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# Singing Across the Scars of Wrong: Johnny Cash and His Struggle for Social Justice

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## *Singing across the scars of wrong: Johnny Cash and his struggle for social justice*

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### **Abstract**

The life and music of Johnny Cash are explored in this article as we detail his commitment to social justice. Situating his politics and biography within a cultural criminology orientation, we show that Cash's lived politics and edgy music reflect his concerns with the working class, the dispossessed, the rebellious, the American Indian, and above all, the convict. A pusher of social causes, Cash advocated for prison reform through decades of social activism and public and private politics.

### **Key words**

cultural criminology; Folsom Prison; Johnny Cash; prison reform; social justice

## **INTRODUCTION**

Compared to other forms of media and culture explored by criminologists in recent years – photography, news and news making, art exhibits, graffiti and wall painting, television and film – little attention has been paid to popular music. This is surprising given the history of critical criminology and recent advances within cultural criminology. More than 30 years ago, scholars associated with the Birmingham School of cultural studies and the National Deviancy Conference in Great Britain, put music and political provocation at the center of their deliberations on the confluences of crime and culture. Most famously, Dick Hebdidge (1979) viewed black styles found in Afro-Caribbean reggae and rude boy music as key elements informing criminal dispositions of white youth subcultures of the time, including the mods, teddy boys, and early skinheads. In reggae bands like Bob Marley and the Wailers (who first toured England in 1973), Hebdidge found compelling political overtones in the “dread”, the ganja, the Messianic feel of this “heavy” reggae, its blood and fire rhetoric, its troubled rhythms’ (p. 36). Reggae was also seen as crucial to the development of black responses to police repression and British nationalism of the early 1970s. For Britain’s new criminology,

reggae became 'the music of the dispossessed . . . the ideological point of origin of a new social movement . . . the seeds of an unorganized political rebellion' (Hall et al., 1978: 357–8).

These influences were instrumental in shaping the trans-Atlantic foundation for today's cultural criminology. In his breakout work, *Crimes of Style*, Jeff Ferrell (1993: 46) located the subcultural derivatives of urban graffiti in 'an eclectic list of musical influences', ranging from rock, punk and rap to Gothic death metal. To be sure, *Crimes of Style* contained as many references to the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Who as it did to Durkheim, Becker, and Stan Cohen. Our own ethnographic work has reflected a similar interest in the cultural criminology of music, be it in studies of bluegrass murder ballads (Tunnell, 1995), the mysterious killing of a famous musician (Tunnell and Cox, 2003), the social world of bluegrass pickers (Tunnell and Groce, 1998), how white power rock has been used as a recruiting tool for skinhead gangs (Hamm, 1993, 1995, 2002), or Timothy McVeigh's meth-crazed fixation on the industrial noise of Nine Inch Nails in the lead-up to the Oklahoma City bombing (Hamm, 1997). In other words, we have studied the ways – and they are dark ways – in which music has been an elixir for murder and mayhem.

But there is another story to be told here. It is not the story of how music is used as cultural weaponry against others; nor is it really about how music is used as cultural weaponry against hegemonic power. Rather, it is a story about a lived reality within the unique social worlds of musicians themselves, and how that reality actually relieves social injustice through direct action. We do not want for examples in this regard.

Woody Guthrie was more than a Dust Bowl balladeer who 'lifted the lowly spirits of the "ordinary", the millions of the dispossessed', as his friend the journalist Studs Terkel (2004: xvii) once wrote. At various points in his career Woody was also a pamphleteer, a union activist, and an advocate for migratory farm workers, a federal prisoner, and even a faith healer (Hampton, 1986). As legend has it, more than once he literally gave the clothes off his back to a skid-row bum (Cray, 2004). Joan Baez was not only the golden-voiced beauty who sang 'We Shall Overcome' at Martin Luther King's 1963 March on Washington and countless other civil rights demonstrations during the 1960s; she linked arms with King to protect African-American schoolchildren in Grenada, Mississippi, and joined King on his historic march from Selma to Montgomery. Joan Baez stood in the fields alongside Cesar Chavez and California's migratory farm workers as they fought for fair wages and safe working conditions. She encouraged draft resistance at her concerts during the height of the Vietnam War; went to jail for blocking an Army induction center; and traveled to Hanoi as part of a peace delegation where she was caught in an eleven-day bombing raid by the US military (Baez, 1987).

In what would become the prototype for a new style of humanitarianism among popular musicians, in 1971 George Harrison and Ravi Shankar organized two historic benefit concerts at New York's Madison Square Garden (The Concert for Bangladesh), raising more than a quarter million dollars for the relief of refugees from the Bangladesh Liberation War. A little more than a decade later, in what was billed as a 'global jukebox' by organizer Bob Geldof of the Boomtown Rats ('Boomtown' taken from a hobo jungle described by Woody Guthrie in his autobiography, *Bound for Glory*), a massive

rock concert held in Philadelphia and London, Live Aid, was attended by more than 180,000 people, with an additional 400 million viewers across 60 countries watching the live broadcast via satellite link-ups. The event raised an estimated US\$225 million for famine relief in Ethiopia. Live Aid was followed by Farm Aid, organized in 1985 by Willie Nelson, Neil Young and John Mellencamp; over the years it has raised some US\$33 million to increase awareness about the loss of family farms in the USA and to raise funds to keep farm families on their land. Neil Young has also raised millions for special needs children in his annual Bridge School Benefit Concerts; Bruce Springsteen has donated generous shares of his concert revenues to community-based hunger relief efforts; U2's Bono has worked tenaciously to help erase billions of dollars in public debt from the poorest nations of Africa. From 1965 until their road ended in 1995, the Grateful Dead performed more benefit concerts than any other musical act of their time, raising millions for projects ranging from relief efforts for Cambodian children to saving the Amazon rain forests.

In many ways, these humanitarian efforts have continued a tradition of artistic authenticity stretching from the bohemians, poets, writers and country bluesmen of the early 1960s folk revival, back to the 19th-century transcendental idealism of Emerson, Thoreau and (especially) Walt Whitman. Just as the folkies restricted themselves to music of traditional and marginalized American cultures – complete with ghost lovers, backwoods crimes and old British fables, what Greil Marcus (1997) called 'the old, weird America' – the transcendentalists believed that an ideal spiritual state 'transcends' political and religious doctrines and is only realized through an artist's intuition about what lies below the surface of the body politic: what Whitman described as 'the inmost tissues, blood, vitality, heart & brain' of the republic (in Warren, 1994: 79). Whitman wrote that he did not want an art that could decide presidential elections; he wanted an art to make them irrelevant. Whitman was less interested in a protest against anything specific than he was in a search for something positive in democratic individual sensibility; namely, in an artist's ability to determine the *feel* of an individual's relationship to larger forces; to become a part of the instinctive response of common folk to desire and punishment, sin and luck, humor and tragedy, community and isolation, and the idealism and betrayals that stem from democracy. 'It is across great scars of wrong I reach toward the song of kindred men and strike again the naked string of old Whitman', wrote the poet Robert Duncan (in Morgan, 2006: 298). Below, we argue that few have sung across more 'scars of wrong' than the Man in Black, Johnny Cash.

## JOHNNY CASH AND HIS STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Cultural criminology recognizes that the personal is political – that one's politics are inseparable from one's biography. Johnny Cash's life – often characterized as bigger than life – was music and politics in motion. We discuss his life, not because of romanticism or pedestrian fascination, but by necessity. Given the lack of scholarly material on Johnny Cash, we use the available biographical and autobiographical information

relying especially on the work of Cash's most accomplished biographer – Michael Streissguth. To appreciate social justice in Cash's music and the life he lived, we must explore the context of his life, which like many before, had its dark and enlightened sides. Yet, as we show, this is an exemplar in a life lived in the pursuit of social justice.

Most casual observers' assumptions of Johnny Cash are quite different and likely include some of the following characteristics: white, politically conservative, Republican, drug-abusing, country singer. However, the personal and political life and music of Johnny Cash was more – much more. As his friend Kris Kristofferson would remember Cash in song, he was 'a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction'. Yes, Cash was white, well, we think. He sometimes claimed (depending on his audience) to be mixed race. Yes, he definitely was a drug user (and sometimes abuser) and remained so until the end. That and his other vices led his contemporary, Merle Haggard, to disclose just after Cash's death that 'Johnny Cash was out of line all his life. He never walked any line' (in Gilmore, 2004: 24). Was he a Republican? A personal libertarian perhaps. Was he a country singer? Not according to Cash and not according to his biographers and music critics. Was he politically conservative? Hardly. In fact, his crusades for justice became so well known that by 1969 *The New York Times* called him 'the first grim and gutsy pusher of social causes' (in Streissguth, 2004: 145).

## Roots: American pastoral

Cash's biography clearly shaped the context of his pushing social justice. Johnny Cash grew up in the Jim Crow south, rural Arkansas more exact, where the segregation laws that sprouted up in the late 19th century remained until the mid-1960s. After all, the US Supreme Court ruled that the 1875 Civil Rights Act was unconstitutional and that the 14th Amendment did not prohibit racial discrimination. Then in *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896), the Court upheld the constitutionality of separate but equal and three years later supported segregated education. Those rulings precipitated a wave of laws in the south restricting blacks' access to schools, hospitals, restaurants, public places, and work sites. Although over time the Supreme Court undid Jim Crow, it was not until 1954 in *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) that the Plessy ruling was overturned.

It was well known that Johnny's father, Ray, was a racist and remained so throughout his lifetime. Ray boasted of attending lynchings, although it is unknown if he actually did. Not that he would have had difficulty doing so. From the time of Johnny's birth in 1932 until he left for military service in 1950, there were 82 reported lynchings in Arkansas alone. Johnny's uncle, a county sheriff during the 1920s and judge during the 1930s, boasted of his mistreating blacks. Years later, when Ray was an old man, his vile ways were unleashed towards a young Jamaican boy who was employed by Johnny Cash. Cash later said, 'I should have realized that some things will never change about my dad. He grew up in Arkansas' (Turner, 2004: 15). Here we witness Cash transcending his dishonorable family origins.

If his father's cruelty later allowed Cash to muster the courage necessary to fight injustice, it also may have contributed to Cash's lifelong problem with self-destruction. Ray Cash was a violent man. Though Johnny would later say that his father never

abused him, Ray was known to kill animals on a whim. He boasted of once killing 50 cows with a box of 50 bullets (for what purpose, Cash's biographers do not say). When Johnny was five years old, he was given a pet dog that gave birth to a litter of puppies, which his father did not want. Ray put the puppies in a bag with a rock in it and threw it into the river and made Johnny watch as they drowned. Then Ray shot the dog (Turner, 2004). 'It was a frightening thing, and it took me a long time to get over it', Johnny later wrote. 'It was a cut that went deep and stayed there' (Gilmore, 2008: 182).

The southern USA was hit hard by the great depression (of the 1930s) and southern farmers were especially hard hit. Victims of a world economy, some, including the Cash family, signed up for the planned colonies of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Each selected family was provided a farm, a house, and barn and were expected to pay off the loan from working the farm. As the Cash family and others soon learned, the Dyess farm colony was a vast progressive program, a social experiment far ahead of its time and envisioned as one great 'community cooperative'. Years later, reflecting on his childhood and the aid, without which they likely would have starved, Cash claimed that he 'grew up under socialism' (in Streissguth, 2002).

## Walkin' the line

In 1950, Cash joined the Air Force spending most of his time, during the Korean War, in Germany where he developed a talent for decrypting Morse code. In fact, it was Johnny Cash who deciphered the first coded message from Moscow that the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, had died on 5 March 1953, of a brain hemorrhage (Gilmore, 2008). (Perhaps this event presaged Cash's ability to decipher cultural codes with his music, which over the years appealed to such diverse audiences as hillbillies and hippies, truckers, professors and Gen X slackers.) Some years after his discharge, Cash was asked about the prospects of going to war and responded, 'I can remember the fears I had about going into combat. I didn't want to kill. I guess I was really a conscientious objector. But I wouldn't have refused to go if I'd been called to' (Wren, 1971: 77).

After leaving the military, in 1954, Cash landed in Memphis and hooked up with guitar player Luther Perkins and bass man Marshall Grant to form the Tennessee Two. Soon they won a contract with the legendary producer Sam Phillips at Sun Records. On 14 July 1956, Cash and the Tennessee Two made their first appearance on the Grand Ole Opry performing their new Cash composition, 'I Walk the Line', to thunderous applause. Backstage after the show, Opry members offered Cash some unsolicited advice – to stay with them, to stay pure and true to country sounds and to not follow Elvis Presley. Some Opry performers supported Cash and his musical vision, which he knew was not country. But passing through the crowd just outside the Opry entrance, Cash remembered, 'there were some who would make it a point to let me hear the remarks they were saying as I walked by. It was the same thing they were calling Elvis: white nigger. And you know, when I left that night, I said, I don't wanna go back to this place anymore. I don't have to put up with that crap' (Streissguth, 2006: 75). The dual criticism of not being country enough for the Opry and embracing rockabilly with its

black R&B roots, drove Cash from the Opry and membership in that elite country club. Here again we see Cash transcending the stereotyping efforts of country music purists and southern racists alike.

## Politics: songs for the common man

We refer to Cash's politics in the broadest definitions of terms, taking into consideration his recorded and live music, his ideological positions on social issues, and his participatory actions to promote progressive change.

Cash claimed to have been deeply influenced by two records – Merle Travis's *Folk Songs of the Hills* (ca. 1947) and a compilation of Alan Lomax's field recordings. These recordings presented real folks performing real folk songs – songs that originated from the people and that communicated people's situations and troubles. In early 1958, Cash told a reporter that he was trying to sell 'authentic folk music'. 'Cash's simple, direct delivery often disguised a poetic depth' and his metaphors were much more powerful than plain, emotional, descriptive lines (Streissguth, 2006). Consider these rich lines from 'Big River': 'I taught the weeping willow how to cry, cry, cry and I showed the clouds how to cover up a clear blue sky'.

This song preceded folk rock by at least eight years and inspired folk singers of the day. Bob Dylan said as much especially about 'Big River' which he described as 'words turned into bone' (Turner, 2004: 75). Cash began associating with folk singers who were not country and who did not identify with country. His friendship with Dylan is legendary and his defense of Dylan was published as an open letter in *Broadside* (in March 1964): 'Near my shores of mental dying, Grasping straws and twigs, and drowning, Worthless I, But crying loudest, Came a Poet Troubadour, Singing fine familiar things. Sang a hundred thousand lyrics, Right as Rain, Sweet as Sleep, Words to thrill you . . . And to kill you. Don't bad-mouth him, till you hear him, Let him start by continuing, He's almost brand new, SHUT UP! . . . AND LET HIM SING!' (Cash, 1964a: 3). Half a decade later, Cash had this to say about his relationship with Dylan: 'A lot of writers have just tried to make something of it. I like him. That's all. He's a friend of mine. He's a good performer, and I like him, and I don't care what he stands for' (Hemphill, 1970/2002: 85). His comments about Dylan were in defense of a folk singer regardless of politics or peoples' assumptions – a gutsy political stance that Cash was willing to take across his life.

During the early to mid 1960s, Cash made some of his most daring and groundbreaking recordings – a series of folk and country concept albums including, *Songs of Our Soil* (1959), *Ride This Train* (1960), *Blood Sweat and Tears* (1963), *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian* (1964), *Orange Blossom Special* (1965) and *The Ballads of the True West* (1965). This body of work spoke about 'the hidden truths, as opposed to the received myths, in American history. The albums also spoke to and about a remarkably diverse range of people, including the poor and the violent, exploited laborers, Native Americans . . . and the dispossessed' (Gilmore, 2004: 35). *Ride This Train*, *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, and *Bitter Tears* 'may still be the most important albums ever made by a country [folk] artist' (Streissguth, 2004: 33). These records took on

issues of the legacy of westward expansion, the working man, and the American Indian, respectively. Other artists had addressed these themes yet none had committed three albums to the topics and no one appeared to treat such topics as seriously as Johnny Cash. Although the country establishment denounced him for his critiques, he continued 'weaving into his songs and repertoire the downtrodden and the common man' (Streissguth, 2004: 33).

His songs constantly drew attention to the sweat and toil of anonymous blue-collar workers. 'While some might dismiss the world's cruelty or just fail to notice, Cash allowed it to impress him' (Streissguth, 2004: 41). After Cash became famous, he supported American Indians performing concerts to draw attention to their cause, recording their somber tale and forcefully promoting his recording of 'The Ballad of Ira Hayes' which brilliantly illustrated the American Indian's plight.

This Peter LaFarge composition told the story of the Pima Indian who was among the US Marines to raise the American flag after the battle at Iwo Jima. Ira Hayes, suffering from what we now recognize as PTSD, later died from alcoholism and exposure, face down in a ditch of water. Although Cash believed the song was one of his best recordings, country radio and country disc jockeys would not play it. Cash responded with an open letter published in *Billboard* (on 22 August 1964) in which he wrote,

*D.J.'s – station managers – owners, etc., where are your guts? . . . I'm not afraid to sing the hard, bitter lines that the son of Oliver LaFarge wrote . . . classify me, categorize me – STIFLE me, but it won't work. I am fighting no particular cause. If I did, it would soon make me a sluggard. For as time changes, I change. This song is not of an unsung hero. The name Ira Hayes has been used and abused in every bar across the nation . . . Regardless of the trade charts – the categorizing, classifying and restrictions of air play, this is not a country song, not as it is being sold. It is a fine reason though for the gutless to give it a thumbs down . . . 'Ballad of Ira Hayes' is strong medicine. So is Rochester – Harlem – Birmingham and Viet Nam. (Cash, 1964b: 30)*

And this was in 1964. He accused disc jockeys of 'being afraid of the truth'. Some in the country music establishment lashed out, even asking that he resign from the Country Music Association because Cash must be 'too intelligent to associate with plain country folks, country artists and country Djs' (Wren, 1971: 161). Cash continued singing 'The Ballad' and soon released a song about the civil rights struggle as well, 'All God's Children Ain't Free' (Wren, 1971: 162).

Cash performed 'The Ballad of Ira Hayes' and other LaFarge songs he recorded about the American Indian at Wounded Knee in 1968 when he, in his words, 'went there to help the Sioux raise money to build a school; back then Indians hadn't started to speak out for themselves, and neither had any national figures' (Linderman, 1975/2002: 153). Performing at the St. Francis Mission on the Rosebud Reservation in December 1968, Cash said, 'I've got very little Indian blood in me myself, except in my heart I've got 100 percent for you tonight' (Miller, 2003: 172). Cash would sometimes claim to be one quarter Cherokee but other times said that he made that claim when he was 'squirreling reporters'.



## Backlash

People of conscience usually pay a price. Despite all his work for progressive causes, Johnny Cash was criticized for his patriotism, his faith, his silence on civil rights and women's issues, and his friendliness toward President Richard Nixon (although he later distanced himself from Nixon and became anti-war) (Streissguth, 2004). Cash was also criticized for not giving enough attention to 'victims' yet he certainly knew about victimization. A terrifying personal incident, where his biography and politics crashed headlong, is indicative of his tolerance for life's down-trodden.

On Christmas day, 1982, Cash and his family were at their home in Jamaica when three men, wearing nylon stockings over their faces, burst in. One wielded a gun, another held a knife, and the third, a hatchet. For a few hours, they held a gun to Cash's son's head and demanded a million dollars. Cash talked to them, convinced them that there simply was not that amount of money on hand. They left after locking everyone in the cellar, and taking all the money and jewellery on the property. That night, the Jamaican police found the gunman and killed him. A few weeks later, the two others were caught and then killed during an escape attempt. Cash wrote later that he had had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that

*the desperate junkie boys were executed for their act – or murdered, or shot down like dogs. My only certainties are that I grieve for desperate young men and the societies that produce and suffer so many of them and I felt that I knew those boys. We had a kinship, they and I: I knew how they thought, I knew how they needed. They were like me. (Cash and Carr, 1997: 41)*

This may be considered an amazingly progressive response from a violent crime victim.

In 1970 Cash was invited to perform at the Nixon White House. Nixon's aids sent song requests to Cash including 'Okie from Muskogee' and 'Welfare Cadillac'. Tennessee social workers were livid about the 'Welfare Cadillac' request and the state commissioner of welfare wrote a letter to Nixon calling him insensitive and saying, 'The song's message that welfare recipients are cheats and the rest of us chumps is a grave disservice'. Although a flap ensued, Cash later had this to say about it:

*I think everybody got that whole thing wrong, because the president didn't ask me to do those songs – one of his secretaries did. I think they wanted me to believe that President Nixon was familiar with my music but evidently they'd picked up a copy of Billboard, found a couple of songs in the Top Ten – and then took it from there. I simply told them, 'Look, "Okie from Muskogee" is Merle Haggard's song, it's identified with him, and I won't do it because it wouldn't be proper. As for "Welfare Cadillac", well I've heard the song once, I don't like it, and it doesn't say anything I want to say. If the request actually does come from the president, tell him that our program is already planned and that I certainly hope he'll be pleased with what we do'. (Linderman, 1975/2002: 143, 154)*

Although Cash refused to play the songs, he said that Nixon's foreign policy should be supported because he was our elected president. A year later, he questioned the

war in 'Singing in Vietnam Talking Blues' and released the song that would become a trademark of Cash's fight for life's underdogs, 'Man in Black' in which he proclaims to 'wear the black for the poor and the beaten down', for the hopeless and the prisoner.

Cash performed a series of concerts for American troops in Vietnam and after returning home announced that he was a 'dove with claws'. In 1975 when he was asked about that comment he responded, 'I thought that was *awful* clever of me at the time – and now I wonder where I ever got that stupid line . . . Anyway, please forgive me for saying I'm a dove with claws' (Linderman, 1975/2002: 153). Years later, in his 1997 autobiography, he wrote that he had never voted for Nixon.

Although Cash and his ancestors had always served in the military, he said, 'I'm not military minded at all. Our government scares the daylights out of me' (Turner, 2004: 246). Although he performed for American troops abroad and publically supported Nixon's foreign policy, he, in 1970, did say the following about the Vietnam War: 'The way I feel about it, the only good thing that ever came from a war is a song and that's a hell of a way to have to get your songs. I don't know how patriotic I'd be if I was poor and hungry, though' (Hemphill, 1970/2002: 86).

More telling is his 1973 interview when he said,

*As far as the war in Vietnam is concerned, that war just made me sick. I'm not supporting that war or any other war . . . We'd like to erase that whole war from our history books . . . Maybe Vietnam has taught us a hard lesson to not be involved in foreign wars. Maybe that's the lesson we've learned. I hope we have. (McCabe and Killion, 1973/2002: 137)*

In 1973, during an interview for *Rolling Stone*, Cash was asked about what he was 'proud of' in his work. He pointed to one record – *The Rebel* which contained 'The Big Battle'. Cash called it 'one of the first social-comment things I wrote. It was about the needless killing in war. That was in 1961. I thought it was a good record, and I still think it is. The idea being that the big battle comes after the killing . . . in the conscience, in the hearts and grief of people that suffered the loss' (Hilburn, 2004: 84).

Johnny Cash's personal politics greatly affected his music and his shifting positions on a multitude of social issues. For the most part, he was indeed a gutsy pusher of social causes whose politics and lived actions came down on the side of the disenfranchised and dispossessed. Yet there is little doubt that his primary social cause and peak achievements as a public figure were undertaken on behalf of prisoners.

## 'FOLSOM PRISON BLUES'

Back in 1955, at Sun Records in Memphis, Cash recorded his hit single, 'Folsom Prison Blues'. The lyrics of the song were drawn from bits of Jimmy Rodgers's 'Blue Yodel No. 1(T for Texas)' and Gordon Jenkins's 'Crescent City Blues'. Played in Cash's trademark *boom-chick-a-boom* cadence, 'Folsom Prison Blues' is a ballad of a rounder who

'shot a man in Reno just to watch him die'. And for this he winds up in Folsom; listening to a distant train, its passengers 'probably drinking coffee and smoking big cigars'. This prisoner is existentially doomed, however, for he knows his incarceration is justified. 'I know I had it comin', I know I can't be free. But these people keep a-movin', and that's what tortures me.'

'Folsom' marked the birth of a myth that Johnny had done time in prison. Though he had not (Cash claimed he was arrested and jailed seven times, mainly for disorderly conduct following drug and alcohol binges; Pond, 2004), Johnny Cash would nevertheless trade on that myth for the next half century, thereby forging an identity as a figure of a criminal underworld where outlaws emerge with their dignity intact. Nobody bought the myth more willingly than prisoners. And so Cash began receiving letters from inmates, hundreds of them by his account, asking him to come and play.

Starting with a 1957 date at the Huntsville State Prison in Texas (later home to Sam Houston State University), Johnny embarked upon a pioneering series of benefit prison concerts. The importance of these concerts for a cultural criminology of prisons, if there is such a thing, cannot be overstated. No musical entertainer of the day – not Elvis, Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf – even considered going behind the walls. Johnny Cash would play around 30 prison shows over the next ten years, including a late 50s' concert at San Quentin State Prison where a young Merle Haggard, then doing a three-year bit for burglary, sat mesmerized by Cash's showmanship. 'There was a connection there, identification', Haggard reflected years later. 'This was somebody singing a song about your personal life. Even the people who weren't fans of Johnny Cash – it was mixture of people; all races were fans by the end of the show' (Streissguth, 2004: 41).

It was through these concerts that Cash began to develop a strong anti-prison sentiment, inspired by both the prisoners he met and California pastor Floyd Gressett who counseled imprisoned men. In this way, Cash was introduced to a documentary on the daily life of prisoners which furthered his commitment to their plight. But all of that would come later. First, Johnny Cash had personal demons to battle.

By 1967 his career had tanked. Cash had not had a hit record since 1964 and his health was in serious decline from years of amphetamine abuse. According to many of his biographers, the rebirth of Johnny's personal and professional life is attributed to two things. The first was his marriage to country and folk legend, June Carter, and his subsequent recovery – more or less – from drug addiction. The second was a concert recorded at Folsom Prison which would turn out to be not only Johnny Cash's most famous moment in music, but a defining event in American penology.

## Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison

In history, design, and aesthetic, Folsom Prison is quintessentially American. Built with granite rock by inmate labor in the late 1870s, Folsom State Prison sits above the mighty American River, some 30 miles east of Sacramento in a town appropriately named Repressa, California. The bleached fortress has a way of intimidating all comers.

'Its physical appearance is frowning and terrible', a former inmate once wrote. 'Its buildings are low-squatting, resembling the lines of a bull dog' (Streissguth, 2004: 44). A legendary roster of criminals has spent time there: Hell's Angel founder Sonny Barger, Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, Timothy Leary, Charles Manson, R&B/Funk musician, Rick James, and the Menendez brothers, to name a few. Wardens and guards have been killed at Folsom. Condemned men once were hanged in an underground dungeon.

Cash's first visit to Folsom came in 1966, when he was permitted to play a set outside the walls with the legendary Carter Family. When he returned two years later, with the help of pastor Gressett, Cash had gained permission from the State prison commissioner and California Governor Ronald Reagan to enter the prison compound with his new line-up, known as the Tennessee Three, and record a concert with the eccentric producer Bob Johnston (who would produce three of Bob Dylan's most memorable albums, *Blonde on Blonde*, *John Wesley Harding*, and *Nashville Skyline*). Cash's intention was to not only record a live album, but he also wanted the American public to hear how the prisoners would respond to a sympathetic voice (Streissguth, 2004).

The date of the concert was Saturday, 13 January 1968. Cash's tour bus arrived at the prison in the early morning under an overcast sky. Exiting the bus Johnny posed for a few photographs outside the East Gate, the main entrance to Folsom. In one, he looks like the embodiment of the American spirit (Figure 1).



**FIGURE 1** Johnny Cash outside Folsom Prison

Source: Associated Press

Around 9:30 a.m., a thousand prisoners – black, white, and Hispanic – filed into the dining hall and took their seats as guards stood at opposite ends of the stage wielding shotguns. Cash walked out dressed in black and ‘only about 75 percent straight’, as Marshall Grant remembered, and announced in his booming baritone, ‘Hello, I’m Johnny Cash’. There was only one song to open with. ‘Folsom Prison Blues’ became a prisoner’s anthem that morning, as the inmates sang along to every word. ‘It was their song’, wrote Streissguth (2004: 75), ‘about their wretched home.’ More songs of confinement and cold regret followed: ‘Busted’, ‘Dark as a Dungeon’, ‘I Got Stripes’, ‘The Wall’, the elegant ‘I Still Miss Someone’, ‘Cocaine Blues’, ‘Green, Green Grass of Home’, and a hanging song called, ‘25 Minutes To Go’. By the peak of his performance, Johnny had become one with his audience: a swaggering, half-crazed bad-ass who left no quarter. The songs united with image to form a partnership between performer and prisoner that likely has never been repeated behind the walls of any penitentiary. ‘Cash was singing from inside the place where American law and order and American hell met’, wrote Mikal Gilmore (2008: 197), ‘and nobody else in popular music could match him for radical nerve or compassion.’ This set the stage for the closer, ‘Greystone Chapel’, a song of sin and redemption written by a Folsom prisoner named Glen Sherley, who sat nearby the stage. ‘There’s a Greystone Chapel here in Folsom’, it goes, ‘A house of worship in this den of sin.’ Many have spoken of Cash’s Folsom concert; though few have described it as poetically as his future sideman, Marty Stuart: ‘Johnny was cocky. He was at the top of his game. I mean he had heaven all over him’ (Streissguth, 2004: 96).

## The reformer

*Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* was released in the summer of 1968. It would sell millions and become one of popular music’s essential albums. Not only did the album represent a turning point for Johnny Cash the performer, but it also established Cash as the nation’s leading public figure on prison reform. In his words,

*I didn’t go into it thinking about it as a crusade. I mean I just don’t think prisons do any good. They put ‘em in there and just make ‘em worse, if they were ever bad in the first place, and then when they let ‘em out they’re just better at whatever put ‘em in there in the first place. Nothing good ever came out of prison. That’s all I’m trying to say. (Hemphill, 1970/2002: 84)*

Cash’s success as a prison reformer was due, on one hand, to the wider reform movement taking place in prisons across the country during the late 1960s and early 1970s. These reforms included greater access to religious services for Muslim prisoners following the Attica riot (which began when prisoners held hostages for four days in September 1971 and ended when the New York State Police stormed the prison killing 29 inmates and 10 hostages); the establishment of inmate councils, grievance procedures; and the ascension of prison rehabilitation programs. Yet on the other hand, Cash’s successes would have never been possible were it not for his ability to work within the system. Make no mistake about it: Johnny Cash’s prison reform work

was not an act of political rebellion. Although he taunted guards during his performances, joked about misplacing his marijuana stash, and ridiculed wardens (audacious acts that would not be tolerated in today's prisons), Cash's reform efforts also had the support of such staunchly conservative figures as Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Rev. Billy Graham. In fact, without the support of religious clergy and law-and-order hardliners, Cash would have never been allowed to set foot inside a prison. When asked by a reporter in the mid-1970s if he was becoming a political radical, Cash emphatically replied,

*No, I sure don't. I look at it the other way: I'm just tryin' to be a good Christian . . . If you take the words of Jesus literally and apply them to our everyday life; you discover that the greatest fulfillment you'll ever find really does lie in giving. And that's why I do things like prison concerts. Compared to that, projects like the television series I did, for example, have very little meaning for me. (Linderman, 1975/2002: 157)*

His advocacy took numerous forms, from writing letters to prisoners, to taking phone calls from death row inmates (Cash spoke to Gary Gilmore prior to his 1977 execution at the Utah State Prison), to acting on prisoners' behalf to win their parole, to arguing their cases before reporters and politicians, including a 1972 meeting with President Nixon in the White House. Perhaps his greatest achievement came on 26 July 1972 when Cash went to Washington and testified before the Subcommittee on National Penitentiaries. After recounting harrowing stories of rape and suicide in prison, Cash called for sweeping reforms to eliminate unequal sentencing and establish an advisory panel that would recommend standards for state institutions. 'Unless people begin to care about prisoners, all of the money in the world will not help', he said to the committee. 'People have to care in order for prison reform to come about' (Steissguth, 2004: 163).

Cash continued to perform in prisons well into the 1970s, including a return to Folsom in 1977. But then the epoch of American prison reform drew to a close, the concerts stopped and so did Johnny's advocacy work. By the time Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, prison reform appeared to be a thing of the distant past.

## THE LEGACY

Folsom Prison underwent profound changes during these years, due mainly to the influence of gangs. Inmate-on-inmate violence peaked at the prison during the early 1980s when the Aryan Brotherhood seized control of the drug trade and protection rackets from black and Hispanic gangs. Since then, gangs have brought a peculiar sense of order to the institution. Color lines demarcate prison spaces at Folsom like blocks and train tracks demarcate a city.

Today Folsom Prison houses maximum-security inmates serving long sentences or those who are considered management problems at other facilities. The institution is severely overcrowded, with a population of 4200 inmates living in spaces designed to hold 1200. Around 500 inmates are triple-bunked in hallways leading to the dining hall



where Cash recorded his 1968 masterpiece (Hamm, 2007). But entertaining convicts is a thing of the past. Cellblocks now teem with violence. Suicide and drug abuse are rampant. Four out of every ten prisoners suffer from Hepatitis C, thereby aggravating aggressive tendencies. There is a critical staff shortage (Hamm, 2007). Most of the rehabilitation programs have been eliminated so prisoners spend their days pacing the yard, pumping pig iron and bangin' Crip, Blood, Mexican Mafia, Aryan Brotherhood, Nazi Low Rider. Seven out of ten inmates released from the prison return, one of the highest recidivism rates in the country. Even California's prison commissioner has described the institution as a 'powder keg' at risk of exploding (Steinhauer, 2006).

This powder keg of incarceration can be summed up in two photographs. One illustrates the structural problems at Folsom; the other illuminates a corresponding human factor which becomes the overriding catalyst to prison violence. Figure 2 deals with the conditions of confinement caused by overcrowding, where prisoners are stacked up like cordwood with no meaningful activity to sustain them.

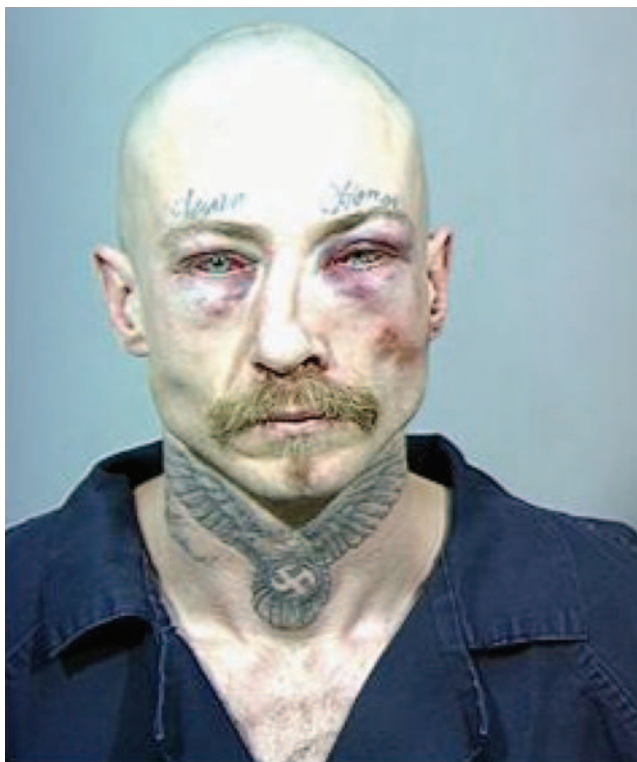
Figure 3 shows what happens under these conditions. In this harrowing photograph, a member of a white supremacist gang is seen with an elaborate mark of the swastika tattooed in a ring around his neck. His nose is broken from a fist fight and his eyes are ulcerated from the ravages of methamphetamine abuse and Hepatitis C. Essentially, this is a human being with nothing to lose.

Criminologists who study failed prisons need only to look at Folsom for a model. But if they look closely enough, criminologists can also find traces of Johnny Cash's legacy. One of the authors caught a glimpse of it on his visit to Folsom's Greystone Chapel in the summer of 2007, four years after Johnny's passing, where he interviewed inmates who belonged to the Crips, the Bloods, and the Aryan Brotherhood



**FIGURE 2** Overcrowding in a California prison

Source: Associated Press



**FIGURE 3** White supremacist gang member in a California prison

Source: Stanislaus Sheriff's Department

about their religious lives and the potential terrorist threat they posed to the United States (Hamm, 2008). Despite all of the prison's problems – and they are severe, to be sure – there is a noticeable sense of fair-play and tolerance among the prisoners who spend their days in Greystone Chapel, even for those who are as fucked up as the man pictured above. That is the whole point of religion in prison, to accept everyone. Because of this, Greystone Chapel is by far the safest area in a desolate and perilous place. It is an area where people still 'care about prison reform' to paraphrase Cash, as evidenced by more than two-dozen interviews the author conducted there. In spite of everything, what legendary penologist John Irwin (1980) called the 'Big House' at Folsom Prison, is still a better place to do time than in California's more modern 'correctional institutions', such as the poorly constructed New Folsom Prison (a name that Orwell would cherish) which sits about a mile away. New Folsom Prison has not one but three chapels, yet they are usually empty, except for the gang bangers who meet there to do gang business, sell drugs or sex, or plan a terrorist attack (Hamm, 2007). 'There is an element of evil in this prison', said the New Folsom Chaplain during a conversation with him. 'Inmates will use any opportunity to lash out against society. There's no state-sponsored effort to save them . . . The same mentality that drives prisoners drives the suicide bombers in Iraq.' This is not the case at Greystone



Chapel inside Old Folsom Prison. There, chaplains and prisoners have embraced a different culture – one that, first and foremost, respects their own house of worship.

And finally, you can clearly see the legacy at the Old Folsom Prison Museum. When the author entered the squat stone building on a blistering summer day, the first thing he saw was an enlargement of the photo taken of Johnny outside the East Gate in January, 1968. Blaring from a boom box behind the counter was none other than *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*. As ‘Orange Blossom Special’ wailed in the background, the Museum curator was asked how often he played the tape. ‘Everyday’ he said brightly, ‘all day long.’ This may be Cash’s most enduring legacy as a musical performer. Not only is Johnny Cash’s memory ingrained in the history of Folsom Prison, but he symbolizes a faith in human betterment that is greatly needed in these times.

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