

**JOHNNY CASH FOR PRESIDENT: 2008
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INVITE RESPONSES TO "JOHNNY CASH"

It's Sunday morning - most any Sunday morning roughly between 1964 and 1969. I awaken to the smells of bacon, eggs, unfiltered Camels and the songs of Johnny Cash: "Hey, Porter", "Rock Island Line", "Folsom Prison Blues" and "I Walk the Line."

My father, in his perennial white T-shirt and work pants, gently wakes me to join him for an early breakfast. This is "guy time" at home with my dad, while my mother grabs the last few winks of sleep before rising for church. And, as is our usual, Johnny Cash provides the soundtrack for this sacred hour of male bonding.

Over the course of those five years' worth of guy time, my musical tastes would migrate far beyond the confines of my father's country collection, but one artist would consistently bridge the proverbial gap between Hank and Hendrix: Johnny Cash. Too rockabilly for most country purists, too country for most rock aficionados, the self-styled "Man in Black" could reach us both - the hard-living World War II gunner with a tough job and a drinking problem, and the gangly, adopted boy who despite all efforts to the contrary, was drawn to life's shadows. For my old man, Johnny Cash's music was authentic, true, credible. For me, Johnny Cash's music was a rebellious misfit's unapologetic look at life's hard side - a side one need not deny or fear - a side where such things as character and compassion are forged.

We'll come back to Johnny Cash, but I'd like to add a second topic to this discussion, one that, at first pass, may seem utterly unconnected to the Man in Black.

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INVITE RESPONSES TO "PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES"

In the wake of an all-around nasty presidential campaign, many on both the left and right feel a certain disillusionment about the state of politics in what my father referred to as "these United States". I feel it, too. It's not that I *enjoy* pessimism, for I *want* to feel hopeful. I *want* to feel the certainty of conviction that seems to be the very ethos of patriotism as defined by our political leaders - left, right and center. Truth be told, I want to feel part of a great moment in time, in a great nation. *I want to feel hopeful.*

But I don't feel hopeful right now.

As I look ahead to 2008 and yet another presidential election, I plan to keep an open mind about all parties and candidates. I'll visit lots of websites. I'll read the mainstream and alternative papers and weeklies carefully, straining to catch a glimpse of the presidential candidate who will stir in me the hope I want to feel.

But if this last pair of candidates is any indication of those to come, I can't help but be a tad skeptical about my chances of finding that stirrer of hope.

So, if my Orwellian cynicism continues through Election Day 2008, I've decided to go the write-in route. Undaunted by the prospect that my ballot will likely be the lone one cast for him, if I can identify no candidate whose vision for America is akin to my own... I'm voting for the ultimate write-in candidate: Mister Johnny Cash.

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Now, some of you practical, left-brained, Myers-Briggs Thinking types might suggest that Johnny Cash is not an appropriate choice for president, given that, a. he's shown no interest in the office, and b. he's dead! But if Arnold Schwarzenegger can be handed the purse strings to the sixth largest economy in the world, I ask you, how big a stretch is it to imagine that Johnny Cash - alive or dead - might become our next president?

Setting aside the admittedly problematic issue of his demise, you may be wondering why anyone would posit Johnny Cash as presidential material. Folks, this is where we get serious, for that weary old man knew that the purpose of an honorable life is to grow a soul. Moreover, he knew that the purpose of an honorable society is to make justice, so that its people might grow souls. That quality alone may not qualify Johnny Cash for a run at the White House, but in my book that's a respectable start.

I'm even thinking about trying to sell the good people of Nora Church on becoming the headquarters for the Johnny Cash: 2008 campaign. A Unitarian Universalist church for Johnny Cash? That's a tough sell. Whether it's as sinister as class bias or as innocuous as musical preference, if we gravitate toward musical icons at all, they tend to be either long-dead classical composers or someone *respectable* - someone in the vein of, say, Manheim Steamroller, the Chieftains or Yo Yo Ma. Either we haven't had much exposure to Johnny Cash or, like the country purists who deemed him too rock and the rock aficionados who thought him too country, we're not quite sure what to do with him.

Today what we do with him is listen to him.

If time permitted, we'd consider some of the many subplots of Cash's life, but let me mention just enough to provide you with enough context to appreciate the three pieces we're going to hear.

Johnny Cash was born to two evangelical Arkansas sharecroppers, at the height of the Dust Bowl. He picked cotton, heard Woody Guthrie's songs sung by migrant farm workers, worked in an auto plant and served in the Air Force. He was married twice and fathered five children. He was jailed seven times, most of them related to a nine-year addiction to narcotics and alcohol. (Contrary to popular belief he was never incarcerated in a state or federal prison, but was well acquainted with more than a few local hoosegows.)

He wrote over 400 songs, 100 them making it into the County Top Forty, Rock Top Forty or both. He's the only person to be inducted into the Rock, Country and Songwriters Halls of Fame. He collaborated with Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, Bob Dylan, Shel Silverstein and U2. He made a film about the life of Jesus, hosted his own music show, wrote a book and appeared in four movies. Just before his death, the video of his cover of the Nine Inch Nails' song, "Hurt", was nominated for nine MTV Music Awards.

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Influenced by his second wife, June Carter Cash (an outstanding musician and

human being in her own right) he became an evangelical Christian who, as far as anyone knows, never sought to convert an audience. Cash personally corresponded with hundreds of prison inmates. He helped fund mental health programs, autism research, programs for battered spouses, cancer research, Native American causes, the YWCA, animal protection programs and research for burn victims.

He suffered from Parkinson's Disease and severe diabetes. June Carter Cash died in May of 2003; Johnny Cash died that next September.

Cash said that he never wrote or borrowed a song that he didn't believe in. He borrowed the first song we'll hear today, "Oney". If its storyline of revenge offends our middle class, liberal sensibilities, listen more deeply. Listen for the story of the workers who were and are the very backbone of our economic system. Think of the "big box" American stores who refuse to allow workers to organize for better wages and conditions. Consider the racism, homophobia and sexual harassment that still haunt the American workplace. Asian sweatshops. Jobs lost to NAFTA. Souls encumbered by an injustice far more damaging than any fist.

PLAY TRACK ONE: "ONEY"

Cash alienated a portion of his country audience when he protested against the war in Vietnam and supported the civil rights movement. The next song, "What is Truth?" is his blunt condemnation of his own generation's treatment of its children. His hook

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line suggests that behind the turmoil and protest lies a question - for Cash, perhaps it's *the* question: What is truth?

PLAY TRACK TWO: "WHAT IS TRUTH?"

Cash felt a kinship and burden for prisoners that led him to perform dozens of concerts for them. Not long after quitting his drug use, he recorded his first live album, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*. When asked why he chose prison as the context for that recording, Cash said: "Prisoners are the greatest audience that an entertainer can perform for. We bring them a ray of sunshine in their dungeon and they're not ashamed to respond and show their appreciation...The culture of a thousand years is shattered with the clanging of a cell door behind you...You sit on your cold, steel mattressless bunk and watch a cock roach crawl out from under the filthy commode and you don't kill it. You envy the roach as you watch it crawl out under the cell door...[and] Your big accomplishment for the day is a mathematical deduction. You are positive of this, and only this: There are nine vertical and sixteen horizontal bars on your door."

He used prison as a metaphor for life's shadow side. Imprisonment by poverty. Imprisonment by depression. By addiction or greed or prejudice or loneliness.

Cash extended the metaphor to his clothing, choosing to wear only black for his public appearances. He wore black as an expression of grief and solidarity. Grief for those still in prisons of all manner and manifestation. Solidarity, to show that life's

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shadow side need not be denied or feared. The final track is his explanation for his black attire: "The Man in Black".

PLAY TRACK THREE: "THE MAN IN BLACK"

History tells us that entire nations can rise or fall in direct proportion to the character their leaders. I believe that good nations - *morally* good nations - have "down front" a woman or man in black. Someone who knows what it is to suffer and muddle through and persevere. Someone with the humility that comes only of grievous mistakes and the indomitable will to grow a soul. Someone who is steadfastly hopeful, yet recognizes that souls are made on the shadow side of life. Someone whose past is not so clean and whose scars, although healed, are never out of sight.

In an interview not long before his death, Cash was asked about his many songs about the hard life: "You can't let people delegate to you what you should do when it's coming from way in here," he said, tapping his heart. "I wouldn't let anybody influence me into thinking I was doing the wrong thing by singing about death, hell and drugs...I've always done that, and I always will."

God's rest, Johnny Cash.

Oh, and come January 2008 be sure to wear that black preacher's frock of yours when they swear you in. You know those Washington winters can be right wicked.