

Roseanne Cash

Where music, the soul and love survive

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Precisely four-and-a-half hours after a film about her father, mother and stepmother was nominated for five Oscars, Rosanne Cash walks into the Nicole Farhi store near her home in Chelsea, New York City, and orders chicken soup and cornbread at the adjoining cafe. She is wearing a green velvet hat, which she keeps on for the duration of her lunch, and a thick dark coat which she discards. She comments on the cold as she eyes a black leather jacket on one of the racks.

She is here to talk about her new record, *Black Cadillac*, which is as close as she has ever got to a concept album in her 32-year songwriting career. The concept is grief and its attendant terrain of memory and love. In the last 30 months, she has lost her father, mother, stepmother, stepsister and an aunt, and the album has been an attempt to interpret her bereavements in lyrical terms. It is a wonderful record, possibly the best she has ever made.

Unfortunately for her, it has been overshadowed by another cultural event. Rosanne Cash doesn't much like the portrayal of her mother in *Walk the Line*, the new biopic with acclaimed performances from Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon. But then she doesn't much like the film at all. She saw a rough edit with her 17-year-old daughter in the summer. 'It was like having a root canal without anaesthetic,' she says. 'My manager was saying, "You really ought to see it so that you can talk about it intelligently." And my brother was one of the executive producers and he really wanted me to see it. He had been instrumental in having them remove a couple of scenes that were not very

flattering to my mother.'

In the United States, the release of her album was put back a few months to avoid accusations that she was hitching a ride on a bigger marketing campaign, the supreme insult to an artist who has forged a singular career for a quarter of a century. So she now feels awkward that the two are being released simultaneously in Europe.

'The movie was painful,' she repeats. 'The three of them [in the film] were not recognisable to me as my parents in any way. But the scenes were recognisable, and the storyline, so the whole thing was fraught with sadness because they all had just died, and I had this resistance to seeing the screen version of my childhood. I don't resent them making it - I thought it was an honourable approach. I loved the movie Ray, but I'm sure if you asked Ray Charles's kids, they would tell you, "Well, that's not exactly how it was ..."

'I have no impulse to set the record straight. Why should I? Eighty per cent of what people believe about my dad is just a projection of what they want to believe. It's a Hollywood movie - very complex lives reduced to two hours - so how can it possibly show the depths of truth?'

I suggest that the movie will bring a whole new audience to her father's music. 'I don't even know how to tell you how much I don't care about that. My father was a transcendent artist, one of a handful out of the whole century who could be called truly great. He left a body of work that is there for anybody to discover and it will exist for ever. That is enough for me. I don't feel any impulse to put myself in the service of making Johnny Cash more famous.'

Do you wish the film had never been made?

'A very hard question. If I say yes, then I sound like I'm bitter. If I say no, it's not entirely honest. My dad and June wanted it to happen, but it was torture for my mother. The idea that her worst

fucking nightmare - she's a strict Catholic girl who had to get divorced - and now the film version is out there ... it was intolerable to her. I thought it was very interesting and ironic that she died a few months before it came out.'

She is far more comfortable with her own creative angles on the past. Her new record is her first public expression of what it was like to lose a father known to the wider world as an icon. When Johnny Cash and his second wife, June Carter Cash, died within a few months of each other in the autumn of 2003, his eldest daughter declined to share in the tributes: 'Why would I want to join the fray?' she asks. 'He was my father, not a mythical figure.' Her mother, Vivian, died last May, on Rosanne's 50th birthday.

Black Cadillac is not a traditional tribute record; it ranges far wider. It considers her parents' lives before she was born, and stretches to the afterlife. In between, we may glimpse some turbulence. Her childhood was 'fraught with anxiety,' she says. 'In my pre-teen years, my father's drug addiction was really consuming him and consuming my parents' marriage. I knew there was something wrong but I didn't know what it was; there was just this background tension and anxiety to all of those years.'

The family had never heard of drug addiction. ' I thought, "He's taking medicine but it's not good for him ... he's acting strange, he seems very unhappy and incredibly restless - but why?"'

They lived in southern California and Rosanne loved listening to her father's records, particularly Ballads of the True West and Orange Blossom Special. His music was the place to connect with his healthiest self. 'But I didn't want to be a musician when I was a kid. I didn't like the fact that you had to travel, that it appeared that you had to take drugs and your relationships were in shambles. Being a performing musician? Crazy.'

She always wanted to be writer, but it was poetry and prose. She describes herself as bookish and slightly withdrawn, happiest at her local library. She became a teenager in the first summer of

love and she began taking drugs. 'I don't think my mother really knew,' she says. 'And my father was the type who would worry about his children privately but he wouldn't confront you. He had tremendous respect for a person, no matter their age, and he had faith that you were going to sort your problems out.'

'But once when I was in my late teens, I really fucked up. Me and my stepsister used his car and we were drunk and he found out about it. The next day, he was so quiet, and the tension was building with every hour, and we were terrified that he was going to blow. Then he finally took us out for an ice-cream, and he said, "I'm going to give you a choice. You can either go out on the road with me and sing and earn lots of money and see the world, or you can stay home and take drugs." I was crying and said, "Yes, I'll go out on the road!" but my stepsister said, "I'm going to have to think about it." In the end, we both went. My stepsister died six weeks after my dad. She never really got off drugs.'

On the road, Rosanne was taught guitar by the Carter family and Carl Perkins, and she would join them on stage for the finale of each show. She watched her dad from the wings for three years. 'It was fantastic.'

At the end of it, she moved to London for a while, living in Hampstead and writing songs. She hoped she could make a career writing for other people rather than performing herself. She says she is shy and has a strong sense of privacy. But then she made a demo singing her own songs and got a recording contract when she was 22. After that, she says, she knew it was for the rest of her life.

Inevitably, there was a problem being Johnny Cash's daughter. 'People think you have it easy and they resent you. I had a brief moment when I thought I might use my grandmother's maiden name - Rivers. Then I realised that that's not who I am and it didn't feel very honest.' It helped that her sound was different - more Californian new country than Tennessee rockabilly, often blending folk and pop - and she had immediate success (she has had 11

number ones on the US country charts).

She lived for nine years in Nashville, where she believes she was never embraced, and left for New York 15 years ago when her first marriage fell apart. By then, she had three children.

I wonder whether she ever asked her father for career advice. 'I was too stupid to go to him for guidance. That's one regret I have - that I didn't go to him for more. Not only early on but also as I got older. The one bit of advice he gave me was to always take care of your children first. He told me that more than once.'

Is that because he felt he had a lot of catching up to do?

'Maybe. He wasn't a modern person. He wasn't compulsively confessional. He was brought up in a very old-fashioned, masculine mould and he was personally very humble. He would never try to be an authority figure for somebody. He would never force advice. We got closer in the last five years of his life and we never had problems. I've read that we were estranged, but that was never true. And I talked to my mother every week. She could be too much of a mom sometimes, like trying to get in your life and fix things, so I kept a certain distance, but she learnt and became very respectful and didn't try to meddle. She was a great grandmother.'

The title track on Black Cadillac was written some weeks before her stepmother became unwell and a few months before her father died, and its prescience is startling. The lyrics describe a journey that sends one party to heaven while leaving another in hell. It starts with Rosanne's father calling her name and ends with a muted parade of trumpets you hear on some of his classic songs. The second track imagines his time as a radio operator after the war and the courtship between him and Rosanne's mother. There are also songs about her childhood home being emptied and sold, and much imagery involving roses, reflecting her grandfather's and mother's passion for the flower.

The casual listener may detect a desire for closure in these songs, but that was not the intention. 'I don't believe in that,' she says. 'I didn't write these songs as therapy, because that idea is so annoying to me. That cheapens the work. But at the same time, making the record was very useful, because it helped me manage the feelings in my life when they seemed unmanageable.'

The album ends with a track called '0:71', which is nothing but 71 seconds of silence, one for each year of her parents' lives. She says it is the only true tribute song on the record; I wondered if it wasn't self-indulgent. 'As a record buyer, you can click past it,' she says. 'I put it on there for me.'

The key song comes much earlier. 'I Was Watching You' considers the layers of fate in her life and what remains after death. 'I think I was picking out my parents before I was born,' Rosanne Cash says as the bill arrives. 'And now they're watching me in some fashion. In the moments of despair, I think, "Well, there's nothing after you die", but most of the time I like to think that the soul is immortal and that love survives.'