



NASHVILLE SKYLINE: The Link Between Johnny Cash and Today's Country Marty Stuart's *Ghost Train* Unites Country Past and Present

NASHVILLE SKYLINE is a column by CMT/CMT.com Editorial Director Chet Flippo

The distance between the gritty reality of Johnny Cash and Hank Williams' sin songs and the shiny school girl diary entry songs from Taylor Swift seems a vast gulf. It's not, really, when you contemplate the basic subjects of country songs. They are: lust, romance, love, me, you, us, sex, marriage, birth, death, children, sin, drinking, raising hell, redemption, church, friends, trucks, animals, guns. It's all about life experience. Both extremes of the above-mentioned country spectrum touch on many of those hot-button country triggers.

What brings this to mind is Marty Stuart's new, aptly-titled *Ghost Train* album, which is an energized return to a country music that is slipping away. A friend whose opinions I respect said the other day in conversation that, for many people, if this album were the first time that they listened to Marty Stuart, they would be stunned by hearing it.

Why? The musicianship is staggeringly good, the songs are first-rate, the performances are off the needle – what's not to like? Well, it's not tailored for country radio, that's what.

This is the kind of album that no longer gets recorded in Nashville, and that's a damn shame. Marty has had the glitter and the credibility to bridge the gap between trad country and Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood country, but he has somehow eluded crucial radio play in recent years. Perhaps he committed the ultimate sin of getting older.

Marty Stuart has had one of the most fascinating careers in the history of country music. He grew up in Philadelphia, Miss., absorbing Southern music of all colors.

I've got an old LP with the cover picture showing him as a kid mandolin picker in bluegrass pioneer Lester Flatt's band. As a teenager in her audience, he admired country music legend Connie Smith from afar. He went on to marry her, and they are still wed. He played as a member of Johnny Cash's band. He later married Cash's daughter, Cindy. Over the years, he has worked in bluegrass, rock and country but has remained rooted in country music's basic tenets.

He has also put together the largest private collection of country music memorabilia in the world, an archive of wonders that would thrill you. From Johnny Cash's boots and Patsy Cline's road case down to the minutiae of Hank Williams' fishing lures, he has sought it out, found it and brought it back to Nashville. As an authoritative master of country, he has recorded a number of influential country records.

On *Ghost Train*, he unveils a song that turned out to be Johnny Cash's last bit of songwriting. That is the song, "Hangman." More about that in a moment.

The impetus for the album, he said, came from a childhood memory of the sound of trains and a recent visit to the old train depot in his hometown.

"Philadelphia, Miss.," he said. "When I was growing up, the train track ran behind our house. It sounded like it was coming through my bedroom. There's just something about trains. I have never lived in a house where I couldn't hear a train."

The album also features performances by Ralph Mooney, well-known as the steel guitar player for country music legends Wynn Stewart and Waylon Jennings. It also features an instrumental version of Mooney's big hit song "Crazy Arms" (which he co-wrote with Charles P. Seals). The album also includes "Little Heartbreaker (The Likes of You)," which he and Mooney co-wrote.

Said Stuart, "He's my favorite country musician of all time. I went down [to Texas] and just spent the day. We went out to the garage. I was singing through, like, a Peavey amp for the reverb. I took some songs to feel him out and see if he was up for it, for playing ... and to me, he really helped define this record."

Stuart said he decided to turn "Crazy Arms" into an instrumental for one specific reason.

"'Crazy Arms' is one of those songs that can get crushed beneath its own weight," Stuart said. "It's kind of like 'Orange Blossom Special' or 'Rocky Top' or 'Crazy.' But when you go back to the original interpretation, you hear it in a new way. When I heard it played instrumentally in that garage, I felt, ooh, that is a completely different take. He didn't want to play it! And I said, 'Come on, play it! Play it the way you wrote it. If we don't like it, we don't have to use it.' But it turned out to be like a postcard from the Old Testament."

The showpiece of the album is the song Stuart wrote with Johnny Cash shortly before Cash's death. "Hangman" came about because of Stuart's love for Cash's album *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*.

"That's the most important record that I've ever owned," Stuart told me. "Nashville wouldn't have him back then, so he found another theater – a jailhouse. When I played Folsom, Calif., the city, the head security guard at my concert also worked at Folsom. So I asked him if there was any way to get in there. He made a call or two, and the governor gave me a pass to Folsom Prison."

So, the next morning, Stuart got a prison tour. He saw the cafeteria where the Cash album was recorded. And he made a discovery there when the guard showed him the adjacent gallows where death row inmates were hanged. It is now the prison band room. It made an impact on Stuart.

"All the way back to Nashville, I was thinking about what a rotten job being a hangman, an executioner, must be," Stuart said. "He must have been a tortured soul. So I walked next door to John's house a day or two after I got home. I said, 'Hey I went to Folsom.' And he talked about making the record there. I had started this song called 'Hangman.' I said, 'I killed another man today/It's hard to believe/I lost count at three/I've grown too numb to grieve.'"

Stuart recited to Cash the other lyrics he had written but said he hadn't been able to finish it.

"Then John spoke up," Stuart said, "and said, 'Who killed who, I ask myself time and time again/God have mercy on the soul of this hangman.' He wrote another verse, and four days later, he was gone."

That was the last time Stuart saw Johnny Cash alive.

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