

# Show Buzz

## Cash's 'American VI: Ain't No Grave' a Fond, Fitting Farewell

By PETE BROOKS

Producer Rick Rubin promises this Johnny Cash album, the second posthumous one, will be the last he releases, which as good as makes it the last actual Johnny Cash album. Distant relatives will almost certainly one day release outtakes, live performances and "alternate versions" much the same way Elvis' cast-offs have been endlessly repackaged by his record company, but this is the last real new Johnny Cash album. That in itself is a sad, sobering thought.

Culled mainly from tracks recorded in the months between the death of Cash's beloved wife June in May, 2003, and his own demise shortly thereafter, *American VI: Ain't No Grave* is Cash's musical last will and testament, and almost every track proves itself the equal of that intimidating responsibility.

The disc's opening lines, "There ain't no grave that can hold my body down," are intoned in a dry, sepulchral rasp meant to chill, and despite the cynical calculation of it, they do. I wouldn't want to

meet this song in a dark alley at night!

One wonders what a new listener, just discovering Cash's *American* output for the first time would think, hearing this opening track. The melody is not the most tuneful and the clanking-chain percussion is perhaps a touch too much. And the voice, though on-pitch, is clearly ravaged. I just heard my first Charlie Louvin (of the legendary Louvin Brothers) record recently and the voice of the singer was wrecked, but it had a lived-in, stately dignity about it that gave me chills. I loved it, even though I can tell the voice must be a shadow now of what it once had been.

I'd hope a new listener would hear this album's title track and come to a similar conclusion.

But if one is already an admirer of the Man In Black, it's impossible not to marvel at, and have empathy with, the grave timbre of *The Voice* in its final corporeal moments. This is the sound of a great spirit letting go, dissipating gracefully, even joyfully, into that *Eternal White Light*.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Then Cash covers a revered pop chestnut, this one written by his good friend Kris Kristofferson. *Like American V's* "If You Could Read My Mind," he doesn't just re-interpret the familiar classic, he re-invents it.

Don't get me wrong. I think there have been a number of misfires over the years in Cash's selection of cover songs. "Cats In The Cradle," comes to mind. So does "Personal Jesus." Most of the time, I tend to like the first version of a song I heard, no matter who covers it later, even Cash.

But on this album's "For The Good Times," he snatches the wistful number away from whatever pop crooner's version I remember so fondly and makes it his own. (As an example of this phenomenon at work elsewhere, Trent Reznor has recently taken to introducing "Hurt" in

concert as a Johnny Cash song, in spite of the fact that Reznor wrote it and recorded it first.) Cash is in really good voice on "For The Good Times." Strong and smooth.

The album's standout is the lone new composition, "I Corinthians 15:55." On my first couple listens, it was the one song that made me stop typing and look up from my keyboard to see which song was playing. And not even for the passionate lyrics, but for the lilting, playful vocal line. To think he had such beauty inside of him even as his heart was broken and his outer shell was falling to pieces around him... Only Cash could sing the words, "Oh Death, where is thy sting?" not as a self-pity or brash challenge, but rather as a teasing lover to a would-be paramour. Cheeky and cool.

"Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound" is practically unrecognizable from its popular rendition. But again, Cash invests the words with so much easy passion, it sounds like a whole different song till he gets to the familiar refrain. Which he sings with a sly wink because if there's one thing Cash knew when he recorded this song, it's where he was bound.

"Satisfied Mind" also delivers maximum satisfaction and was recorded on a good voice day. Another fitting epitaph in a final album full of them. His strong, confident performance on this song makes it feel less like a coda and more like a period in 72-point, bold type.

The last song, "Aloha Oe," nicely underplays the Hawaiian underpinnings of its origins. The vocal is up front, and when Cash gets around to translating the chorus, it was my voice that caught in my throat, not his. A lovely send-off. If Johnny Cash couldn't have a proper Viking funeral—flaming boat and all—this song is the next best thing.

This obsession of Cash's, at least in his professional life, with death and the hereafter wasn't just window dressing he picked up in his dotage to keep the kids interested. Johnny Cash sang about death from one of first hit records, "Folsom Prison Blues," on. (If you're not sure which one that was, that was the one where he "shot a man in Reno just to watch him die.")

Death was a theme he returned to again and again, from every side of the equation, but more often than not his character was the receiver of death, not the bringer.

The great country gospel music that filled Cash's childhood and informed his professional output usually dealt with this life as merely a grisly, unpleasant test one had to endure in order to earn a coveted spot at the right hand of the Lord in the afterlife. And to get from here to the hereafter, you were going to have shake death's hand somewhere along the way so you might as well face it head-on.

Cash's obsession with death and the next life only became creepy the nearer he himself got to it. But like the fearless artist and true believer that he was, rather than shy away from it, he confronted it. In his last recordings with Rubin, he used his impending demise as the muse that elevates *American VI* from sad elegy for an American icon to something bigger, more important.

People will be teaching this album in grief counseling workshops from now till judgment day.

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