

MUSIC

Reviews



PRODUCERS: Billy Sherrill,
John Carter Cash, Steve
Berkowitz

LABEL: Legacy

RELEASE DATE: March 25

ALBUM

Johnny Cash, *Out Among the Stars*

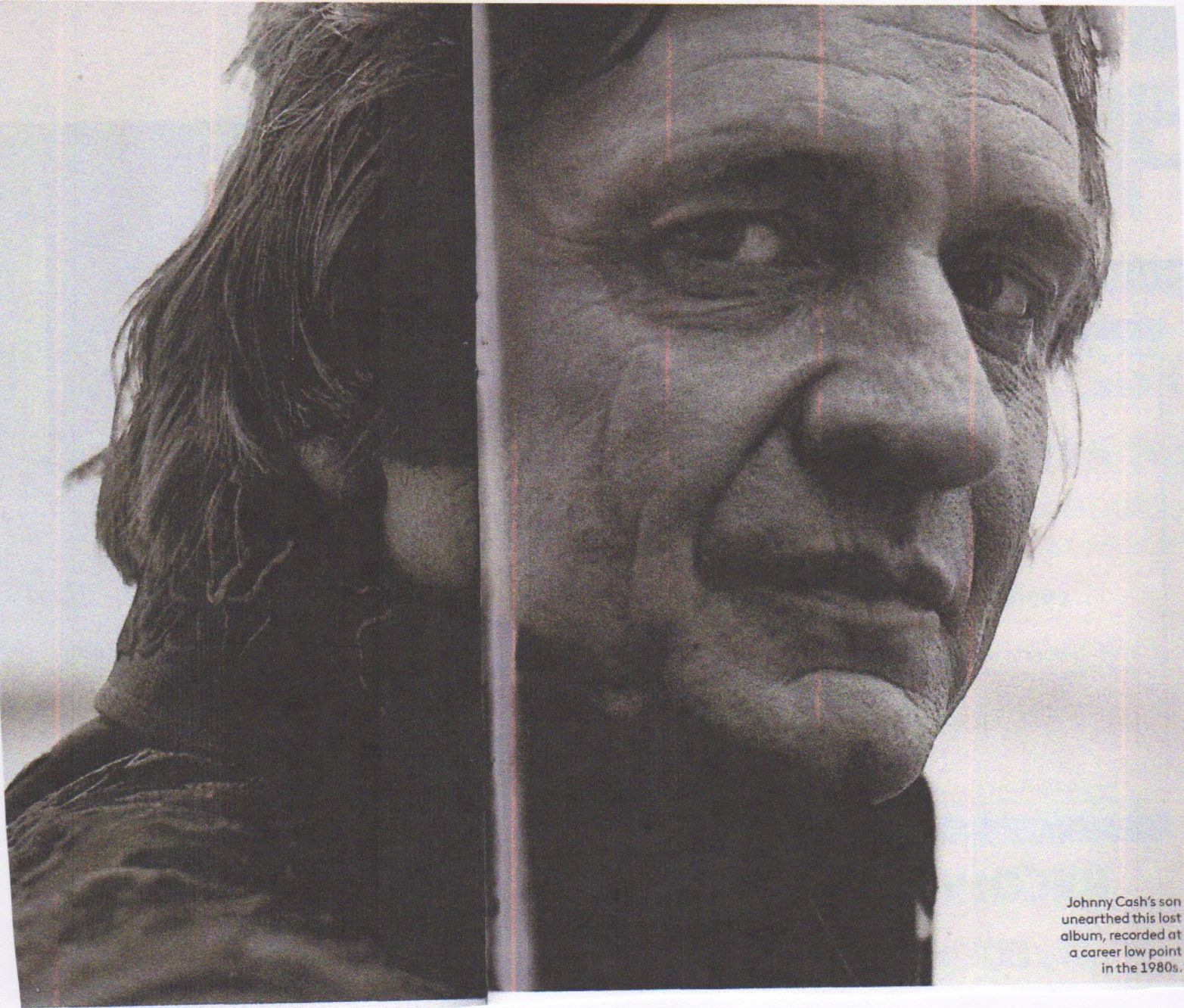
It's a fine thing when music that's historically valuable also happens to be a good listen. Such is the case with *Out Among the Stars* — so much so you'd hardly know that when these long-lost performances were recorded, in the early 1980s, Johnny Cash was at one of his lowest career ebbs.

His style of country music had faded out of vogue, his record sales were tanking, and he had become, as he put it in 1997's *Cash: The Autobiography*, "invisible" to his label, Columbia. In an attempt to change the situation, Cash teamed up for a few sessions with producer Billy Sherrill, who'd recently been named vp at CBS Nashville. The tactic made sense: Sherrill had displayed his hit-making mojo time and again with George Jones, Tammy Wynette and many others. Still, the records he was famous for were slick "countrypolitan" stuff with masses of backing singers and string sections, the antithesis of Cash's more traditional, hardscrabble sound.

In the end, Sherrill and Cash reached an aesthetic compromise. They tailored the production to fit then-current tastes — making it a tad antiseptic in the process — but went

easy on the aural sweeteners and hired a top-notch band that featured Marty Stuart on guitar and mandolin and Pete Drake on steel. Columbia didn't find the results very enticing. The label issued one disc's worth of the Cash/Sherrill material in 1981 (*The Baron*) and passed on the rest, including further sessions from 1984. Within a few years, Cash was off Columbia, but he hung on to the Sherrill tapes until his 2003 death. They languished in a vault until last year, when his son John Carter Cash discovered them and decided to release them, after some extra polishing and new overdubs by Stuart and others.

The album that never was turns out to be a charming addition to The Man in Black's catalog. Cash is in rich voice throughout, even when he betrays some discomfort on the maudlin ballad "After All" and the double-entendre fest "If I Told You Who It Was." But for the most part, the force of his personality overcomes any mawkishness in the arrangements. It seems far more Cash's album than Sherrill's, despite the fact that only two songs were self-penned. One of them, "I Came to Believe," seems to reference the 1968 spiritual rebirth Cash underwent after attempting suicide in a Tennessee cave, and



Johnny Cash's son unearthed this lost album, recorded at a career low point in the 1980s.

it closes the album in stirring fashion.

Not surprisingly, the darker songs provide many of the high points. The title track gets philosophical about a liquor store heist, while "I Drove Her Out of My Mind" details a murder plot with sinister relish. The breakup songs are splendid too, both wistful ("She Used to Love

Me a Lot") and witty ("Call Your Mother").

But the most heartwarming moments are the duets with old pal Waylon Jennings and wife June Carter Cash. On a rollicking cover of Hank Snow's "I'm Movin' On," Jennings and Cash trade verses like wisecracks, encouraged by the muscular twang of Stuart and fellow

guitarist Jerry Kennedy. And on "Baby Ride Easy," you can practically hear the smiles in Johnny and June's voices as they harmonize, a further testament to one of the great partnerships in American music. —**Mac Randall**