



JUNE CARTER CASH – Wildwood Flower (Dualtone)

One of the ways in which I amuse myself outside day job hours is to stage gigs, most often of an ‘Americana’ bent. At each of these shows, one of my partners in this usually introduces the acts as an audience settler, paving the way for our visiting artists by peppering his banter with irreverent humour and a personal twist on relevant news of the day. By unhappy coincidence, we put on shows in the weeks last year when both June Carter Cash and husband Johnny passed on, and dedicated each respective evening to them from the stage. In the case of Johnny, near hysteria gripped the room, with an ovation to the announcement as if his resurrected, giant, black-clad frame had entered the room on that cue. With our June tribute, there was nary a flicker of recognition, and a genuine air of indifference.

In many ways, this is understandable. The Carter Family weren’t wild or sexy, never (as far as I’m aware) considered killing for fun in their songs, weren’t seen to openly rebel and protest beyond mild lyrical feather ruffling, didn’t wear black, flip the bird at all authority or swallow fistfuls of pills or liquor with alarming regularity. For right or wrong, us humans tend to be drawn to individuals that do and, in the main, not to sweet, smiling women in long white dresses singing about mountains and flora.

But what is always seemingly forgotten is that Johnny’s music most certainly wouldn’t have sounded as it does without their influence. I guess that, even in these days when (particularly in the UK) the country audience is at its youngest and most open-minded, ‘old,’ ‘safe,’ ‘quaint’ music still has a way to go to achieve the cool of its alt. heroes, despite its import and bearing on current trends. The lineage can be left unexplored, but then it *is* an awe-inspiring, vast field of music to get stuck into. Ask the average Wilco freak their favourite Monroe Brothers song or Kris Kristofferson album, and this becomes apparent.

Still, it will remain documented in the annals of popular culture just how vital a role these and The Carter Family have played in our lives, whether we realize it or not, so will always be available if needed. As Jack White would happily tell you, their legacy is colossal, and will continue to quietly influence just about anything known as ‘roots’ for the rest of time.

In June Carter Cash’s final album *Wildwood Flower*, a clutch of the scores of these essential Family songs are re-examined, not with any intent of reinvention, but to celebrate them in a setting where June was knowingly writing her own exit. The result is extremely poignant, but elements of this listener’s sadness emit not from any huge sense of loss that I will never hear its masterpiece-like again – because it isn’t one - but from the vocal performances that tell the human story. June Carter Cash was an old lady in

rapidly-worsening health when she recorded this and, particularly when her voice is to the fore with minimal backing on, for example, *Storms Are On The Ocean* or *Big Yellow Peaches*, that is exactly how she sounds – not a towering musical legend, but a once brilliant singer who was no longer so when she laid these final offerings down.

In this, there are obvious comparisons to be drawn with Johnny's final mortal release, where there are instances of massive power alongside cringe-inducing croaks through tired standards. Listening to some of this collection is indeed akin to the effect the video for *Hurt* has, when you know you're watching and listening to someone dying.

However, this said, the song is all. *Wildwood Flower* contains some of the finest country songs that will ever be written, and so the spectacular performances from the stellar band and many family members involved are as joyous as you'd expect from an ensemble that know them backwards and recognize their beauty.

The Road To Kaintuck (recorded by Johnny on his *Sings The Ballads of The True West* 1965 double concept album) is the prime example of this, romping gleefully along with unbounded spirit of expression, and nailed firmly down by Johnny's guttural narration.

He appears on 7 of the album's 13 tracks, but in no way does his presence dominate proceedings. His voice largely also far beyond the weapon it once was, he acts as an easily identifiable part of a traditional whole, slotting nicely in to events, a world detached from his latter-day role as Rick Rubin-directed interpreter of modern rock fare.

Overall, the *Wildwood Flower* experience is a tough one. There *is* the overriding emotion of the loss of a true great, but it is certainly, for me, outweighed by the fact that the central performer's swansong is best viewed as an artifact that brings down the curtain on a remarkable career, than as a keystone in the history of country music.

Yet as a document of June's final days, it is a beautiful thing indeed. Tracks are linked with snatches of fuzzy Family radio broadcasts and studio chatter including a precious Lee Marvin anecdote; it is exquisitely packaged with eloquent sleeve notes from Rosanne Cash, beautiful artwork, full lyrics and touching snaps. As kitchen sink packaging goes, it is grand but not overstated, lovingly pieced together for a fitting send-off. Dualtone has served her very well in this respect.

Beyond my observations, there is still much to commend this release. Particularly, the charming enhanced section of footage from the Mace's Springs, VA. recording sessions at Mother Maybelle Carter's childhood home, but even this, the sight of a grand old woman struggling through on her very last legs is evidence enough that she really had already worked more than enough for one lifetime. Bless her.

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