

ROSANNE CASH

When I was 18, I was on the road with my dad. One day, we were sitting in the tour bus, talking about songs, and he mentioned a song, and I said, "I don't know that one." He mentioned another one, and I said, "I don't know that one, either." Then he started to get alarmed, so he spent the rest of the day making a list on a legal pad, and at the top he put "100 Essential Country Songs." And he handed it to me and he said, "This is your education."

The genesis of Rosanne Cash's remarkable new album, ***The List***, dates back to that day in 1973—to a time before her eleven previous albums, her 1985 Grammy and numerous additional nominations, her twenty-one Top 40 country singles. She had just graduated high school and was starting to write songs of her own when her father, the incomparable Johnny Cash, discovered some gaps in her knowledge of American roots music.

"I think he was alarmed that I might miss something essential about who he was and who I was," says Cash. "He had a deeply intuitive understanding and overview of every critical juncture in Southern music—Appalachian songs, early folk songs, Delta blues, Southern gospel, right up to modern country music."

Three dozen years later, Cash has selected twelve songs from the syllabus presented to her by her father and recorded her first album of covers. Still, she remains a songwriter to her core, so she approached each composition—from Jimmie Rodgers' "Miss the Mississippi and You" to Bob Dylan's "Girl from the North Country"—in search of its particular essence.

The result is a glorious range of sounds and moods, as rich and complex as such Cash masterworks as *Seven Year Ache*, *Interiors*, and *Rules of Travel*. A handful of truly special guests join her for some of the recordings: Bruce Springsteen ("Sea of Heartbreak"), Elvis Costello ("Heartaches by the Number"), Wilco's Jeff Tweedy ("Long Black Veil"), and Rufus Wainwright (Merle Haggard's "Silver Wings").

The idea for *The List* came about while Cash was on tour promoting her 2006 studio album, the widely acclaimed, Grammy-nominated *Black Cadillac*—a reflective song cycle about the loss of her father; her mother, Vivian Liberto; and her stepmother, June Carter Cash. She had held on to the original copy of the List for all those years, but had never thought to do anything with it.

"It just didn't interest me," she says. "I learned all the songs, but then I set on my own course as a songwriter, and set about separating myself from my parents, as you do when you're young. When I was writing the narratives for the *Black Cadillac* show, I had recently found the List again, so I wrote about it. And virtually every show, people started asking me. 'Where's the List? What about that List?'"

Still, she resisted the idea of recording the classic songs herself. Eventually, though, Cash decided that she needed a change after *Black Cadillac*, a break from that project's emotional intensity. On tour in Europe, she tentatively added a few songs from the List into her set.

The response was immediate. "People were eating it up, like they were hungry for these songs," she says. "And the import started to sink in—that this was about me and my dad, but it was also about a cultural legacy. These songs are as important as the Civil War to who we are as Americans. Something clicked and I entered it full-bodied then, with all my heart."

To complicate matters further, however, in 2007 Cash underwent surgery for a benign brain condition. After a full recovery, she and her husband, Grammy-nominated producer John Leventhal, got down to the business of culling through the songs on the List and choosing the ones that best fit her voice and her sensibility, and that added up to the most complete story. Songs were attempted and scrapped; others were in, then out, then back in again.

Some of the selections were straightforward. ("I've loved 'Silver Wings' and 'Long Black Veil' since I was a kid," she says.) Others proved more difficult for the singer to find her own point of entry. Patsy Cline's recording of "She's Got You" is so iconic that Cash was intimidated to take it on, before ultimately creating her own glorious take. "Heartaches by the Number" felt structured and fixed, but bringing in Elvis Costello helped her find a way to loosen it up.

"Girl from the North Country" had its own meanings, and its own challenges, for Cash. "That song was so much about my dad," she says. "I have those images of him singing it with Bob seared into my mind, and I was afraid of it. I had to go back to Bob's original version, which I actually don't know as well, and then approach it as a folk song."

All of the thought, research, and experimentation that went into each performance is immediately evident on *The List*. The revelation of this album is hearing Rosanne Cash, for the first time, purely as an interpreter. "I've never done a record just as a singer before, so that was a bit jarring to me," she says. "But John kept pounding home that that's what this record is really about. So then I kind of got into it, and it was liberating—like 'OK, these aren't my songs, I can just have fun and play with them.'"

Leventhal crafted a sound for *The List* that is surprising without being self-conscious, familiar but not obvious. "This was the record John has been waiting his whole life to make," says Cash. "He has such extensive knowledge about roots music, and a deep, deep love of Southern music. So writing these arrangements was a dream job for him."

All of the couple's knowledge and talent was required for the timeless blues "Motherless Children." They listened to dozens of versions, recorded by everyone from Eric Clapton to obscure bluegrass musicians. "We started putting lyrics together from different versions until it was a bit more linear," she says. "We had to make a definitive version of that song, and I think we did."

The closing song on *The List*, the Carter Family's "Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow," may be the most personal choice of all for Rosanne Cash. "Helen Carter was incredibly important to my growth as a songwriter," she says. "In fact, she and Maybelle taught me to play the guitar. So that song had a lot of emotional resonance for me because of them—and June, too. I learned so much from them and I had a real love for all of them, so that song is really kind of a tribute to them."

With this ambitious project behind her, Cash says that, while she has started writing songs of her own again, she hopes to do a second volume of songs from her father's List at some point, and then make sure that the full 100 songs are archived properly. She also points out, though, that while she hadn't fully explored this priceless gift from a father to a daughter, the songs on the List had always been important to her own work. Rather than a break from her own career, she looks at *The List* as something she needed to grow into over time.

"It's not like I didn't know these songs before," she says, "so their standard of excellence has been in the back of my mind all along. That standard is something I'm always trying to reach."

For more information please contact JR Rich at EMI Music
Phone: 212.786.8628 E-mail: jr.rich@emimusic.com

