

## Rosanne Cash: *Black Cadillac*

“I couldn’t avoid them,” says **Rosanne Cash** about the twelve songs that constitute *Black Cadillac*, a breakthrough album that raises both the stakes and the standards for one of this country’s finest singer-songwriters. “I couldn’t let any of them simply return to the ether. Some of them literally wouldn’t let me sleep.”

For more than twenty-five years now, on such albums as *Seven Year Ache* (1981), *Interiors* (1990), *10 Song Demo* (1996) and *Rules of Travel* (2003), **Cash** has made personal honesty a compelling signature of her songwriting. She has never been willing to turn away from difficult emotions or complex situations. Indeed, a writer first, she has found her truest voice in articulating the most heartbreaking emotional realities: betrayal, self-betrayal, loss, misunderstanding and isolation. But she also believes firmly in the limitless possibilities of personal redemption.

The circumstances that gave rise to *Black Cadillac* would test the resolve and talents even of a songwriter as fearless as **Cash**. Within a two-year period, **Cash’s** mother, father and step-mother all died. Her mother, Vivian Liberto, the first wife of Johnny Cash, was an intensely private person, and her relationship with Rosanne, her oldest daughter, was extremely close. Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash, of course, were as much forces in the world as they were loving presences in **Rosanne’s** life. Grappling with the impact of their dying – without resorting to the empty consolations of sentimentality or sanctimony – was not so much a challenge as a necessity. And on *Black Cadillac*, **Rosanne Cash** has delivered songs worthy of their profound subject.

The album found its genesis in its title track, which, according to **Cash**, “was like a beacon, leading the whole process.” Written six weeks before June Carter’s death, a point at which no one suspected that she was even ill, the song seemed “foreboding” to **Cash**. “I’ve always found that songs can be postcards from your future,” she says, and that one evoked the darkness to come. But the elemental quality of the song’s imagery – and the hauntingly suggestive quality it would take on in the studio – created a kind of poetic environment in which the other songs could take shape. “I felt that I had to fit everything else around that song,” she recalls. “That was the theme.”

That theme, simply put, is the search for whatever it is that survives death. Is it the soul? The spirit? Is it love? Memory? Is it some or all of those things? Is it possible that death simply is the end?

In addressing the various stages of grief – the anger of “**Like Fugitives**,” the desperate abandonment of “**World Without Sound**,” the deep, loving acceptance of “**God Is in the Roses**” – *Black Cadillac* asks universal questions and tells a universal story. We are all “westward leading, still proceeding” – a line **Cash** gracefully borrows from the Christmas carol “**We Three Kings**” for use in “**The World Unseen**” – and coming to terms with our mortality is important for all of us, not just the daughter of Johnny Cash. This album is not important simply because of its creator’s storied lineage. “It’s about the attempt to connect the dots,” **Cash** says. “It’s about how relationships go on even after a person dies. How when someone important to you has departed, you have to re-identify yourself. That’s what this album’s about. All of that.”

To create a sound appropriate to her powerful subject, **Cash** worked with two producers: her husband and longtime co-producer and co-writer, John Leventhal (Shawn Colvin, David Crosby), and Bill Bottrell, who has worked with Sheryl Crow, Shelby Lynne and Linda Perry. Each man delivered separate gifts that helped shape a unified whole. “Our work on this was a little bit looser and more spontaneous than it has been in the past,” Leventhal says of his collaboration with **Cash** this time around. “I think ‘**House on the Lake**’ and ‘**The Good Intent**’ are two of the best songs we’ve written together. Musically, there are powerful echoes of roots country and Appalachian blues on this album, which is an important part of Rosanne’s family heritage.”

Of course, the other part of her heritage is the sophisticated, mainstream pop that she heard growing up from bands like the Beatles and the Eagles, and Bottrell brought that quality to the mix. But just as the roots elements that Leventhal describes are more atmospheric than literal on *Black Cadillac*, Bottrell strips down the catchy hooks and big choruses that can so easily become pop-song clichés. “This is music for smart people,” he says with a laugh. “There’s not a lot of ear candy, because it all comes from the lyrics and the vocals.”

The meanings of *Black Cadillac* are evolving for **Cash**, and that’s as it should be. “I’m still getting perspective on it,” she says. “I feel a little exhausted, and I still feel so many of the emotions that are in those songs. Some of them will never go away.” The richness of the album will continue to open for listeners, too, long after they first encounter it. It’s rare that an album both makes itself thoroughly available on a first listen, and then reveals itself further each subsequent time. *Black Cadillac* does that because, like all great works of art, it is deepened, not diminished, by whatever growing life experience you bring to it. The more you know – of loss and life’s recompense, of sadness and hope – the more brightly its virtues shine. – Anthony DeCurtis

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