

Rosanne Cash: Rules of Travel

It almost didn't get made.

"I lost my voice," says **Rosanne Cash**. "Completely, for two and a half years. Some days I couldn't speak."

She'd begun work on the album with her husband, the producer/songwriter/guitarist John Leventhal, in the summer of 1998, and almost immediately learned she was pregnant. A polyp shut down her vocal chords, making singing impossible. The songs had been written, and they were good ones: **Rules of Travel** was already looking to be a landmark in **Rosanne's** career. In addition—1996's **10 Song Demo** aside—it would be her first major album since **The Wheel**, in 1993. But suddenly everything stopped. There was nothing she could do—except continue, as she says, with "this little cottage industry I'd developed" as a writer: a short story collection, a children's book, magazine work. And, of course, take care of her new baby, Jake, whose arrival—frustratingly—did not restore his mother's singing voice.

"We shelved the project," **Rosanne** says. "I wasn't too worried in the beginning, but after I gave birth and still didn't have my voice back, I started getting anxious. It turned into an identity crisis. I started thinking about who I was without my voice. Interestingly, I never wanted to be a singer. From the time I was nine years old, all I wanted to be was a writer. Well, one thing leads to another, you end up doing your own songs. Not to say it was an unconscious choice, but I've always been ambivalent about being a performer." When she lost her voice, she says, she had to re-evaluate all of that. "And I realized it had become a central part of my identity, and that I *liked* it, and now who was I without it?"

During this period she didn't even touch a guitar ("too depressing") and wondered whether she'd made her last record. Happily, that proved to be far from the truth: the new record would not only be completed, it would be astonishing.

Rosanne noticed the first encouraging signs that her voice was returning in autumn of 2000. "I was relieved, but I also thought that maybe it had been damaged and it would be like it was," she says. She saw a voice therapist, who told her, "Your voice is seriously out of shape. You can get it back." The breakthrough came when he gave her an Italian aria to sing. "We had worked on it before and I was struggling with it, and he said, 'Go ahead and be falsely operatic! Fake it! Make a lot of mistakes!'" she says, laughing. "And it worked. And I was so *happy*. It was a thrilling moment."

Work resumed on **Rules of Travel**. "I had to reacquaint myself with all these songs," **Rosanne** says. "Although I was happy to have my voice back, John initially had more of a drive to finish it than I did. But about midway through, I started to get really passionate about it."

Now it's the listeners' turn to get passionate. **Rosanne** has never sounded as deeply compelling as she does on these eleven tracks. And after all the travails, that remarkable voice sound better than ever, perhaps in part because it has been so missed. The songs themselves resonate with themes encompassing her entire career, but **Rules of Travel** has a timeless yet decidedly contemporary feel. The elegantly crisp and spare production is by John Leventhal, and there are a few notable guest vocalists: Sheryl Crow, Steve Earle, Teddy Thompson...and, on the stunning "**September When it Comes**," Johnny Cash.

Surprisingly, **Rosanne** and her father had scarcely ever sung together. She'd navigated through country music early in her career—11 #1 singles—and she's still happy to be part of that world and recognized for it, but she'd always gone her own way. Still, timing is everything.

"He was in bad health, he got very ill for a while," she remembers about the period when she'd resumed work on the album. "I was facing my dad's mortality for the first time. It's deeply unsettling when you come to that point in your life when your parents suddenly become frail and ill. Of course, I was very affected by it. So I called him—I was going down to Nashville anyway—and I said, 'Dad, I'm gonna bring the tape, and if you're feeling well enough when I'm down there...' He said, 'I can't promise, but if I feel well enough I will.' And I could tell that morning he really *didn't* feel well, but he said he would do it. So we went over to the little studio he has in the woods."

As her father learned the song, **Rosanne** says, his energy started to perk up. "He was getting into doing it," she says, smiling "And then he was calling for more takes: 'No, let me try that part again!' When we finished, I said, 'Dad, it's beautiful, you sound great.'"

His response?

"He said, 'No, now you take that back to New York and play it for John, and if it's not good enough, then I will fly to New York and I'll red-do it for you.'"

There was no need, as anyone who's heard the track can attest.

"It was a very moving experience," **Rosanne** says now. "I was actually crying in the studio." Her dad, of course, later told her, *You know, I really could have done it better.*

"**September When It Comes**" is but one of many extraordinary moments on **Rules of Travel**, and even Rosanne is happy with this record that almost wasn't.

"Once we finished it," she says, laughing, "I thought we had a really good record."

As always, understatement becomes her.

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