

Out Among the Stars, a “new” album from Johnny Cash

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When country music legend Johnny Cash died in September 2003, he left behind an archive of unreleased music. Some of this has begun to surface, including two new additions to the Rick Rubin-produced “American Recordings” series: *American V: A Hundred Highways* (2006) and *American VI: Ain't No Grave* (2010).

While those albums featured material recorded by Cash in the last years of his life, a new release, *Out Among the Stars*, collects songs recorded in collaboration with renowned Nashville producer Billy Sherrill during sessions held in 1981 and 1984.

Originally slated for an album to be released during that time, the recordings were rejected by Cash's record label, Columbia Records, and shelved indefinitely. The label would drop Cash from their roster entirely in 1986. The Sherrill sessions remained unheard until the tapes were discovered in Cash's personal archives by his son John Carter Cash in 2012. *Out Among the Stars* deserves to be heard. While not matching the best of Cash's great recordings of the 1950s and 1960s, this is lively and entertaining music and, in its finer moments, it demonstrates a real feeling for people and a strong sense of protest against the present state of things. Much of it rings true.

At first glance, the pairing of Cash and Sherrill might seem unusual. Cash is associated with a stripped-down, raw form of country music and rockabilly. Sherrill, on the other hand, is associated with the so-called Countryopolitan style of country music, which is to say the more pop-oriented music that began coming out of the Nashville establishment during the 1960s.

Countryopolitan has certainly given us its share of blandness and sentimentality. Still, one should be careful about dismissing it outright. The Nashville of the 1960s and 1970s was no wasteland. Far from it. For

his part, Sherrill in particular, produced some of the richest country music of the 1970s and 1980s in his work with George Jones. His production of Cash on *Out Among the Stars* is mostly restrained.

To augment the original recordings, some additional material was produced. Guitarist Marty Stuart, who had performed on the original sessions, returned to amend his earlier playing. Musician and producer Buddy Miller, as well as the wonderful dobro player Jerry Douglas, also came on board to flesh out the original tapes.

Of the tracks collected here, the song which gives the album its title, “Out Among the Stars,” is especially good. It considers with compassion the life of a young, unemployed man who turns to petty crime.

The opening lines make an immediate impression on the listener:

It's midnight at a liquor store in Texas/Closin' time,
another day is done/When a boy walks in the door and
points a pistol/He can't find a job, but Lord he's found
a gun.

The chorus, as well, is moving:

Oh how many travelers get weary/Bearing both their
burdens and their scars/Don't you think they'd love to
start all over/and fly like eagles out among the stars.

There is a subtle dip in the music as Cash sings “weary” that lends an extra shade of consideration and warmth.

Merle Haggard, another icon of country music, would have a hit with this Columbia-rejected song just a few years after Cash's take on it was shelved.

That Cash's voice feels so very lived-in is also an extremely attractive quality of this music. His voice is deep and dry. He seems at times to dig the lowest notes out of the dirt with a shovel. It is a voice which would not have taken him far on any of the talent shows of

“reality” television which smother the airwaves today, but it is so alive with experience and meaning that it makes up for any technical deficiencies many times over. His gentle, sincere handling of the melody of “After All,” included on *Out Among the Stars*, certainly demonstrates that.

There is a wide range of human experience which finds expression on the album. On “She Used to Love Me a Lot” Cash sings of a failed effort to rekindle a past relationship. However tempting, the singer finds an escape into nostalgia and sentimentality offers no way out in the end. Cash’s song allows us to *feel* the truth of this realization.

Along with the more serious songs, there is also Cash’s playfulness, something which is often overlooked. Among the more enjoyable songs here is “Baby Ride Easy.” The fast-rolling, two-step rhythm from Cash’s days with the Tennessee Two is revived in this duet with his wife June Carter Cash (1929-2003). “If your lovin’ is good and your cookin’ ain’t greasy,” they sing, then this relationship might work out after all.

A rocking version of the Hank Snow classic “I’m Movin’ On,” performed as a duet with Waylon Jennings (1937-2002) is also a welcome addition to the album. And only Johnny Cash could make a song like “I Drove Her Out of My Mind” so successful and so darkly funny. The opening verse is irresistible:

“She gave me my walking papers and ran off with someone new/
Cause he bought her things my wages couldn’t buy/
So I turned to ups and downers and everything between/
Still I can’t get her good lovin’ off my mind.”

This “new” release from Johnny Cash comes as something of a breath of fresh air in country music--and it was recorded some three decades ago! This gives some indication of the terribly poor state of country music today.

How much of real life finds its way into the music of today’s performers? More often than not, one finds contrived, nostalgic fantasies about small town life, anti-intellectual posturing and the glorification of some very backward sentiments. It goes hand in hand with the musical blandness of it all.

An inability or an outright lack of interest in approaching life critically and plumbing it to its depths and, along with that, a lack of emotional range and

resonance dominate in country music today.

Big social movements will help to shake the dust off of things and inspire the best artists to dig deeper. New questions and considerations will be thrust to the forefront. The best work remains ahead.

The ongoing popularity of Johnny Cash and the interest generated by “new” material from the late artist is just one indication of the hunger for such serious and lively works.



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