a convincing performance of 'Folsom Prison Blues' as it is for me to enjoy Johnny covering 'Hey Good Lookin', without an ounce of Hank's vocal charisma. As a story-teller, visionary, and «encyclopedist of Americana», Cash moves on to heights that Hank never even thought of scaling; as a vocal snake charmer, he relates to Hank the same way a \$25 bottle of wine relates to a \$250 one, and that's putting it mildly.

In short, the existence of this record probably tells us a lot more about the desperate situation at Sun Records in 1960 than it does about the artistry of Johnny Cash — but then, it is always just as instructive to learn about the lows as it is to learn about the highs. Maybe even *more* instructive, not to mention more entertaining. Who really cares about the rise of the Roman Empire? I'll take the decline and fall any day, thanks so much.





RIDE THIS TRAIN

Album released:

September 1960

V A L U E
2 3 2 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Loading Coal; 2) Slow Rider; 3) Lumberjack; 4) Dorraine Of Ponchartrain; 5) Going To Memphis; 6) When Papa Played The Dobro; 7) Boss Jack; 8) Old Doc Brown; 9*) The Fable Of Willie Brown; 10*) Second Honeymoon; 11*) Ballad Of The Harp Weaver; 12*) Smiling Bill McCall.

REVIEW

At the exact same time while Cash's old record label was busy with (non-consensual) sodomizing of his musical legacy, Johnny himself was busy making a new record for his new record label that would end up being one of the most divisive albums of his career. Anywhere you go, you'll find a bunch of zealous fans waving **Ride This Train** around as a masterpiece of integrating music with the art of story-telling and the genuine American spirit, and another bunch of skeptical fans dismissing the record as a well-meaning, ambitious misfire, in which both the music and the story-telling end up diminishing, if not downright canceling out, each other. As usual, the truth is somewhere in between, or, rather, just shares the bed with the first or the second group depending on who was the first to ask her out on a date this morning.



I myself happen to be a little torn when thinking about, or even when *feeling* Cash's «serious artistry» on an instinctive level. On one hand, Johnny's approach to «Americana» is an unquestionable step-up compared to its representation in pop culture of the first half of the 20th century. As a singer, a lyricist, an actor, he makes great strides in subtlety, sincerity, and unpredictability — building upon the old folk tradition, but adding new layers of personal introspection, taking great care to

think in addition to *observe*. On the other hand, Johnny always took care that his work be thoroughly accessible to the simplest out of the simplest men out there — meticulously constructing his image as the «man of the people», in ways far more traditional and crude than, for instance, any of the subsequent mass-appeal rockers like Bruce Springsteen (or even John Mellencamp, for that matter). This means that it's usually a 50-50 chance of his subverting, dominating, and sophisticating some traditionalist trope or cliché when he tackles it, or, on the contrary, of his slipping into corny pathos or tired old sentimentality that cannot be redeemed even with the power of his voice. And the line dividing creativity and good taste, on one side, and pretentious cheesiness, on the other, is so unbearably thin that even the most experienced and seasoned connoisseurs of all things Americana will probably end up on different sides of the main street, hands on their hips and ready to draw.

At least there's no arguing that with **Ride This Train**, Cash tried to make something *different*: a conceptual album where each song begins with a lengthy spoken monolog, either telling us a story or giving us Johnny's thoughts on the history and sociology of the United States of America (often both) as he imagines himself sitting at an open train window, gazing at all the famous — more usually, not so famous — landmarks passing him by. While spoken word passages as such were nothing new to the country-western genre, making them such an integral part of the experience was an original and bold move on Johnny's part, as he was clearly trying to make the best of the artistic freedom granted to him by Columbia while that good luck still lasted. But is it an experiment that could really be evaluated as worthy of the risks taken?

Well, *technically* I would argue that it's a failure almost by definition. Music is music, and story-telling (when it is not done in a musical form) is story-telling; the two things generally belong in different dimensions, which is precisely why I've never been a big fan of the *VH1 Storytellers* series, for instance. For one thing, the concept obviously impacts the album's factor of replayability: you *might* want to endure Johnny's stories the first time around, but next time you will be more likely to want to skip them and get straight to the songs, and there's even no way to do that easily, since stories and songs are woven together without formal track separation. And given that the songs as such are not usually counted among Johnny's best (at least, they certainly do not display a lot of «hit potential»), *and* that there's only eight of them, not counting the bonus tracks on CD editions, this makes it quite tempting to forget about the album altogether.

For another thing, the story-telling is... well, ambiguous. When Cash puts his mix of «folkie simplicity» and «literary introspection» in the context of an actual song, you can easily disregard the lyrically jarring moments if they are delivered with sufficient energy, hook-power, and feeling. But when it is arranged as a just-so-story, I find it pretty hard to tear up at

his stone-faced transformation into the son of a poor coal miner, or a struggling lumberjack, or an unfortunate inmate put to work on levee construction, or even John Wesley Hardin himself. It's not that he doesn't have enough *authenticity* to pull off all that imagery — it's simply that it isn't very *interesting* authenticity by itself. Had all of us been complete and utter strangers to human suffering, living some pampered existence *à la* Paris Hilton, Cash's stern portrayals of tough life in ye olde America might have struck a deep chord (provided we'd even *have* a deep chord to be struck in the first place). But on a purely verbal level, Johnny is no Dickens or Dostoyevsky when it comes to describing human suffering; and as for his uniquely powerful voice, well, in this particular case it just suffers from having the *MADE IN PROFOUND WISDOM COUNTY* logo imprinted all over it in blindingly bright colors.

Modern listeners with modern sensitivity might already be turned off the album in the first few minutes, during which Cash finds himself obliged to — very briefly — make a mention of "*millions of people living in teepees along the rivers*" who were occupying the land way before all the protagonists of the eight stories on the album. "*It's with a little regret that I think of how I pushed them back / And crowded them out to claim this land for myself or for another country*", Johnny admits before giving a little phonetic praise to how "*the Indians' hearts must have been full of music*" for giving places names like Kickapoo or Winnebago, and then leaving the Indian subject altogether and moving on to describing the plight of white coal miners and lumberjacks. For the standards of 1960, this was clearly quite a progressive development, comparable to the contemporary gradual bits of «humanization» of Native Americans in Western movies; more than half a century later, people with no proper historical perspective will look at that "*with a little regret*" bit with understandable, if somewhat misguided, indignation. But regardless of the actual year in which we give the record another spin, it feels more likely that the mention of the Indians is not so much due here to any pangs of social justice as it is to provide Cash's narrative with extra vastness and depth — throw in an extra fifteen millennia or so just in order to flash the man's credentials as a certified history teacher, *and* a really special history teacher at that, as he leaves the Indian subject with this twist: "*But let's look a little at the heart and muscle of this land / A few things you don't read in books, things that aren't taught in school*". Oh boy... this is where the cliché-spotting drinking game really begins, I guess.

The sad thing is that there are quite a few decent songs on the album — not jaw-dropping obscure highlights, perhaps, but certainly not any worse than the «average» Cash content that he kept producing for Columbia; however, the fact that you cannot properly extricate them from the narrative means that they are going to be inevitably constricted and diminished by it. 'Loading Coal', for instance, is a melancholic and sympathetic contribution from Merle Travis, the man who wrote more songs about coal mining than Ted Nugent wrote about pussy hunting — and, unlike all those Hank Williams howls-at-the-

moon, perfectly suited for Johnny's hard-as-a-rock vocals. There's a classic «Hand-of-Doom» jump there to a minor chord on the "loadin' coal" conclusion to each verse, symbolizing the futility of any hopes and dreams to break out of the vicious circle, which seems perfectly tailored for Cash — Merle Travis himself could never go that low — but just because the song is buried at the end of the opening trail monolog, it never even had the slightest chance to compete with the likes of 'Sixteen Tons' and 'Dark As A Dungeon' in popular conscience. It *could* have been a lot bigger, though.

Another notable track is 'Going To Memphis', which seems to have a rather complicated history. On the record, it is credited to Alan Lomax, although Alan is much better known as a «songhunter» than a songwriter — and, in fact, there is an actual recording in the Lomax Digital Archive of a prison work song called '[Going To Memphis](#)' which he taped on September 16, 1959 at the infamous Parchman Farm penitentiary. Other than the title, however, and the general chain gang atmosphere, it has nothing in common with the recording on **Ride This Train**, which was most likely written by Cash himself, but left credited to Lomax for some reason (inspiration?). The song uses work grunts, chain rattle, and pickaxe swings in a fashion not unlike Floyd would later arrange their cash registers for 'Money', but once the band comes into full swing, acquires a slightly merrier barroom feel courtesy of Floyd Cramer's crystal-clear piano runs. As in all the best prison songs, this one has no place for explicit self-pity; indeed, its nagging "*I'm going to Memphis, yeah, going to Memphis*" refrain sounds more threatening than desperate, leaving you quite in the dark as to the protagonist's actual plans to take control of his life back into his own hands.

I'm also pretty doggone sure that Roy Wood must have been spoofing Cash's 'When Papa Played The Dobro' with his own '[When Gran'ma Plays The Banjo](#)' from 1973's **Boulders**; Johnny may have deserved it, what with all the melancholic pathos of the tune outweighing its light humor, but perhaps the biggest irony of the song is that the dobro parts, in this tune that is allegedly about an amateur performer's clumsy, but original approach to the instrument, were recorded by Harold "Shot" Jackson, one of the country's primary experts on bluegrass dobro — try as he might to imitate an «amateur» approach, you cannot help but discern the professional skill behind it. However, as long as Johnny himself remains in charge, most of the «extras» on his songs usually make them more interesting and efficient (as opposed to dreadfully embarrassing when somebody else takes care of it, yes, I'm talkin' 'bout *you*, Sun Records!).

Still, **Ride This Train** is constructed first and foremost as a musical equivalent of a portrait gallery, and some of its eight songs are little else other than rhythmic narratives of various characters — some of whom jump out of really weird areas of the brain, e.g. the «benevolent slave driver» stereotype in 'Boss Jack' (predated by a fantastic tale of «Boss Jack» pardoning

a slave for slacking in order to compose ‘Swing Low Sweet Chariot’, no less!), or the heroine of ‘Dorraine Of Pontchartrain’, whose only purpose seems to be to uphold the stereotype of Louisiana ladies as overtly sensitive characters. Of all these songs, only ‘Going To Memphis’ was seen fit for single release — and then it became the first of Cash’s Columbia singles to completely flop on the US Country charts, which is kinda telling.

Digital re-releases of the album often include a bunch of bonus tracks recorded at the same sessions that yielded the LP, including two singles that *did* actually chart (‘Smiling Bill McCall’, an educational fable of the danger of overrating and mythologizing one’s unseen radio heroes; and ‘Second Honeymoon’, whose grim lyrics are a rather poor match for its upbeat sentimentality) and an almost unbearably pathetic «instrumental monolog», ‘Ballad Of The Harp Weaver’, which is basically Johnny reciting a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay. If you like Edna’s poetry, you might get a kick out of it, and the tale would actually fit nicely into the **Ride This Train** portrait gallery; but I am not a big fan (based on my own very limited experience, I would tend to agree with those critics who thought there was way too much 19th century in her 20th century verse — which, admittedly, would very much agree with Johnny’s own style), and I can see how Cash himself would have ultimately decided to keep the track off the finished album for being much too maudlin compared to the general restrained atmosphere of all the other songs.

Regardless, **Ride This Train** is still sort of essential; it’s the first time that Johnny actually decides to "cash" in (excuse the pun) on his own legend, taking all of us back to school in a straightforward and explicit way, and it deserves at least to be given a fair chance, whereupon you can decide for yourself if you want to enroll in the class voluntarily, or prefer to remain proudly self-educated on the issues. Personally, I had fun riding the train with Mr. Cash this once, yet I’m also sure I won’t be signing up for the same tour anytime soon. There’s just a bit too much tour guide talking for my preferences, and the landmarks, with a couple notable exceptions, are not quite up to par with the Grand Canyon.





NOW, THERE WAS A SONG!

Album released:

December 1960

V A L U E
1 2 3 2 2

More info:

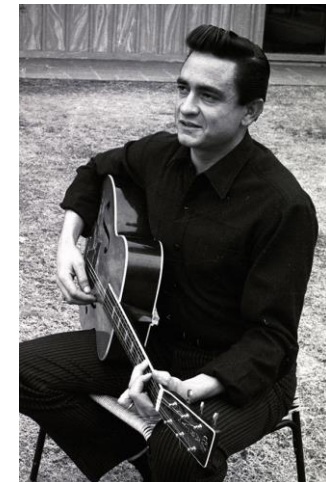


Tracks: 1) Seasons Of My Heart; 2) Feel Better All Over; 3) I Couldn't Keep From Crying; 4) Time Changes Everything; 5) My Shoes Keep Walking Back To You; 6) I'd Just Be Fool Enough; 7) **Transfusion Blues**; 8) Why Do You Punish Me; 9) I Will Miss You When You Go; 10) I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry; 11) Just One More; 12) Honky-Tonk Girl.

REVIEW

The very existence of this record is a good excuse to once again remind myself that I am including Johnny Cash in this somewhat straightjacketed variant of popular music history not because he is a «country artist» — as a rule, I hold little interest in country artists — but because his importance and his spirit transcends the formulaic understanding of country as a genre defined by certain strict musical, aesthetic, and image-related conventions. There is a very fine line drawn between Johnny Cash and the rock'n'roll world of Carl Perkins, or the Nashville pop world of the Everly Brothers, or the folk world of Greenwich Village, and every once in a while that line is erased altogether. Who is this man a better friend of — Hank Williams Jr. or John Fogerty? There is no single way to answer this question, and I'd rather not try. Additionally, I just like Johnny Cash — not everything Johnny Cash has ever done, no, but I like the *idea* of Johnny Cash, and ultimately that's enough.

I do not like this album a lot, though — actually, I might like some of its sound, but I do not like the *idea* of this album. First and foremost, I do not like its title. Perhaps it was supposed to reflect Johnny Cash's natural humility — implying that on here, he is bowing down to the old masters of the craft, submissively agreeing that everything he — and, apparently, all of his contemporaries as well — is doing here in 1960 is inferior to the amazing artistic revelations of country music in the previous decades. (Actually, most of the songs covered here date back from as late as the 1950s, so we'd have to surmise that



some sort of revolutionary artistic degradation must have taken place over the past two or three years.) Frankly, I do not know all that much about the state-of-the-art of the general country scene in 1960, but surely things could not be as bad as the title implicitly suggests.

Second, it has already been established in previous reviews that Cash is rarely all that hot when interpreting songs that were not either written by him or, at least, directly for him by other artists. All of his Hank Williams covers add nothing to the pain or the joy of the originals (and this might just as well include the cover of 'I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry' on this record) — so what's to be said about his covers of artists decidedly inferior to Hank Williams? In most cases, these just come across as polite, respectful versions that tell us much more about Johnny's admiration for his predecessors than his ability to add some new, fresher angle to their dusty message. And while that's a nice human quality per se, it does not bode well for the longevity of the actual album we are talking about. It is basically a «tribute» album, and Johnny Cash was no David Bowie when doing tributes: he was way too much of a gentleman to make the primary point of his tribute album to make the listener go all «*what the hell am I listening to?*» or «*this is so stupid it's actually unforgettable!*».

I do concede one point: the album, on the whole, *sounds* very nice. Although the Tennessee Two still follow Cash on every track, the record is dominated by the sounds of Floyd Cramer's instantly recognizable «glass-house» piano, Don Helms' lap steel, and Gordon Terry's fiddle — all three sometimes going on at the same time. It makes perfect sense, for instance, to compare George Jones' original recording of '[Seasons Of My Heart](#)' — which also featured some pretty decent piano and steel guitar playing — with Johnny's arrangement, just to see how far the smoothness, versatility, and mutual chemistry of piano, lap steel, and fiddle playing had advanced from 1955 to 1960. And, of course, I'm partial to any recording that is honored to feature Don Helms on it — anything that the man who created that gorgeous sound on Hank Williams' 'Hey, Good Lookin' decides to do with his steel guitar is alright by me.

Some listeners have expressed dissatisfaction with Cash's shift of sound on the album, bemoaning the loss of the classic minimalistic boom-chicka-boom vibe and seeing this larger, more flowery sound almost as the beginning of a «sellout». Technically, that may be so, but after five years of incessant chick-a-boom, a man's gotta get a little weary, no? Even the Ramones surrendered to Phil Spector after five years of non-stop chainsaw buzz, and we never saw Johnny taking an oath of eternal loyalty to the Tennessee Three Musketeers. In the end, it all depends on who precisely is there to embellish your sound, and if it happens to be the finest piano and steel guitar players Nashville ever saw, what exactly is the problem?

No, if there is a *real* problem, it is that after a song or two, these pretty — sometimes downright beautiful — arrangements

become a bit routine, and the endless flow of broken-hearted ballads turns into mush. When you can hardly remember the difference between all the 'I'd Just Be Fool Enough's and the 'I Will Miss You When You Go's, and not even the perfect timbre of Floyd Cramer's ivory tinkles and Don Helms' sexy sliding can help you with this, how is it at all possible to believe in the alleged superiority of these old songs? They're all the same song, more or less. Maybe that's precisely how we are supposed to understand the title — thinking of **A Song** as a collective term.

Things get a bit more exciting when the band picks up the tempo: Kenny Rogers' 'I Feel Better All Over' (first recorded by Ferlin Husky, I think) gets a little proto-rock'n'roll vibe going, with Gordon Terry really revving up the old fiddle and even Johnny himself caught up in the excitement to the extent of actually raising his voice (!) on the final verse. But they do it very rarely indeed, and the only song in that vein that *really* matters on here is the first appearance on record of what would go on to become one of Cash's signature numbers — here still called 'Transfusion Blues', respecting the unwritten laws of musical censorship, rather than under its original title of 'Cocaine Blues', by which it still dared to go in Roy Hogsed's seminal recording from 1944. (To be fair, the *truly* original title is 'Little Sadie', first recorded by Clarence Ashley in 1929, but the «cocaine»-related lyrics were added later). Here we see some of the same gritty vibe that fueled 'Folsom Prison Blues' — no big surprise Johnny would later take both of these songs with him to Folsom Prison in 1968 — and the censored lyrics are not much of a bother, since the original meaning of the song remains exactly the same.

Interestingly, it is precisely on 'Transfusion Blues' where all those classy musicians take a back seat — Cramer and Terry are very quietly grinding out inobtrusive lead lines in the background — and just let Johnny tell the story, as articulately as possible so that we can easily memorize all the details in the life of Willy Lee, a fascinatingly unique person who shot his woman down while under the influence of a «transfusion», was captured and sentenced to 99 years of imprisonment. (At least this time around the hero has a real motive — not just "*I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die*", but "*I thought I was her daddy but she had five more*").

I do have to say that Roy Hogsed's [original version](#) is still superior in a way: the very point of this song is to tell a gruesome tale of substance abuse and murder to the most lightweight and humorous musical backing and vocal performance possible, and since «lightweight» is not a word that can easily find itself in the same sentence with «Johnny Cash», there is absolutely no way that his cover may be completely free of a bit of moralistic sheen to it, even if he makes no moralistic additions to the lyrics whatsoever. With Hogsed, you're supposed to let your brain work out all the implications by itself; with Johnny, it's always a «*children-don't-do-what-I-have-done*» vibe the moment he opens his mouth. That's just the way

God planned it, and there is nothing we can do about it. When Johnny finishes the song on that (slightly censored) "*come on you guys and listen unto me / lay off that liquor and let that transfusion be!*" lyric, he's no longer a story-teller, but a vice officer stepping down from a freshly delivered high school lecture on upholding morale.

As for 'I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry'... all I can say is that, despite the miriads of covers, I have never heard a single one that could do anything truly outstanding with the song — simply because it was written to precisely fit the unique timbre of Hank Williams' voice. There are decent versions, there are horrible versions, but it was designed to work on one certain frequency, and that frequency went off the air on January 1, 1953. In comparison, the quality of Johnny's voice is such that it is largely impervious to either crying or laughing — all of its emotions are implied rather than openly exhibited — and that makes it hard to believe that he could actually be so lonesome he could cry. (Certainly not on *record*.) Do I really need this version? I don't really need this version. I don't need *anybody* covering Hank Williams, unless it's something like, say, Fats Domino rockin' 'Jambalaya' because *he* happens to know very well what «fillet gumbo» is, and can really wash it down with style on that piano.

As for George Jones, Marty Robbins, Tommy Duncan, Melvin Endsley, and all those other guys to whom Johnny is paying his dues on the album, I wish them all well, and if **Now, There Was A Song!** ever played a small part in preserving their legacy (well, it certainly got *me* to listen to George Jones' 'Seasons Of My Heart' for the first time in my life!), then the album truly had a purpose and at least partially fulfilled it. But as far as Johnny's own musical and spiritual journey is concerned, 'Transfusion Blues' feels like the only important piece of that puzzle that ended up landing on this LP.



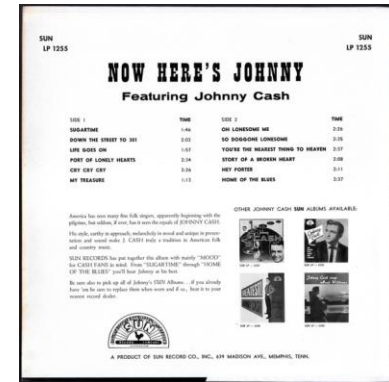


NOW HERE'S JOHNNY CASH

Album released:
June 26, 1961

V A L U E
1 2 3 1 2

More info:
W 🎵 🎶



Tracks: 1) Sugartime; 2) Down The Street To 301; 3) Life Goes On; 4) Port Of Lonely Hearts; 5) Cry Cry Cry; 6) My Treasure; 7) Oh Lonesome Me; 8) So Doggone Lonesome; 9) You're The Nearest Thing To Heaven; 10) Story Of A Broken Heart; 11) Hey Porter; 12) Home Of The Blues.

REVIEW

More like **Now Here's More Of Johnny's Cash**, as this is yet another bastardized release on the part of Sun Records, and those were getting crassier and crassier with each passing year. In fact, the only reason why I am allocating some space to it at all is that, somehow, this LP ended up being the only «proper» longplay album for Cash in the year of 1961; his output for Columbia at the time was limited to a couple of singles (including the famous 'Tennessee Flat Top Box', which we shall tackle a bit later) and a guest appearance on the otherwise quite obscure «atmospheric» album **The Lure Of The Grand Canyon**, recorded by the orchestra of Andre Kostelanetz and featuring a performance of Ferde Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite* with overdubbed «nature sounds» and a lengthy spoken-word piece from Johnny, your local tour guide through the wonders and mysteries of an American natural landmark. I do believe that in between this historical curio and a set of bottom-of-the-barrel Sun tracks, most people would still go for the latter — even in spite of all the annoying vocal and instrumental overdubs.



The biggest problem, actually, is that way too many songs here are simply sneaked in from previous releases, in the faint hope that nobody notices because so few people bought the previous releases anyway. 'You're The Nearest Thing To Heaven' and 'Home Of The Blues' had already been featured on **Sings The Songs That Made Him Famous** (it may be

possible that these are slightly different mixes, but you'd have to be a full-paid Cash scholar to really want to bother). 'Cry Cry Cry' was both Johnny's first single *and* included on his first Sun LP. 'Hey, Porter' was an important single as well (the first recording he ever made with the Tennessee Two) and at least its inclusion is somewhat justified because the track had so far avoided LP release; but no such excuse can be made for 'So Doggone Lonesome', which was also a part of **With His Hot And Blue Guitar!** years ago.

This ultimately leaves us with but seven «new» songs (furthermore, some of which had been issues as «preview» singles by Sun in 1960), a measly 14 minutes of previously unheard material, and hardly any of it will make any difference. Somewhat inauspiciously, the album begins with Johnny's slightly mismatched cover of 'Sugartime' — the song may have been written by a couple of professional country songwriters, but its most common association is with [The McGuire Sisters](#), and that's a pop vibe that would be about as consistent with Johnny's personality as classic jazz fusion. Not that Johnny couldn't write, perform, or record sweet, unpretentious, unassuming pop songs — like any other human being, he could occasionally be «simply happy» and even want to display it publicly — but to be convincing, they needed context, and 'Sugartime' just drops out at you as if saying, «hey, I want a pop hit!» Certainly Johnny must have liked the song, otherwise he wouldn't have cut it in the first place, but I'm totally not convinced that he was able to make it his own — which is probably why it remained on the cutting floor until Sam Phillips picked it up and took his final revenge on Johnny by releasing it.

Just as happy, but maybe a pinch more salacious, is 'Down The Street To 301', a semi-harmless, semi-immoral tale about a young boy having a summer love affair — the good thing is that Johnny's subtle irony is back for this one, the bad thing is that the song (which was apparently the very last recording Cash had made for Sun) is really just a remake of 'Ballad Of A Teenage Queen', only from a male perspective this time. The only things that redeem the recording are the lack of the ghostly wailing lady (only the barbershop quartet harmonies remain in the background) and the presence of a smooth, joyful, uplifting piano part; but even so, this is definitely not a separate artistic entity from the first song.

Moving on, 'Life Goes On' might work for somebody as a (rather formulaic) consolation after a breakup ("*If I see her anywhere / I hope she thinks that I don't care*" — yeah, sure), but for most people it will probably be just an inferior follow-up to 'I Walk The Line', with largely the same melody. 'Port Of Lonely Hearts' is notable only for having Johnny overdub himself — there's a second vocal line acting as a counterpoint to the main melody, and, frankly speaking, the resulting effects are *not* at all pleasant. (Certainly Johnny was no Brian Wilson when it came to vocal overdubs). 'My Treasure' is less of a song than it is an unfinished minute-long snippet (just one verse and a chorus). 'Oh Lonesome Me' adds nothing to the

Don Gibson original (except for another nice piano part) — we'd have to wait for Neil Young to slow that song down and fully exploit its potential to make you feel miserable. Finally, 'The Story Of A Broken Heart', credited to Sam Phillips himself (somewhat suspiciously, because the lyrics are 100% Cash in spirit), is probably the most genuine and unassailable thing on here, but so thoroughly unspectacular in all of its aspects that attempting to verbally climb its ideal smoothness is as fruitless as trying to write a thesis on the literary virtues of an aircraft safety card. "*When we walked beneath the moon, our love was in bloom / Now we're two lovers drifted apart*". Uh, pretty sad.

Maybe I should actually take back what I said earlier and confess that it's *more* exciting to listen to Johnny's [10-minute long narrative](#) about the Grand Canyon, interrupted or complemented by various nature sounds. At least it's a bit of a novelty, and it serves an actual purpose (lulling you to sleep while thinking of yourself as possessed by the spirit of Davy Crockett or some other frontier hero). In any case, this is probably the last of those «quasi-posthumous» Sun albums I'm going to discuss — Phillips managed to issue a couple more in 1962–1964 before the barrel truly ran dry (**All Aboard The Blue Train** and **Original Sun Sound**), but they were even more seriously loaded with recycled material, and have even fewer points of additional interest.

