

# “At Folsom Prison”—Johnny Cash (1968)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Original album cover*



*Original label*



*Glen Sherley*

Johnny Cash first sang about Folsom Prison in 1955 in his self-penned song “Folsom Prison Blues.” Originally inspired by an American fictional film on the prison he had seen while in the army in Germany, “Blues” became one of Cash’s signature songs and a staple of his repertoire.

On February 10, 1968, the song had a homecoming of sorts when Cash and his talented sidemen staged—and recorded—a historic concert at California’s Folsom State Prison, then a maximum security facility housing well over 1,000 inmates.

The resulting album, “At Folsom Prison,” is a seminal work of American country music and, arguably, the defining achievement of Johnny Cash’s long and remarkable career.

The February ’68 concert was not the first time Cash had performed at Folsom, or at a prison. Since the release of the original “Folsom Prison” single in ’55, Cash had been receiving numerous invitations to perform at penitentiaries from inmates who sensed a kinship with the Man in Black. A devout Christian, Cash saw such performances as part of his ministry and he played his first penitentiary, Huntsville State Prison in Texas, in 1957. He followed that performance up with a show at San Quentin where, in the audience, among the inmates, sat a young Merle Haggard.

It was Cash’s friend, pastor and prisoner counselor Reverend Floyd Gressett, who first brought Cash to Folsom. His inaugural show behind that prison’s legendary Gothic walls was in 1966 and proved an artistic, if undocumented, success. Immediately afterward, Cash began to formulate the idea of a recorded concert played inside Folsom’s walls.

Two years later, with the approval of his record company, Columbia, and Lloyd Kelley, the prison’s recreation director, Cash and company—new wife June Carter Cash, the Statler Brothers, Carl Perkins and Cash’s band, the Tennessee Three, along with two recording engineers, a still photographer and a few others (including MC Hugh Cherry)--walked through the metal gates of the prison to perform and record two live shows.

The dual shows, both recorded, acted as insurance for the other and featured many of the same songs (“Orange Blossom Special,” “Jackson,” and, obviously, “Folsom Prison Blues”). However, it is the earlier show, begun at 9:40am, from which the majority of “At Folsom Prison’s” final tracks were culled. These included renditions of “Long Black Veil” and the Cash standard “I Still Miss Someone.” Only “Give My Love to Rose” was utilized from the later concert which was performed that same day starting at 12:40pm.

In both sessions, Cash catered to his audience with carefully selected songs which reflected their plight—"Dark as a Dungeon," "Cocaine Blues," and the aforementioned "Long Black Veil." Perhaps most provocatively he also introduced a new song, "Greystone Chapel," written by then Folsom inmate Glen Sherley.

Thirty-two year old Sherley had been in and out of jail for years due to various hold-ups of both banks and liquor stores. He'd been transferred to Folsom about one year prior to the Cash concert. Behind bars, Sherley busied himself strumming his guitar and composing songs. Rev. Gressett provided Cash with a tape of Sherley's "Greystone Chapel" (named after Folsom's sanctuary) the night before the show. Cash was impressed and decided to learn the song in order to perform it the next day. After its debut performance, Cash acknowledged Sherley from the stage. Sherley, from his seat in the front row, rose to shake Cash's hand. Sherley would later write a song for Eddy Arnold and, after his release, pursue a fulltime writing and performing career. He died in 1978.

Despite the record company's allowance of Cash and crew to stage and record such an unlikely concert, at first, Columbia had little belief in the resulting album eventually titled "Johnny Cash: At Folsom Prison."

But the record-buying public proved them wrong. Once it was released, "At Folsom Prison," spurred on by the success of two hit singles from the album (the live rendition of "Folsom Prison Blues" and Shel Silverstein's comic "A Boy Named Sue") sold strongly to both country and pop audiences for the next two years. To date, over six million copies have been sold.

At first, a live album recorded in prison might present itself as a novelty. But, musically, Cash and company transcended any forced or imposed uniqueness and wrought a compelling musical experience, one fully captured on vinyl.

Cash may have tailored his show to his specialized audience but he was only able to pull it off because, in their eyes (and the ears of later listeners), he had also lived the hard life he was singing about. There had always been a bit of danger about Cash. Early in his career, he was never part of the teen idol-dom of many of his peers (Elvis, etc.). His music, like his wardrobe, was dark and his foreboding seriousness was reflected in hits like "Don't Take Your Guns to Town" and "Ring of Fire" thanks to their subject matter and his voice-of-God-like delivery.

Granted, the audience Cash was performing for that day at Folsom was "captive" but captive does not mean unresponsive or uninvolved. Though some inmate reaction was later added or "sweetened" for the album, much was spontaneous and fevered and filled with pent-up, repressed energy. Cash and those gathered seemed to feed off each other. Together, they engaged in a musical tour de force of passion, forgiveness and redemption. Author Michael Steissguth, in his book "Johnny Cash At Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece" states, "On stage, Cash stepped like a matador, erect, his guitar a cape. He was El Cordobes, turning Folsom's tiny wooden stage into Madrid's Plaza de Tores. Torrents of applause rushed him with every violence-charged lyric. There was, in Folsom that day, a spirit of simpatico."

"Folsom's" success took Cash to new heights, a pinnacle he was able to enjoy at the time thanks to his recently gained sobriety.

Though many consider "At Folsom Prison" to be the highpoint of Cash's musical career, other "highlights" would certainly follow. His similar and well-regarded "Live at San Quentin" album emerged in 1969 and his landmark TV series aired from 1969 to 1971. Later, he would be part of the country supergroup The Highwaymen and his critically-acclaimed "American Recordings," recorded in the 1990s and 2000s and produced by Rick Rubin, would each be labeled instant classics upon their release.

During his life and career, there were few accolades that Cash did not receive. He was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1980 and was honored by the Kennedy Center in 1996. Cash died in 2003, the same year that “At Folsom Prison” was named to the National Recording Registry.

*Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).*