



THE  TIMES

Saving Cash

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Published at 12:00AM, October 27 2005

As a new film about Johnny Cash is shown at *The Times* London Film Festival, Rick Rubin tells how he rescued the Man in Black

The music producer Rick Rubin, who for more than 20 years has made records for artists such as the Beastie Boys, the Rolling Stones and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, is heavy-set and sports a long, straggly beard that stretches down to his chest. He often wears a baseball cap, a heavy fleece jacket and jeans. He looks like an ageing Hell's Angel. Even so, the first time he met Johnny Cash, in the summer of 1993, it was Rubin who felt intimidated.

Rubin, then 30, had noticed that Cash was performing in a dinner theatre in Orange County, a Los Angeles suburb. Having contacted the singer's manager to arrange a meeting with Cash, Rubin drove to the venue. The singer's career had been on the skids since 1987, when he was dumped by Columbia, his record company since the Fifties.

"As he was singing, you could sit there and order your meal," says Rubin. "I think many people felt that his best work was behind him. But when I got there, I started to feel nervous. He was the Man in Black. I guess it was the mythology."

Rubin watched Cash play a short set with a small backing band to a small audience of faithful fans. It was a pitiful fall from grace: while contemporaries such as Bob Dylan and Neil Young continued to climb to the top end of the charts, Cash had been reduced to this.

Backstage, though, the singer was delighted to meet Rubin and went to great lengths to make him feel at ease, introducing him to family and friends. As Rubin sat talking to Cash and his wife, June Carter, he broached the idea of an acoustic album. Cash was interested and, later that evening, Rubin asked him to record a few songs using only an acoustic guitar.

As the evening wore on past midnight, Rubin taped some new Cash compositions and covers of hits by Leonard Cohen and Kris Kristofferson. "It was the voice that was so affecting," says Rubin of the singer's baritone. "He sounded like a wounded animal; looking for redemption from God. After a while, you weren't scared. You wanted to care for him."

American Recordings was released in 1994. It was the first of four award-winning collaborations between Cash and Rubin and immediately brought the singer to the wider attention of a younger, college-based audience. While the capital of country music, Nashville, remained fixated with anodyne songwriters such as Garth Brooks, *American Recordings*, all spit and sawdust, was a constant feature on alternative radio stations. The album won a Grammy in 1995 for Best Contemporary Folk Album. It had revived one of the greatest careers in country music.

Johnny Cash was born in Kingsland, Arkansas, in 1932, the son of a poor Southern Baptist farmer. He fled the cotton fields of his family to pursue celebrity status in country music. His third single, *Folsom Prison Blues*, made the top five of the country charts; *I Walk the Line*, got to No 1. In 1957, he became the first artist at Sun Records — then home to Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison and Jerry Lee Lewis — to release a full-length album.

During those early years Cash could rarely put a foot wrong. America was booming after a postwar lull; the nation's teenagers had come of age. Cash, who preferred to write songs about the dispossessed, immediately struck a liberal voice. His success, though, was not achieved without great personal cost. By the early Sixties he was fiercely addicted to amphetamines and barbiturates. His undiminished work rate continued to deliver hits such as *Ring of Fire*, but his wild lifestyle would land him in jail on seven occasions, for one night each time. In 1965 he was arrested by the drugs squad for smuggling illegal amphetamines in El Paso, Texas.

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Tragedy and infamy seemed to tangle with Cash at every turn. In 1968 his long-time guitarist Luther Perkins died in a house fire. Two months later the home of his best friend and neighbour, Roy Orbison, burned down, killing two of Orbison's sons. Cash locked himself into a bedroom at home to undergo detox. He rediscovered his Christian faith.

He remained immensely popular throughout the Seventies, often cutting a tall and imposing figure, dressed from head to toe in black. The publication of his autobiography, *Man in Black*, sold more than 1.3 million copies.

But after staying clean for most of the Seventies, Cash would find himself addicted to drugs once more in the Eighties. He started abusing painkillers after a serious stomach injury sustained during a fight with an ostrich at his exotic animal farm in 1983. While he would eventually kick the habit for the last time, after a double heart bypass, his relationship with Nashville soured.

Rubin’s collaborations with Cash reintroduced the singer to the first tier of singer-songwriters, a group including Bob Dylan, Paul McCartney and Neil Young. During his recording visits to Rubin’s house in Los Angeles, U2’s Bono, Joe Strummer of The Clash, Nick Cave, the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Willie Nelson were just a few of the musicians who sought out Cash. “Joe Strummer, well, he spent a whole week sitting in the studio listening to Johnny recording a few songs,” says Rubin. “I think they all sympathised with him. They wanted to help restore him to the top.”

Over nearly a decade, Rubin and Cash collaborated on four acclaimed *American Recordings* albums, made under increasingly arduous circumstances as the singer’s health continued to fail. In 1996 his *Unchained* album won a Grammy for Best Country Album. In a rebuke to Nashville, which had continued to ignore his resurgence, Rubin and Cash took out a full-page advert in *Billboard* magazine, sarcastically thanking the home of country music for its continued support. An accompanying photograph featured the singer displaying his middle finger. A year later, Cash was found to have Parkinson’s disease. At a concert in Flint, Michigan, in October 1997, he dropped his guitar and looked unsteady as he tried to retrieve it. A subsequent tour was cancelled and, for the remainder of his career, Cash would perform only on the occasional TV show.

By 1999, his health was deteriorating so much that he was unable to travel. Rubin, who loathes flying, was often journeying to Hendersonville to record at the Cash family farm. “It was a struggle to get him down to a studio some days,” he remembers. “He would work in the morning after breakfast when he was feeling well. By the afternoon, he was often exhausted.”

In May 2003 his wife and singing partner June Carter Cash died after complications arising from heart valve surgery. “I spoke to him the day she died,” says Rubin. “And I have never heard him sound so sad. There was little that I could say to him that would soften the blow. In the end, all I could tell him was to hold on to his faith. I think that seemed to work. He told me he wanted to start recording straight away.” Four months later, Cash was dead. He was 71.

Two years on, Rubin still sounds grief-stricken. He is putting the finishing touches to *American Recordings V*, an album culled from extra material from the past decade. “I knew Johnny for over a decade,” says Rubin, finally. “Our relationship was like a pact. I took a chance on him when no one else would. He repaid that by recording some of the most stunning music ever recorded.”

The life

Born in Kingsland, Arkansas, on February 26, 1932.

After high school, he enlisted with the US Air Force. On his discharge, he married his first wife, Annie Liberto.

In 1954 he auditioned for Sam Phillips at Sun Studios. Within five years, he had a No 1 hit with *I Walk the Line*.

In 1958 he was signed to Columbia Records, where he hit with *Ring of Fire*.

In 1966 he divorced and a year later married June Carter. The couple go on to have five children.

In 1980 he became the youngest inductee into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

In 1993, Rick Rubin signed Cash to his American Records label where he covered songs by artists such as Tom Waits and Depeche Mode.

Cash died of complications from diabetes in September 2003, just months after June Carter had died.

The songs

SAN QUENTIN

San Quentin, you’ve been livin’ hell to me
You’ve hosted me since nineteen sixty three
I’ve seen ‘em come and go and I’ve seen them die
And long ago I stopped askin’ why

JUST THE OTHER SIDE OF NOWHERE

I’ve come from just the other side of nowhere
To this big time lonesome town
They got a lotta ice an’ snow here
Half-as-cold as all the people I’ve found.
Every way I try to go here
Seems to bring me down

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