“The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin”: Johnny Cash & the Politics of Country Music

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Abstract: Johnny Cash’s live prison albums, “At Folsom Prison” and “At San Quentin,” are significant and under-recognized social statements of the 1960s. Cash encouraged his listeners to empathize with prisoners by performing songs with prison themes and by recording the electric reactions of inmates to his music. Cash performed before a multiracial audience, and his music was popular with the counterculture as well as with traditional country fans. Cash’s albums and his prison reform activism rejected the law-and-order policies of conservative politicians who sought to enlist country music in their cause. An examination of Cash’s prison records challenges the commonly held notion that country music provided the soundtrack for the white conservative backlash of the late 1960s.

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We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee
We don’t take our trips on LSD
We don’t burn our draft cards
 down on Main Street
We like livin’ right and bein’ free.

– Merle Haggard, “Okie from Muskogee”

Country musician Merle Haggard’s 1969 hit “Okie from Muskogee” became an anthem of conservative backlash. The song contrasted the traditional values of the American heartland with psychedelic drug use, anti-Vietnam War protests, sexual liberation, hippie fashion, and campus unrest. Songs about “Okies,” whites who had migrated to California from Oklahoma and nearby states during the Dust Bowl, had once been associated with left-wing folk singers such as Woody Guthrie. But when Haggard sang, “I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,” he tied pride in white working-class identity to conservative attacks on the counterculture and the New Left in a way that resonated with the political messages of George Wallace, Ronald

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Reagan, and Richard Nixon. In live performances, Haggard's enthusiastic audiences waved American flags.[1]

Politicians and critics at the time viewed country as the musical language of a white working class that was once a solid contingent of the New Deal Democratic coalition, but that defected in large numbers to the Republican Party beginning in the 1960s. However, while many New Right politicians sought to capitalize on the popularity of country music, the genre was not inherently conservative. The most popular country records of the late 1960s challenged backlash politics. Johnny Cash's classic live prison recordings, *At Folsom Prison* (1968) and *At San Quentin* (1969), rejected conservative calls for "law and order."

We typically remember popular music of the 1960s for its overt social messages; yet Cash's prison albums have too often been neglected as major political statements of the time. *At Folsom Prison* and *At San Quentin* suggest that country music could express populist resistance to New Right politics that drew on a different conception of white Southern identity. Like other genres of popular music, country was politically diverse. Even "Okie from Muskogee" was more complicated than it seemed. Many fans may have interpreted it as supportive of conservative backlash, but Haggard meant his song to be tongue-in-cheek. "Okie" satirically contrasted hippie drug use to Muskogee residents' consumption of "white lightning," illegal high-proof liquor. Its spare instrumentation was atypical of Haggard's blues-inspired sound, and its lyrics were clearly over-the-top.

Many Americans associate 1960s popular music with rock-and-roll artists such as Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix. Yet the decade also saw tremendous growth in the popularity of country music. Until the late 1940s, the United States had no full-time country music station, but by 1967, at least 238 stations played country full-time, and more than 2,000 stations played some country. Sometimes called "country and western," the genre had national appeal. But it also had a distinctive regional character, identified with the South and Southwest. Its main institutional centers were Nashville, Tennessee, and Bakersfield and Los Angeles in Southern California.[2]

The growing popularity of a musical genre identified with the South indicated the increasing importance of this region in American culture and politics. Some scholars have connected the "southernization" of American culture to the growth of a New Right that successfully fused populist opposition to liberal elites with militaristic patriotism, evangelical Christianity, and backlash against 1960s-era social movements. Historians examining the rise of the New Right in the 1960s often point to the growing influence of the region where country music was most popular: the Sunbelt, an area stretching from the former states of the Confederacy to Southern California. From 1964 to 2004, every elected U.S. president hailed from the Sunbelt. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, the low-wage, union-hostile economy of the region boomed while the Rust Belt decayed. Politically, the Sunbelt is often associated with strong patriotism, reinforced by the heavy presence of military bases; traditional social values, derived from evangelical Protestantism; and strong support for maintaining white supremacy.[3]

Historian Dan Carter, for example, traces the modern conservative movement to the 1964 and 1968 presidential campaigns of the former segregationist governor of Alabama, George Wallace. In his presidential bids, Wallace combined populist rhetoric against liberal elites and

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unpatriotic antiwar protestors with coded racial appeals to win significant support among the white working class, not only in the South, but also in states such as Ohio, Michigan, and California. Wallace embodied the politics of backlash; when liberal protestors heckled him with obscenities, he responded: "I have two four-letter words you don't know: 'W-O-R-K' and 'S-O-A-P.'"[4] Though Wallace failed to win the presidency, his rhetoric and tactics were imitated by Richard Nixon, whose famous "Southern strategy" ensured that previously solid Southern support for the Democratic Party shifted just as solidly to support for the Republican Party. Nixon claimed to speak for hard-working, patriotic Americans: a "silent majority" of the "forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators."[5]

New Right strategists and politicians sought to enlist country music in their struggle. In a syndicated 1971 news column, Kevin Phillips claimed country music for conservatism. "More and more people," he declared, "are evidently finding the 'straight' songs and lyrics of country music preferable to the tribal war dances, adolescent grunts, and marijuana hymns that have taken over so many pop stations." Phillips, a key architect of Nixon's Southern strategy, had coined the term "Sunbelt" in his influential 1969 book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, which identified the region as a likely source of Republican gains. He claimed that Republican politicians such as Nixon could learn from country music how to capture the votes of disaffected working-class whites. Phillips declared country to be the music of "the forgotten Americans," the hard-working citizens who "drive the trucks, plow the farms, man the fields, and police the streets." Ignoring country music's African American roots, Phillips celebrated it as the "folk music of English-Irish-Scottish rural and small-town America." Conservative politicians, he contended, could appeal to white country fans indignant that liberal elites ignored their problems and who were "tired of hearing upper-crust talk about equal justice for blacks."[6]

New Right politicians sought to capitalize on the growing popularity of country music during the 1960s. Wallace solicited country musicians' endorsements, and country bands warmed up audiences at his campaign rallies. As governor of California, Reagan devoted a week of the state's calendar to "country and western music." Hoping to endear himself to "Okie from Muskogee" fans, Reagan officially pardoned Haggard for a crime for which he had earlier served time.[7] Some of the country hits of the late 1960s expressed messages of conservative backlash. Following the success of "Okie," Haggard released "The Fightin' Side of Me" (1970), which attacked antiwar protestors as unpatriotic. Tammy Wynette's country and western tunes "Stand by Your Man" (1968) and "Don't Liberate Me (Love Me)" (1971) rejected feminist demands for gender equality. Guy Drake's "Welfare Cadillac" (1970) attacked liberal welfare programs, implying that they benefited poor African Americans at the expense of hard-working whites.

The growing popularity of country music did not always go hand-in-hand with the rise of the New Right. In fact, the most popular country albums of the late 1960s rejected the conservative politics of backlash. Johnny Cash's live recordings at two notorious California prisons, *At Folsom Prison* (1968) and *At San Quentin* (1969), both reached number one on the country music charts, the latter remaining there for twenty-two weeks. Both albums also had significant crossover appeal that reached the very countercul-

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ture audience decried by advocates of conservative country. With 6.5 million records sold in 1969, the albums made Cash the best-selling musical artist in the world, eclipsing even the Beatles.[8]

Cash's records rebuked the conservative politics of "law and order," a slogan used by Wallace, Reagan, and Nixon to call for crackdowns on criminals and protestors. In a 1966 campaign speech, Reagan declared:

> Let us have an end to the idea that society is responsible for each and every wrongdoer. We must return to a belief in every individual being responsible for his conduct and his misdeeds with punishment immediate and certain. With all our science and sophistication . . . the jungle still is waiting to take over. The man with the badge holds it back.[9]

As Cash rehearsed at a Sacramento hotel on the eve of his concert at the nearby Folsom Prison, he received a visit from Governor Reagan to wish him luck. However, Cash's lyrics clearly rejected Reagan's emphasis on tough punishment for lawbreakers. Cash's records cut against the politics of law and order by encouraging listeners to identify with men behind bars. His songs articulate what it would be like to be in prison, and the recorded reactions of inmates to Cash's performances literally gave them a voice on the albums.

A common misperception of Cash was that he had done hard time. In fact, he had spent only a few nights in jail. However, he had written songs about prisons from the beginning of his career. He wrote his famous "Folsom Prison Blues," released in 1956, years earlier while serving with the army in Germany; at that time, Cash had never stepped foot in Folsom, but he had recently seen a movie set in the prison. In 1957, just two years after Cash was signed by Sam Phillips at the now-legendary Sun Studios in Memphis, he began to perform at prisons. In fact, Haggard attended a Cash concert while a prisoner at San Quentin in the late 1950s. For years, Cash tried to convince his record label, Columbia, to produce a live prison album. Finally, Columbia agreed to record *At Folsom Prison*, a Cash performance held in Dining Room 2 at Folsom Prison on January 13, 1968. After Folsom climbed the charts, Cash and Columbia followed with the 1969 release of the even more popular *At San Quentin*.[10]

The records' crossover success owed partly to Cash's musical style, which appealed to audiences who did not normally listen to country. His deep, gravelly voice, his hard-bitten persona, and the spare, monotonous "boom-chicka-boom" sound of his band, the Tennessee Three, created a grittier feel than the smoothly produced country-pop sound of Nashville and the Grand Ole Opry. Indeed, Cash's style was more similar to that of rougher-edged California country musicians such as Haggard. Cash's Memphis rockabilly roots brought him closer to rock 'n' roll than most country performers. On the prison records, Cash was backed not only by the Tennessee Three, but also by legendary early rocker Carl Perkins, who had first performed the iconic hit "Blue Suede Shoes" (1956).

In addition, Cash embraced folk music, unlike most country musicians. On his prison records, Cash performed traditional songs, featured June Carter and the Carter Family, and emphasized ballads and songs of social protest. Cash also maintained a public friendship with Bob Dylan (who co-wrote "Wanted Man" on *At San Quentin*). By performing prison-themed songs before an audience of inmates, Cash placed himself in a longer tradition of American roots music. Prison songs had a long history in American folk music, reflecting fascination and often sympathy with men

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driven to crime by difficult economic circumstances and with outlaws who defied social convention. Prisons were also key sites of musical production in twentieth-century folk music. The pioneering folk musicologists Alan and John Lomax began recording prisoners at Southern penitentiaries in 1933. Most famously, they encountered Huddie Ledbetter at a Louisiana penitentiary and subsequently promoted his career as the folksinger "Lead Belly," sometimes forcing him to perform in prison clothes.[11] While Cash's prison records avoided the exploitative element of the Lomaxes' work, they traded on this folk music tradition of viewing prisons as sites of musical and sociological authenticity.

Folsom is essentially a prison concept album. Its set list mixes Cash's own compositions with traditional folk songs and combines songs with explicit prison themes with songs about the trials of labor and love, which take on new meaning in a prison context. Though the material for *San Quentin* more closely replicated Cash's normal touring show, it included a healthy dose of prison-themed songs such as "San Quentin," "Wanted Man," and "Starkeville County Jail." The excitement of both recordings lay less in the originality of the material than in the context of the live performance. Cash wanted *At Folsom Prison* to be "the kind of thing that has all the realism of a real prison – the clanging steel doors and other sounds inside the big walls."[12] The records did not exactly reproduce Cash's concerts; for example, producers altered the order of songs and drew material from separate performances held on the same date. Nevertheless, the albums demanded that listeners place themselves alongside the prisoners as an audience for Cash's music. The records' distinctive sound came not only from the live recording of Cash and his band, but also from Cash's banter with prisoners and – most of all – the enthusiastic responses of prisoners to songs intended to express their condition.

Cash's dynamic rapport with his audience featured prominently in one of the second album's few new songs, "San Quentin." Cash introduced the song as his effort to articulate the experience of prisoners: "I was thinking about you guys yesterday. Now I've been here three times before and I think I understand a little bit about how you feel about some things. . . . I tried to put myself in your place and I believe that this is the way I would feel about San Quentin." The inmates' responses backed Cash's claim to speak for California prisoners. When Cash sang the first line of the song, "San Quentin, you've been living hell to me," the audience clapped, yelled, and whistled. The subsequent lines, "San Quentin, I hate every inch of you," and "San Quentin, may you rot and burn in hell," received even louder reactions. Songwriters often take the perspectives of others, but rarely are their imaginations so powerfully confirmed by the people their songs are about. Men behind California prison walls were a powerful collective presence on Cash's records, reminding listeners that they were not just the conceit of a singer, but a very real part of American society.

By articulating the perspectives of prisoners, Cash recognized them as "forgotten Americans" who differed from the silent majority valorized by New Right politicians. Cash's exclusive focus on *men* in prison dovetailed with the New Right discourse of the "forgotten American," almost always imagined as a male, blue-collar worker. However, by combining his rebellious individuality and hard-bitten persona with empathy and sensitivity, Cash's version of masculinity differed from conservative advocates of "hard

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hat" politics. In contrast with law and order rhetoric that demonized prisoners, Cash's records stressed the humanity of inmates and encouraged his listeners to empathize with them. Cash's liner notes for the Folsom record referred to "the convicts – all brothers of mine." Like New Right politicians, Cash used the language of populism, speaking in the name of the common man. Yet rather than attacking out-of-touch liberal elites, Cash targeted prison officials, the wealthy ("rich folks eating from a fancy dining car" torment the narrator of "Folsom Prison Blues"), and government officials who ignored prisoner welfare.

Cash tapped into a left-oriented Southern politics, with roots in late-nineteenth-century populism as well as in the New Deal, that reflected his own biography. At the end of the San Quentin concert, the concert announcer introduced the audience to Cash's father, Ray Cash, described as a "badland farmer from Dyess, Arkansas." Dyess was a New Deal resettlement community where the Cash family had relocated during the agricultural depression of the 1930s. Johnny Cash was always grateful for the assistance his family received, and he felt that the government should help those similarly in need.

The prison albums' messages of shared humanity and personal redemption sprang in part from Cash's evangelical Protestantism, a religious orientation more often associated with conservative politics. Cash insisted that prisoners deserved compassion even if they had made poor choices; he felt prisons should be places of rehabilitation rather than punishment. *At Folsom Prison* concludes with a gospel rendition of "Greystone Chapel," written by inmate Glenn Sherley, that asserts the equal right of all men to God's mercy: "the doors to the house of God are never locked." Cash's redemptive message jibed with his own widely publicized (if embellished) personal story, which included drug abuse and exaggerated accounts of his prison record and which ended in rescue by the love of a good Christian woman, June Carter Cash.

When Cash pled for compassion and redemption for prisoners, he sharply criticized the New Right emphasis on imprisonment as a solution to social problems. The song "San Quentin" drove this point home, posing the question, "San Quentin, what good do you think you do?" and declaring, "Mr. Congressman, you can't understand." Cash's advocacy of prison reform did not stop with his songs. He outspokenly supported efforts to clear up abuses, to improve the conditions of prisoners, and to reevaluate whether long-term confinement was the best method for rehabilitating prisoners. In 1972, Cash testified on these issues before the U.S. Congress, appearing before a Senate subcommittee with Glen Sherley, the Folsom prisoner who had written "Greystone Chapel," and whose parole Cash had helped secure. Here, Cash connected himself to a broader prison reform movement that urged that prisons be sites of rehabilitation rather than retribution.

Cash's prison albums also rejected New Right politics by reaching out to one of the targets of law and order rhetoric: the counterculture. Columbia Records actively promoted *At Folsom Prison* and *At San Quentin* in the underground press, where it received positive reviews from *Voice* and *Rolling Stone*. Both records appealed to a late-1960s rock audience that prized authenticity in its music, having rejected much of American mass culture as artificial. More important, Cash's prison albums captured a broader masculine rebelliousness in American society, a rejection of authority evident among men who burned their draft cards or grew their hair long. Joking with his audi-

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ence in Folsom, Cash remarked about the prison guards, "Mean bastards, ain't they?" During his San Quentin concert, Cash was infamously photographed flashing his middle finger. The active cheers of the prison audience to Cash's anti-authoritarian banter and lyrics added to the albums' appeal, as its producers well understood. On the Folsom album, after the famous line "I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die," producers spliced in a prisoner yelping with delight.[13]

Advocates of conservative country portrayed it as a genre that appealed to whites only, but Cash's prison audiences were racially mixed. In his prison records and his public statements, Cash avoided explicit engagement with the racial politics that defined the 1960s. A writer for *The New York Times* charged, "Cash will not talk much of the contemporary poor, of civil rights and civil wrongs, of black people and *Chicanos*. Perhaps many of the down South country folk who buy his platters would rather not hear about those subjects."[14] The writer's condescending depiction of country music fans and his assumption that only people of color made up the "contemporary poor" would have delighted populist conservatives on the lookout for liberal elitism. But the writer had a point in that Cash had never directly confronted racism against African Americans.

Nevertheless, Cash implicitly rejected the racial politics of white backlash, especially in his prison albums. His rock and roots influences more openly displayed their debt to African American musical traditions than did most country music. At Folsom and San Quentin, Cash performed before prisoners of all races. One scholar estimates that when Cash played San Quentin in 1969, 30 percent of prisoners were African American and 18 percent were Hispanic.[15] Photographs of the audience included with the LPs advertised this fact by showing faces of many colors.

Moreover, the prisons where Cash performed lay at the center of the late-1960s confrontation between law and order politics and the black power movement. San Quentin, located in Marin County, near the Black Panther Party headquarters in Oakland, was a particularly symbolic choice. A near race riot occurred at San Quentin in 1967, prevented only when guards fired upon the prisoners. That same year, the Black Panthers demanded "freedom for all black people in jail" in their ten-point program, claiming that all black inmates were political prisoners. Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver had been imprisoned at both Folsom and San Quentin, an experience he discussed in his best-selling 1967 memoir, *Soul on Ice*. In 1968, Panther Party founder Huey Newton was imprisoned in San Quentin, charged with voluntary manslaughter for killing a police officer.[16]

It was to Cash's credit that he eschewed the radical California prison reform movement's outlandish demand for the release of *all* prisoners and its delusion that prisoners were urban revolutionary guerrillas. However, unlike the Black Panthers, Cash failed to explicitly connect inhumane prison conditions to institutionalized racism. Nevertheless, if Cash's populism emphasized class injustices at the expense of racial ones, it clearly rejected the racial backlash politics of the New Right. The conservative call for law and order was always in part a racially coded call for cracking down on African American radicalism and criminality. Cash's emphasis on prisoners' humanity extended to black and Chicano prisoners, as well as to white ones. The popularity of Cash's prison records served as an inspiration for black blues artist B. B. King, who recorded a concert at a majority-

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black Chicago penitentiary in 1970 (released in 1971 as *Live in Cook County Jail*) and became involved in prison reform activism, helping create the Foundation for the Advancement of Inmate Rehabilitation and Recreation.[17] At least one member of Cash's prison audience even interpreted him as sympathetic to black radicalism. When Cash began playing "San Quentin" in the prison of the same name, an African American convict raised a clenched fist, the black power salute.[18]

The political significance of Cash's prison records has often been missed because Cash himself never hewed to a consistent ideology. Though Cash clearly rejected efforts to tie country music to conservative politics, he also disappointed liberals, particularly for his refusal to consistently criticize the Vietnam War. For example, when Cash performed at the Nixon White House in 1970, he encouraged patriotic Americans to rally behind the war effort, only to then confound Nixon officials by performing "What is Truth?" – a song that sympathized with antiwar youths. In recent years, scholars have tried to comprehend the nuances and contradictions of Cash's political statements during the late 1960s. However, as historian Michael Foley has argued, Cash's political significance lay not in any particular ideological stance he adopted, but rather in his broader "politics of empathy" that allowed him to bond with and articulate the feelings of working-class Americans.[19]

This was dramatically true of *At Folsom Prison* and *At San Quentin*, when in empathizing with a multiracial group of forgotten Americans, Cash rebuked the New Right politics of conservative populism. Cash not only rejected the politics of law and order and its racial connotations, but also made common cause with countercultural rebels. His classic records remind us not to generalize about the politics of a musical genre and the social group and region it represents. Country music was never the monolithically conservative music that Republican leaders claimed it was. When Cash performed at the White House, he refused the request of a Nixon official that he play "Welfare Cadillac" and "Okie from Muskogee."[20]

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ENDNOTES

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2 Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 267.

3 For a recent collection of essays that stresses the political and cultural diversity of the region, see Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, eds., *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

4 As quoted in Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 240.

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6 Kevin P. Phillips, "Revolutionary Music," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1971; and Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969).

7 La Chapelle, *Proud to be an Okie*, 143.

8 Leigh H. Edwards, *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 20.

[9] As quoted in Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003), 216. Reagan's prison policies as governor, however, were considerably more moderate than his rhetoric.

[10] The definitive account of the Folsom concert is Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece* (Cambridge, Mass.: De Capo, 2004). See also John Hayes, "Man of Sorrows in Folsom," *Radical History Review* 98 (2007): 119 – 135.

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[12] As quoted in George Carpozi, *Johnny Cash Story* (New York: Pyramid, 1970), 93.

[13] Interestingly, the record company cut the line from the radio version of "Folsom Prison Blues" in the wake of Robert Kennedy's assassination, fearing that its violent overtones would alienate audiences. See Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*, 89, 136 – 138.

[14] Tom Dearmore, "First Angry Man of Country Music," *The New York Times*, September 21, 1969.

[15] Jonathan Silverman, *Nine Choices: Johnny Cash and American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 96.

[16] See Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994). Newton's conviction was later overturned.

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