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SURFING THE WAVES OF POPULAR CULTURE
BY MICHAEL GILTZ & FRIENDS

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Johnny Cash -- Still The Man (In Black)

There's something about a great singer at the end of their life. Their voice is a shadow of what it used to be, but they know so much about singing that they can plumb the depths of a song like never before. The frustrated ones can't get past the fact that their voice simply won't do what they tell it to anymore. The great ones know how to use what they have. Frank Sinatra. Maxine Sullivan. Ella Fitzgerald. Some of my favorite songs by them came at the end of their careers. And now Johnny Cash. His last album was almost painful to hear -- I think it's because Cash felt that frustration, not to mention the death of his wife and the sickness stealing over his body like a stain. But now on "American V: A Hundred Highways," he seems much more at peace. His voice still had its good days (a wonderfully strong take on the righteous standard "God's Gonna Cut You Down") and its bad ones (the whispery frailness on the last song he ever wrote "Like The 309"). But Cash seems to have come to peace with his voice, not to mention the death staring him in the face. The result is singing that is transfixing, even when tackling the maudlin Gordon Lightfoot tune "If You Could Read My Mind" (which sounds a LOT more compelling when Cash sings it) or Rod McKuen's "Love's Been Good To Me," which even Cash can't rescue other than to offer a little much needed dignity. Plus, he and producer Rick Rubin avoid the formula they almost fell into of including a wacky rock cover or two on every album just to keep the kids listening. Larry Gatlin's lovely "Help Me." Springsteen's compelling "Further On Up The Road." Hank Williams' "On The Evening Train." Seriously good songs sung with the fervor they deserve. This isn't bleak like "American IV" (which I also liked). It's elegiac, which is becoming my favorite adjective for describing the works of art that calm and compel me at the same time. Wonderful stuff here. Listen.

POSTED BY MICHAEL IN NEW YORK AT 6:50 PM



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