

Review: Tony Tost, 33 1/3: Johnny Cash's American Recordings (London and New York: Continuum, 2011)

By Richard Elliott

For much of his career as performer and semi-mythic being, Johnny Cash remained simultaneously of and beyond his time. As a rocker in the Sun Records roster in the mid-1950s, he participated in the farthest reaching musical revolution of the twentieth century. In the 1960s he managed to epitomize both the drug-addled rebel and the seeker after answers spiritual (Christian), political (the rights of the First Peoples), and mytho-poetical (the American story in all its vast complexity). Cash's 1970s, like those of many survivors of the previous decade's excesses, were shaped by channels of regret, redemption, and inner searching. Throughout these eras, even as he rode or helped write the zeitgeist, Cash grew increasingly larger than life: half-man, half-myth, in part a reflection of his times, in part a conduit to something older, greater, something set in black stone.

Then came the 1980s. Though Cash remained popular with his hardcore audience, the decade was his least creative. Recording with the Highwaymen, touring with his wife and family in the Johnny Cash Show, and recording novelty numbers like "Chicken in Black" having fallen foul (fowl?) of his long-term record company Columbia, Cash faced a decade as creatively barren as fellow Columbians Bob Dylan and Miles Davis.

Cash was never forgotten, however, even by younger hipsters, remaining a point of reference for punk and post-punk bands in the US and UK alike. In 1988, a bunch of indie musicians in the UK put out a tribute album to the man in black, which some have credited with kickstarting his resurrection as elder icon of cool. But it was erstwhile hip-hop and thrash metal producer/guru Rick Rubin who would make the largest contribution to Cash's late status, capitalizing on Cash's label-lessness, his artistic recuperation, and the growing interest in country and Americana amongst younger, rock-oriented fans for which Rubin himself had been partially responsible (The Jayhawks' Hollywood Town Hall appeared on Def American in 1992). Rubin signed Cash to Def American in 1993 and recorded the singer performing a set of contemporary, rock-sourced songs, self-written numbers, and old weird standards, stripped of the extra clutter of the Cash Show orchestra and delivered only via an acoustic guitar and that resonant, lower-than-low, stark naked, lived-in Voice. An inspired move, it almost instantly brought Cash back into the limelight as man of his time, while connecting him more strongly than ever to the long mythhistory of his homeland.

American Recordings, released in 1994, was the first of four Rubin-produced "American" albums released prior to Cash's death in 2003. Poet Tony Tost's book on this landmark release is, by its author's admission, the story of how Cash-the-man—the recording artist, husband, father, sinner, human—and Cash the myth become entangled in what Tost believes is Cash's greatest work. It is the story, as Tost puts it early on, of Cash's "arrival into permanence".

Like the best books in the 33 1/3 series, this one is written from the point of view of a fan eager to communicate the various threads and flights of fancy he has connected to his chosen subject. Like the best works dedicated to other specific works, it faces the challenge of balancing the closed world of its case study with the open-ended territory beyond it, not so much a matter of text and context as of a recognition, à la Roland Barthes, that texts are never finished. And like the best work on Cash, it makes no attempt to disentangle myth from

history or biography. Tost is an American mythologist in the vein of Greil Marcus and there are numerous moments in the book where the reader is put in mind of Marcus writing on Dylan, or Cash for that matter.

Tost knows what he's doing and uses the book's introduction to justify his reliance on the mythical Cash. If anything, he overdoes this justification, using it to both denigrate other (unnamed) writers who would attempt a similar strategy and to make claims for his own method that are inevitably difficult to live up to. In fact, Tost overdoes a lot of things in his difficult-to-love opening chapters, things that, in smaller quantities, could have been much more effective. Early pages are littered with seemingly endless litanies and lists of Cash's cultural contemporaries and precursors, leading to a bloat that makes the book bigger than many in the 33 1/3 series and arguably bigger than it needed to be.

Tost is enamored of a kind of dynamic, surface-level rhetoric that skips across the surface of the vast ocean of American myth. This superficiality is unfortunate because he is clearly wishing to root Cash deep within the mythological loam, to root around and identify all the similarly rooted landmarks of the US cultural landscape and not a few of the bindweeds and rhizomes that form the necrophilic network of the underground. His knowledge is broad and deep but, in wanting to reference so much of it, he ends up making it strangely, invisibly ineffectual. In skipping so freely across the texts and textures of American mythology, the author is always in danger of skipping over his subject. A few well-chosen images or reference points would probably have served his readers better in these opening salvos.

Another less-than-positive early impression. Tost seems to expect his readers to have a similar level of cultural and subcultural capital to him and he makes few concessions to those who may not be able to keep up. In some ways this is appealing: a refusal to dumb down, an insistence on the interconnectedness of the mythical moments of American culture, an invitation to find out more, to do one's homework. But in other ways the tactic can be annoying. There is nothing wrong with a bit of explanation, not least when one is eliciting the credulity of a readership being asked to accept a series of highly subjective interpretations.

These initial reservations are, however, overcome as the book proceeds. Subsequent chapters become more streamlined, structuring their points of comparison and contextualization more cleverly and concisely. Perhaps it is a case of changing poetic voices, away from the repetitiveness of the epic, towards the clear, pure image. Examples of the latter can be found even in the book's longest, most overloaded chapter, the one inspired by the opening song on *American Recordings*, "Delia's Gone". Responding to a newspaper story from 1901 which detailed the true story behind Delia Green's murder, Tost writes, "It's like visiting the spot that songs come from". By the end of the book, such quick-witted summaries are being tossed (Tost?) around with consummate skill; I particularly liked the description of Tom Waits as "the hobo Heraclitus of the postmodern world".

Tost is equally good on the mythopoeisis that accumulates around Cash's work. The impossibility of a man who shot another man in Reno doing time in Folsom Prison and hearing a train bound for Texas doesn't matter, he says, because "Cash's songs exist ... in a mythic landscape"; his songs—and even more his voice—bond disparate elements together, creating and recreating the patchwork quilt of American myth. A similar blurring-together of boundaries, or weaving-together of patches, occurs in Cash's "Let the Train Blow the Whistle", where only "a slight distinction [is] made between the literal and the figurative".

Cash didn’t only contribute to myths, he also took ownership of them. So too with the material that he elected to cover. While not always successful, his renditions of contemporary songs were often a revelation, a reinvention of the song’s potentiality perhaps not realized by its writer or other performers. This was a gift that Cash had always displayed, but it became ever more noticeable in his later years, as he attached the weight of his experience to the words of others. Cash’s late voice was a voice out of time, but also a voice of time, of age and experience. In this he can be said to fit the template of late style, as theorized by Theodor Adorno and Edward Said. For these critics, late style is a manifestation of an artist’s being out-of-joint with contemporary mores, a moment epitomized by a simultaneous reflection on one’s body of work and a provocation brought about by a new approach.

Cash seems as fine an example of this as anyone in the popular music sphere and, if his world seems a world away from the world of Adorno and Said (both of whose preferences lay firmly in the classical realm), it is at least worth noting that Adorno’s friend Walter Benjamin is one of many thinkers referenced by Tost. It’s that kind of book, one in which the frames of reference are as open as the land it mythologizes, or at least are staked out some way on the far horizon, bounding a vast patchwork.

Although Tost’s chapters are organized for the most part around individual songs, the narrative is left to thread from one chapter to the next, protecting the quilt against disintegration. Certain themes recur: sin, redemption, religion, death and lateness, Native American belief, trains, Dylan, Marcus. As Tost explains, “Cash contained so many Americas”. No wonder it’s hard to extricate the man from the myth. Tost playfully throws in some new ones at the end of the book: Cash buried in the Grand Coulee Dam; Cash and his wife “dressed up like pilgrims, planting car bombs and hopping trains along the Mexican border”; Greil Marcus and Roseanne Cash singing a Rodney Crowell-penned epic about Cash’s final hours.

Like the mythical trains to which it so often refers, Tost’s book starts out heavy and finishes light, picking up speed along the way, becoming sleeker and more streamlined as it gradually identifies where it should be heading. It’s a train that carries murderers, robbers, fraudsters, lovers, songsters, glory-seekers, second-chancers, writers and readers. After some initial false directions, it becomes a brilliant ride. Whether American Recordings ultimately stands up to everything claimed of and for it here is another matter. For me, Tost is too dismissive of some of the other Rubin/Cash recordings (surely it’s the series as a whole that attests to Cash’s late greatness?), while his determination to follow up on every thread of Cash’s story (and the stories of Cash’s songs), impressive though it is, sometimes threatens to overshadow the particular album he is supposed to be concentrating on. But there is no doubt that, as a testimony to the Man in Black himself, and to his legacy, it is an ultimately appropriate tome.

Originally written for Tiny Mix Tapes – published version at <http://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/33-13-johnny-cashs-american-recordings-tony-tost-continuum-books>.