“At Folsom Prison”--Johnny Cash (1968)

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Essay by Michael Streissguth (guest post)*

Cash in performance

Recorded live at Folsom State Prison in California on January 13, 1968, Johnny Cash’s “At Folsom Prison” album proved to be one of pop music’s most powerful commentaries on social justice and helped expand the global audience for country music, Cash’s home base. The album also invigorated Cash’s career, which had lagged due to drug abuse, and unexpectedly established his prominence in the ongoing prison reform debate.

Cash’s 1955 recording of “Folsom Prison Blues” for Sun Records in Memphis inspired the Arkansas native to perform a concert at Folsom Prison for the first time in 1967, this after a decade of visiting prisons around the country, including San Quentin State Prison in California, where an unknown Merle Haggard, later a major country music star, saw him play in 1958. The wild reception among prisoners inspired him to return to Folsom in 1968 with recording equipment, a hit record in his dreams.

With his rough-hewn Tennessee Three behind him (guitarist Luther Perkins, bassist Marshall Grant, and drummer W.S. “Fluke” Holland) as well as rockabilly legend Carl Perkins sitting in on guitar, Cash recorded two shows that day, turning his familiar set list into an extended commentary on the prison experience. He gave the inmates classic songs of imprisonment, dissipation and misdeeds such as “The Wall,” “Give My Love to Rose,” “Cocaine Blues” “Green, Green Grass of Home,” and “The Long Black Veil.” Even standards not immediately associated with prisons became apropos meditations on confinement: “Dark As A Dungeon,” “I Still Miss Someone” and “Busted.” In response, the prisoners cheered on cue not just because they were asked to (an emcee had urged them to yelp and shout for the sake of the recording), but because the Man in Black had struck a bond with them, as many inmates in attendance that day later attested.

When the mood created by prison songs became too dark, he warbled the nutty “Dirty Old Egg-Sucking Dog” and “Flushed from the Bathroom of Your Heart,” novelties from his catalog, he

and flirtatiously crooned the 1967 hit “Jackson” with his soon-to-be wife June Carter who was dressed that day in a somber black dress, chestnut hair falling on her shoulders.

Many fans of the album assumed the prisoners had perversely cheered the line “I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die” from “Folsom Prison Blues,” Cash’s opening number, but the eruption had been spliced in by Columbia Records producer Bob Johnston for drama’s sake. In fact, the inmates saved their rowdiest greeting for Cash’s performance of “Greystone Chapel,” a paean to Folsom’s place of worship written by inmate Glen Sherley which had been slipped to Cash just the night before. They thanked this ultimate show of respect and caring with profuse hoots and applause.

Upon its release in the spring of 1968, Columbia Records, Cash’s recording home since 1958, marketed “At Folsom Prison” to young audiences with an appetite for folk music and rock and roll who promptly adopted it. Underground journals such as the “Village Voice” and “Rolling Stone” lauded the album for its stark realism and compassion for those on the fringes of society which Cash expressed on stage and in the album liner notes. FM radio, then in the early days of its influence, heavily programmed the new live version of “Folsom Prison Blues,” lifting the album to the “Billboard” pop album charts’ top twenty. Before 1968 was out, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) awarded the record gold-record status.

Columbia’s sales and marketing efforts on behalf of the album also exploited the myth that Cash had done hard time in prison. In fact, Cash had only spent a few nights in jail on minor charges, but the label’s advertising copy, and Cash’s own album liner notes, suggested a darker experience in the criminal justice system. The myth had followed him since the first time he sang “Folsom Prison Blues,” many assuming he had shot a man just to watch him die. But he had merely cribbed the harrowing line from Jimmie Rodgers’ “Blue Yodel No. 1 (T for Texas)” which describes shooting “poor Thelma just to watch her jump and fall.” (Crucial elements of “Folsom Prison Blues” were also lifted by Cash from arranger and conductor Gordon Jenkins’ “Crescent City Blues” of 1953.) Fanciful tales about Cash and criminality only multiplied thanks to the big sales of “At Folsom Prison,” serving Cash until the last chapter of his recording career when producer Rick Rubin mined the darkness in the country balladeer’s story to create interest around the remarkable American Recordings albums.

The popularity of “At Folsom Prison” and the album it inspired, “At San Quentin” (1969), electrified Cash’s career. He went from playing county fairs to major rock arenas such as Madison Square Garden and the Forum in Los Angeles, and he attracted international audiences which opened markets for the wider country music industry. ABC-TV gave him a weekly variety show that was taped at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Cash’s home, while documentary filmmakers and journalists flocked to him. In the midst of all this, his opinions on prison reform were sought after.

He used his new electronic stage on ABC to broadcast his belief that prisoners deserved redemption, a point of view rooted in his Christianity and the knowledge that he too might have been in prison were it not for his fame. He echoed the theme in interviews and other prison concerts, and, in 1972, lobbied President Richard Nixon on the issue and testified before a U.S. Senate Subcommittee considering reform legislation.

At this point, Glen Sherley's role in the Folsom saga grew. The inmate who had given his "Greystone Chapel" to Cash gained parole when the now superstar promised him work in Nashville. Indeed, Sherley wrote for Cash's publishing company and performed on his shows, embodying for a while Cash's convictions about prisoners and redemption. Sadly, Shirley never adjusted to life on the outside and he committed suicide in 1978.

Vaunted albums of the 1960s, such as "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" and "Pet Sounds," made history in part because of their lyrical and sonic innovations and expressions of reinvention in the midst of expanding youth culture. But "At Folsom Prison" followed another theme of the 1960s: social justice in the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day and others. Recorded in a dank prison and with a small combo behind him, Cash produced an album greater than the sum of its parts that forever aligned him with the disenfranchised.

Michael Streissguth is the author of eight books about music and culture, including "Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of A Masterpiece." A professor in the Department of Communication and Film Studies at Le Moyne College, he also directs documentary films, including the award-winning "Nighthawks on the Blue Highway."