
May 22, 2006

CRITICS' CHOICE

New CD's

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

Johnny Cash*"Personal File"*

(Columbia/Legacy) At various times from 1973 to 1982 Johnny Cash recorded favorite songs in his studio, singing alone with his guitar. A clutch of these, the earliest, were conceived as a proper record, but he couldn't find a label to release it.

They all surface now on "Personal File," a two-disc collection of unreleased material uncovered in 2004. The 49 tracks are sequenced more or less by theme, but the main division, is between religious (Disc 2) and secular (Disc 1).

We've had a taste of this kind of Cash performance before, from the material of his final years, produced by Rick Rubin, particularly on "American Recordings," on which he sang a minor-key religious song of his own called "Redemption," with impressive blood-and-fire imagery. This collection, by contrast, has an amiable dragginess. One wants his private stash to yield curious songs, performances that indicated the dimensions of his humanity, his vast, funky, unapologetic soul. Instead, most of these songs, even his religious originals, are plain and prim.

Here he sings favorites from his youth and young adulthood; they include old repertory like "The Engineer's Dying Child," recorded by Vernon Dalhart; the Irish song "I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen" (played by Sons of the Pioneers on the soundtrack to [John Ford's](#) "Rio Grande"); and [Bing Crosby's](#) old hit "Far Away Places," which Cash describes as the first tune he ever sang in public to "a critical audience," at a talent show in Arkansas.

The songs are plainly recorded, except for a little useful reverb in a batch from 1980; many have introductions, some stagy, some more informal. Sometimes he tells where he heard the song he's about to sing, or why he wrote it. And sometimes he just spiels, like this before "What on Earth (Will You Do for Heaven's Sake)":

"I got a 400 power telescope in a place I got in Jamaica, and I look at the moon and I look at the stars, and one night I was looking at the stars, and I was thinking how big heaven was. And I wondered how big God was, you know? If the form of God covered the whole sphere of it all, and I'm sure it does — yet God cares for each and every one of us. I guess he's as small as we want him to be, or as big as we want him to be. Although we're earthbound, we can still be more like him if we can try."

Cash fans will be able to apply an after-the-fact gravity to the music: this album was from a time when he had escaped his past. As of 1973 he was free of drug addiction, free to start a new life. "Sanctified" deals with this in religious terms, but "It Takes One to Know Me," a secular song written by his daughter Carlene Carter, which Cash here addresses to his wife, June, is far better.

"Sometimes I wish I was younger," he sings, "And could pick up the pieces and run/But then I look back on the matter of fact/And it's a race that I've already won." BEN RATLIFF

Scott Walker

"The Drift"

(4AD)

Scott Walker has a voice made for drama: a long-breathed baritone with a cultivated vibrato that sounds both virile and ghostly. It made him a pop star when he proclaimed a monumentally orchestrated despair in the 1966 Walker Brothers hit "The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore." He moved from Los Angeles to London, where the Walker Brothers — not his brothers and not his last name, Engel — became pop idols for a few years. There he embarked on his own increasingly idiosyncratic songwriting career: from pop-rock to singing Jacques Brel to what can only, and incompletely, be called art songs.

"The Drift" is his first album since "Tilt" in 1995, and like "Tilt" it's remote from anything usually called rock or pop. The electric guitar and drumbeat disappear midway through the first song, "Cossacks Are," and rarely return. Most of the songs are slow, yet utterly devoid of the comfort of ballads. Dissonant orchestral strings appear and disappear, swelling or muttering or shivering high overhead. Lone instruments, like a fluegelhorn or a slide guitar, loom up out of silence. Electronic sounds lurk in dim recesses.

Amid them Mr. Walker croons grim, cryptic tidings: visions of death, mutilation, sorrow and destruction. "Jesse," which he has described as his song about 9/11, is also about [Elvis Presley's](#) stillborn twin; it starts with a barely recognizable hint of "Jailhouse Rock" and ends with Mr. Walker singing, completely unaccompanied, "I'm the only one left alive."

In "Hand Me Ups" he imagines how it feels to be crucified; the backup includes an Arabic-inflected voice, a giant bass saxophone called a tubax, a screaming woman and, when he sings, "Its audience is waiting," a lone rhythmic handclap. When he contemplates murder in "Jolson and Jones," he turns the word "curare" into something like a refrain.

If Mr. Walker has any rock counterpart, it would be the Trent Reznor who made Nine Inch Nails' "Fragile"; Mr. Walker wants his complex studio textures "played at high volume," say the liner notes. But his songs are equally close to the somber desolation of Schubert lieder like "Die Winterreise," and in their oblique way are informed as much by history and politics as by private reflections.

"The Drift" sets out only to follow its own obsessions; it's both lush and austere, utterly personal and often Delphic in its impenetrability. Mr. Walker clearly set out to please no one but himself, but his threnodies are as compelling as they are disquieting. JON PARELES

Yo Gotti

"Back 2 da Basics"

(TVT Records)

Yo Gotti is a shiny-toothed, crime-obsessed Southern rapper who has yet to score a big hit. But he does have a rabid local fan base in Memphis, along with one of hip-hop's richest draws. His sing-song rhymes tumble out in a lispy blur of squelched consonants, shape-shifting vowels and agile rhythms.

Yo Gotti's 2003 album, "Life" (TVT), was an uncelebrated gem; his thick voice oozed all over the trebly, drum-machine beats. Since then he has solidified his regional reputation without transcending it. And so the release of his second proper album, "Back 2 Da Basics," will be a major event in Tennessee and almost nowhere else.

That's a shame, because even on a CD like this — by the numbers, with few guests, few memorable beats and lots of songs that have already surfaced on mixtapes — Yo Gotti is riveting. One minute he's mournful and grim ("Cold Game," an indictment of snitches), the next he's playful and clever (the witty "Full Time"). And then there's "25 to Life," an extraordinary narrative about an inmate who can't stop obsessing over the number of years he has to serve: "Picture 25 dollars a week/Picture 24 hours a day, but only 25 minutes of sleep."

For "Gangsta Party," Yo Gotti splurges on a big-name sample (Marvin Gaye) and a couple of well-chosen guests (Bun B and 8 Ball), both of whom he matches, maybe even outdoes. The result is one of the year's smoothest, loveliest hip-hop singles; with more tracks like that, Yo Gotti could one day storm the charts. For now, let him storm your CD player instead.

KELEFA SANNEH

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
