



Johnny Cash

*American Recordings*

04/1994

American / Sony

# The Silences

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When Kurt Cobain killed himself on April 5, 1994, I was a brooding fifteen year-old in a small trailer park in West Virginia. I was watching MTV when Kurt Loder came on to make the announcement. I called my girlfriend to tell her the news. We both loved any music that seemed to find its way out of Seattle and into our little corner of Appalachia. I made her mixed tapes of Alice in Chains, Temple of the Dog, Pearl Jam, and Nirvana. When I hung up the phone, I think I may have cried.

I imagined my upbringing in the panhandle of West Virginia was not all that different from Kurt's childhood in Aberdeen, Washington. We both came from broken homes. We both were lower-class white trash. My bedroom was a little box in a little metal box at the bottom of a hill. I only had three pieces of furniture in my room: a bookshelf/desk that my dad made from plain boards (not a bevel or adornment on the whole thing), a chest made of the same upon which sat my 17-inch television and CD player, and my bed. I had just enough room on the floor to do crunches during wrestling season, although not quite enough to do full push-ups. On the other side of my bedroom wall was the spare room, in which I kept a weight set and my dad kept his guns. Somewhere in that room is a convenient metaphor for my adolescence. It was exactly the type of "toxic masculinity" that Kurt sought to escape and mock every time he wore a dress.

Today, I think too much is made of Nirvana, and the misty-eyed reverence that my generation has for the band annoys me in the way that the baby boomers' reminiscence over the Beatles irks me. But in April 1994, my musical world had collapsed with the discovery of Cobain's limp body at his Seattle home. I grew up on my father's music, which consisted of hard rock from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Led Zeppelin. Black Sabbath. AC/DC. Speaker stacks and interminable guitar solos with an assload of crunch and distortion. I had endured bad music in my early teens: Warrant, Whitesnake, Slaughter and dozens of other hair bands. Then Nirvana came along and became the hard rock arrival of my generation.

It was appropriate that Kurt Loder deliver the news to me rather than Tom Brokaw. MTV was my portal to the outside world, something larger than the trailer park or even my hometown. I would stay up late into the night watching *Headbangers Ball* and the horribly, if appropriately, named *120 Minutes*. That April I watched both programs, intent on finding another band to attach myself to. It might have been during an episode of *The Real World* that I turned the channel and found Johnny Cash.

Johnny Cash released *American Recordings* in late April 1994. My memory tells me that VH1 broadcast a video of him singing "Tennessee Stud" in a live performance at the Viper Room in Los Angeles. I wondered how Cash had managed to find himself there. My mother and grandmother had seen him five years earlier at the Maryland Theater in Hagerstown, Maryland. The Maryland Theater is where country acts go to complete a quiet and not-quite dignified death. I saw Kenny Rogers there with my grandmother in 2015. The show was in December, and he set out to perform all of his hits, which were supplemented by holiday songs. During the first set, he chided the audience for not singing along to "Islands in the Stream" (to be fair, the crowd was mostly over seventy and didn't have much singing left in them), and during the second set he made a Bill Cosby rape joke during a rendition of "Baby, It's Cold Outside." All of this is to say I can imagine how Johnny Cash felt before he stepped out on that stage in Hagerstown in 1989,

and I can imagine the fear that wrapped itself around his heart: that he would become nothing more than a bitter flame waiting for the end. It must have been with this knowledge of the abyss that he agreed to make *American Recordings* with Rick Rubin.

The music collection in our trailer held hundreds of vinyl records, cassette tapes, and CDs, but the only country album was a double vinyl of Flatt and Scruggs my father bought so that he could make a tape for his father-in-law. My maternal grandparents loved country music. My grandfather, who died when I was eight, was a painfully shy man who rarely ventured out in public for anything more than a pack of Camel non-filters and a canister of Folger's instant coffee. He loved country music, but he would never go to a store to actually buy an album. I think no small reason for this was because he was illiterate, and finding something in a store without the assistance of others would have been panic-inducing and shameful. So my dad made him a tape of Flatt and Scruggs, and my grandmother ordered eight-tracks from television commercials so that he could listen to them in his Ford pickup. Conway Twitty. Don Williams. Johnny Cash. I loved my grandparents, but country music was their music. But after watching that performance in the Viper Room, I decided to purchase *American Recordings* on my next trip to the Valley Mall in Hagerstown.

When I peeled open the shrink-wrap of the CD, a small insert fell out. It was a photostatic copy of what looked like a very long letter from Johnny Cash. In it, he explained how he came to know his first guitar (his mother's) and how he came to play the Martin that was used for the album. The letter seemed like an apology for the album, one directed at me.

The album cover is simple but powerful. Cash stands between two dogs, which he nicknamed sin and redemption, and he wears a long, black trench coat, a black shirt, and black pants. And black shoes. His wardrobe is so black that it is a hard to make out the black guitar case that Cash holds in front of him. His face is just under the words "CASH" in bold white letters. The look the man has on his face is that of an Old Testament prophet, a man come to tell you that you'd better get your shit together before divine retribution levels its barrels at you.

I put on the CD and lay back on my bed. In the current age of on-demand music, I miss the days when I would devote thirty minutes or an hour, a type of prayer, really, to listen to a full-length album. When the album was through, I could not believe that the whole recording was just one man and his guitar. The early 1990s was the age of MTV *Unplugged* performances. Being "unplugged" was a gimmick, a one-off before a band went back to kicking ass. In my mind, a guitar should have pickups and they should hum with the menacing potential for noise. Angus Young's Gibson SG. Jimmy Page's Les Paul. Cobain's Fender Jaguar. All Cash had was an acoustic D-28 Dreadnought. Even though he claimed the guitar was the first black one Martin had ever made, it still seemed a poor weapon to combat a man's demons.

In *American Recordings*, I learned the power of silences. When Kurt Cobain recorded "Something in the Way" for the lost track of *Nevermind*, legend has it that the engineers could not get the studio quiet enough to pick up Kurt's whispering vocals. *American Recordings* is nothing but a dark whisper, an album full of death and regrets. This is most noticeable in the song "Oh, Bury Me Not." The song begins as a prayer, but then shifts into a plea from a dying cowboy for his friends not to bury him on the "lone prairie." His pleas mean nothing, as practicality over-rides sentimentality and they, of course, bury him on the high plains, far away from the comforts of home and nothing but sage and coyotes to keep him company.

In this way, *American Recordings* is a gospel album that is decidedly not a gospel album. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the ultimate punishment is not in the grisly methods of torture, but in the sufferer's distance from God. In *American Recordings*, people are far away from heaven or family or home, and they are desperately trying to make their return on the backs of horses or riding the high whine of a train. The speakers of Cash's songs seek redemption, but it is never guaranteed. The album occupies a dark place, one without clear or easy answers.

If anybody gains redemption in these songs, it is by sheer luck and the grace of God, not any kind of inherent goodness of the speaker. What makes the songs of *American Recordings* anti-gospel is that their focus is not on the power of God, but rather on the sufferings of the sinner. The songs are populated by down-on-their-luck sinners, like the Everyman in Cash's performance of Glen Danzig's "Thirteen" or Loudoun Wainwright III's "The Man Who Couldn't Cry." Wainwright's song is an excellent study in theodicy; it is the book of Job compacted into five minutes. The ultimate message of the song seems to be "life sucks, then you die."

Cash never forgot about the wild nights of his youth. He sings about redemption like a man who knows that he needs it more than anyone else. One of the highlights of the album is a Cash original, "Like a Soldier," an autobiographical song about the pain that he caused other people in his younger days. The tone of the song is one of thanksgiving. Cash is a man surprised with his good fortune, but he is still haunted by demons.

*There are nights I don't remember  
and pain that's been forgotten  
and a lot of things I choose not to recall.  
There are faces that come to me  
in my darkest secret memories,  
faces that I wish would not come back at all.*

I like to think this is the type of song that Kurt Cobain would have written had he survived.

*American Recordings* taught me simplicity. Cash's voice had not given out like it did in the later albums. It is weary, yes, but no less urgent for being weary. I have heard the isolated vocals from "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and something is similar. It is the voice of a man wrestling with himself, the world, and his place in the world and his journey on it. Cash's guitar playing is nothing fancy, but it is distinctive. His go-to is the alternating bass strum, with a few hammer-ons occasionally thrown in for variation. I have read several biographies about Cash and I have seen enough pictures in those biographies to say that I've never seen him with an electric guitar. I have never seen a picture of him making a barre chord. He didn't need to. Three chords and the truth. He did not use a song to express himself; he used himself to express the song.

With the exception of "Something in the Way," *Nevermind* is a study in studio layering. Kurt's voice is laid on top of Kurt's voice, which is then supplemented by Dave Grohl's voice laid on top of Dave's voice. For all of its touted "grungy" sound, *Nevermind* is truly a studio album. The slick polish of "In Bloom" is in its jangly melody line that is not all that different from the early Beatles albums. Kurt must have known this as he smiled throughout the Ed Sullivan-esque music video. *American Recordings* is not lo-fi, but it is raw. The liner notes state that the songs, except for the two in the Viper Room, were recorded in "Rick's living room and Johnny Cash's cabin." The sound now reminds me of campfires along the Cacapon River. Saturday nights in the toolshed of my friend's

grandfather. Music at its most elemental level, that of people gathering for a story and a song to keep away the encroaching night.

Much of what we think of the original *American Recordings* comes from what happened afterwards. The second album with Rubin, *Unchained*, won a Grammy. Nearly a decade after the performance in the Viper Room, the video for his cover of Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt" solidified Cash's legendary status. I thought the cover was not that great. His voice was shot by that point, an animal separate from himself that he could not control. Even if "Hurt" and the movie *Walk the Line* had never happened, *American Recordings* would have been a solitary act of redemption that would have saved him from falling into the same trap that Kenny Rogers did.

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I always wanted to play the guitar throughout high school, but I never actually bought one until my late twenties. I shudder when I think of how good I would be now if I had my idle teen years to practice, long before I had adult obligations. My first guitar was not a Stratocaster or a Les Paul. It was an acoustic Seagull S-6, and the first song that I learned to play was "Folsom Prison Blues."

I played that guitar until I wore an extra hole below the sound hole. This year, with my fortieth birthday approaching, I was willing to spend a few extra dollars on a better guitar. I narrowed my options to two Taylor acoustic-electric models, the 210e and the 214e. Indecisive to the end, I asked the salesman for his opinion.

"Well, the 214 is good if you are quiet and want people to hear fingerpicking, but the 210 is good for volume," he said.

"In that case, I'll go for the 210."

Even after two decades of *American Recordings*, I am not yet ready yet to hear what my silences have to say to me.