FROM ROCK OF AGES TO ROCK’N’ROLL

Brian McFarlane belatedly discovers the joys of Johnny Cash

JUST how enduring has been the popularity of films about pop-music idols and trends? Does anyone now ever watch the seminal *Rock Around the Clock* (1956)? It was little more than a B movie in budget and running-time, its title deriving from the hit tune of the previous year when it was introduced in *The Blackboard Jungle*, in which teacher Glenn Ford tamed a class of hooligans. And, it was said, cinema ushers had to tame teenagers who were carried away by the theme song to the point of leaping about in the aisles. As far as I can discover, *Rock Around the Clock* is not available on DVD or video. Even those films that had higher aspirations, featured major names of the day and were big box-office successes in their various decades rarely proved to have a very long shelf-life. Every now and then one will acquire a cult following, as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) did: after its initial box-office failure, it became a favourite with late-night movie audiences who responded to its camp references and presumably didn’t care much about its qualities as a film. For them, the fun was putting on fishnet stockings and going to the movies at midnight.
Elvis Presley, who got started at about the same time as Johnny Cash, may have legend status but it's quite hard to hire his films. My normally well-stocked video store had only two of his films and apparently gets very few requests, though at the time of writing Channel Nine is doggedly screening such items as Harum Scarum (1965) in unlikely viewing slots such as Saturday afternoon, when small children may be watching. When the Beatles' black-and-white hit A Hard Day's Night was revived a few years back, it was hard to see what all the fuss had been about. It's no more than a mock-documentary of the fab four going from Mersey-side to London for a recording session, taking with them Paul's grandpa, a 'very clean old man', and trying to keep him out of trouble. There were fewer songs than I'd remembered, but enough to remind us of what once was the most famous sound in the world. 'I Wanna Be Your Man', 'If I Fell in Love with You': songs that now sound pleasantly simple, tuneful, as if they belong to some innocent bygone age.

And what about those other films of the 1970s and 1980s that cashed in on the latest rock phenomenon? What would the Maysles brothers' documentary Gimme Shelter (1970) about the Altamount pop festival in 1969, which featured the Rolling Stones and the Hell's Angels, and ended in murder, look like now? Perhaps it still has the raw power to keep mindless nostalgia at bay. Hollywood took to rock in a big way in the 1970s with films such as American Graffiti (1973), set in small-town America in 1962, and the John Travolta hits Saturday Night Fever (1977), Grease (1978) and Staying Alive (1983). There were also The Buddy Holly Story (1978), with Gary Busey as Holly, whose life story has some points of contact with Cash's, and the rock musicals Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) and Godspell (1973) adapted from the stage, the Streisand remake of A Star Is Born (1976), in which the big number is the love song 'Evergreen', and Milos Forman's airbrushed version of Hair (1979). For all the strenuousness of the Forman film, it was utterly clear that the moment of Hair had passed.

I'm not sure if any of these films could be revived today. Their success at the time depended so crucially on the interaction of the political climate, which accounted for what was being reacted against, and the pop culture scene. The heady mixture of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll has perhaps claimed too many victims among their luminaries and the survivors are now grandparents or pompously knighted or both. My own theory about the unwatchability of many of these films has to do with the clothes and hairdos. Could anyone look at Frank Zappa today and keep a straight face? Film history is strewn with forgotten movies, or movies that deserve to be forgotten, about the rock ascendancy. Maybe its real potency
could only be experienced in the live-stage environment, when there was always the edgy possibility of everything getting out of hand.

Even a great film such as Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), which more overtly than most brings politics and popular music (mainly country, with rock standing in for political savvy) into collision, was never a popular success. It is, however, a film of shining intelligence that manages both to critique and to pay tribute to the music and musicians that make up its many-threaded plot, which ends with an assassination at the Parthenon (*Nashville*, that is, not *Athens*). There are authentic notes of loneliness and longing for certainties in the country songs, some of them done for satiric effect, like those of *Laugh-In*’s Henry Gibson as Haven Hamilton, dressed like a sawn-off Roy Rogers without his horse, and others allowed their due of poignancy, like ‘Dues’ or ‘Bluebird’, sung by Ronee Blakely, as Barbara Jean, country-music royalty who falls apart in Nashville. The rock trio of Bill and Tom and Mary (Allan Nicholls, Keith Carradine and Cristina Raines) are meant to be more astute politically; that is, they are as Mary points out registered Democrat voters, though Altman is too generous and clear-headed a film-maker to believe in a straight-down-the-line attribution of virtues according to political affiliation.

The toll on performers of the facts of performance and of the celebrity that goes with it, and what it takes not to be destroyed by the concomitant demands and temptations, account for the narrative trajectory of James Mangold’s *Walk the Line*. I should come clean at this point: until I first saw this film in January, I knew who Johnny Cash was but had never consciously listened to him. So, I came to the biopic in a state of almost virgin ignorance and was utterly carried away by it, surrendering to its narrative sweep, its affirmation of romantic love and—to my surprise—the range and power of the music. Those who know more about Cash than I did (there can be few who knew less) have quibbled a bit about the film’s dealings with this or that aspect of his life, but this is not a documentary: it is a biopic, and as such will of course take liberties with the life (and documentaries don’t!), eliding and highlighting in the interests of narrative rhythm and dramatic cohesion. Less narrow in its time-span than *Good Night and Good Luck*, which treats one run-in of Ed Murrow’s life, or *Capote*, which focuses entirely on the author’s obsession with the Kansas killings that made his name and ruined his life, *Walk the Line* still shares with them and with last year’s *Kinsey* an old-fashioned craftsmanship that knows the value of contrasts in emotional tone and visual sheen.

*Walk the Line* was initiated with the cooperation of Cash and June Carter Cash, which might have been the recipe for a bland hagiopic, but isn’t. What emerges is an exhilarating and moving show-business tale of huge success, a spiralling out of
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control and a final, sustained reclamation. Biopics of performers have to convince us of their stellar capacities. Here, let it be said straight off, Joaquin Phoenix as Johnny Cash and Reece Witherspoon as June achieve this triumphantly. They do their own singing (some have suggested that Witherspoon is actually a ‘better’ singer than Carter, at least technically) and maybe this helps to account for the really remarkable immersion in their roles they exhibit, especially when on stage.

The film is chiefly taken up with the years between 1952, when Cash is with the air force in West Germany, and 1968, when he proposes on stage to Carter at a concert in Ontario—a moment that might smack of old-time Hollywood if we didn’t know that it actually happened. There is a brilliantly concise prologue set on the Cashes’ cotton farm in Dyess, Arkansas, in 1944, sketching Johnny’s adoration of his older brother Jack who dies following a sawmill accident, and his drunken father’s abuse of him: ‘Nothing—that’s what you are. The devil took the wrong son.’ There is no announcement of the eight years passing: the film just cuts to Phoenix’s face and dispatches him to Landsberg, West Germany, where, more convincingly than is usually the case in such films, he is seen tentatively composing ‘Folsom Prison’, with its indelible line ‘I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die’.

The first marriage to Vivian (Ginnifer Goodwin), contracted on inadequate knowledge of each other’s needs, founders quickly. Viv, who has the look of a 1950s starlet, a Debbie Reynolds manquée who will aspire to Jackie Kennedy svelteness in the 1960s, wants him to take up her ‘Daddy’s’ offer of a good safe job. He’s clearly no good as a door-to-door salesman and this episode has a shrewdly imagined look of the 1950s, with black boys doing shoe shine and Johnny in terrible two-tone jackets. While Viv entertains her middle-class friends at afternoon cards, Johnny and his ‘band’ (‘two mechanics who can’t hardly play’, says Viv disdainfully) twang out ‘I know when Jesus saved me’ on the porch.

This whole sequence sets up economically the basis for the failure of the marriage, articulating the oppositions with precision and an impressive fairness. Viv may be profoundly conventional but the film allows that she has a case. Much later, when Cash arrives home from touring and with the feeling for June beginning to take shape in him, Viv will cut him off with: ‘I have a casserole in the oven and I don’t want to talk about the tour.’ ‘What do you want from me?’ he asks with scarcely warranted exasperation. ‘I want you.’ And the film shows that she, as his wife and the mother of his children, has this kind of right, just as it acknowledges their fundamental incompatibility.

Sequence by sequence, the film works its way with fine discriminations of this kind. At the turning-point audition, Sam Phillips (Dallas Roberts) of Sun Records
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says 'I don't believe you' when Johnny and the boys try gospel, adding 'It's got to
do with believin' in yourself.' The gradual displacement of the boredom on Sam's
face with a gradual dawning of a this-is-the-goods discovery as Johnny sings
'Folsom Prison' involves both subtle character playing from Roberts and our
introduction to the Cash charisma and vocal power. In the touring episodes that
follow, Mangold skilfully builds a tension between, on the one hand, the off-stage
problems of disintegrating marriage, descent into drugs and drink, the wariness
of the relationship with June, and on the other, the magic of the on-stage perfor­
mances. At a much later point, June admonishes Cash in the dressing-room: 'The
only place you're allowed to speak to me is on stage.' She means here that he is to
back off in personal terms, but the audience is free to consider how their most
electric communication seems to take place around the microphone.

The concert sequences are superbly staged. Often backlit, Phoenix and With­
erspoon incarnate that magical quality that great performers have that enables
them to lift an audience out of itself, to have that audience seem to reach across
the footlights in a rapture of joy and gratitude. Having since first viewing bought
several Cash CDs and the 'Duets' selection of Cash and Carter, I'd say that
Phoenix doesn't quite manage the deepest registers of which Cash is capable but
that he more than compensates for this by the sheer intensity of his involvement
in the character. Witherspoon is something else. She seems to me currently the
smartest, sassiest woman in Hollywood and here she sings her heart out as June
and is mesmeric in doing so. At Cash's first glimpse of her, backstage in a Texas
concert hall in 1955, she is in the opposite wings from him, and she instantly
lights up the screen. Her performance as a performer is perhaps the best I've ever
seen; she entirely persuades us that her professionalism can overcome anger or
anguish and that while she's on stage she belongs to the audience. When he finally
proposes to her on stage, it's like the culmination of a courtship that has been
conducted most significantly right there in front of the crowd—and one of the
great romantic movie moments in recent years.

Mangold has structured his film with the sort of skill that keeps us anticipat­
ing the next gig with excitement, gratifying this anticipation, then making us want
to see how the off-stage lives are coping with it all. He hasn't made one of those
musical biopics where you wish they'd stop the story and just get on with the
numbers. The bulk of the film comprises a long flashback that begins and ends
in Folsom Prison. It is introduced by a dazzling montage of feet tramping along
prison corridors until Cash is found waiting to perform before the audience of
inmates, his hand running along a saw, which initiates the flashback to Arkansas

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1944. The flashback ends with the triumphant Folsom performance (don’t sing songs that’ll remind them they’re in prison, an official warns him. ‘You think they forget?’ he replies) and the film then moves to Ontario, the proposal, and a brief lakeside coda between Cash and Carter, her parents in the background and a series of end titles that tell how they stayed married for a further thirty-five years. By the kinds of structuring I’ve referred to, as well as neat parallels (Cash’s composing of ‘Folsom Prison’ in Germany is later echoed in June’s ‘Ring of Fire’), by juxtaposing her care for her children with his increasing neglect of his, and her sassiness on stage with Viv’s prissy disapproval, Mangold has avoided the biopic trap of offering a mere string of events as a narrative.

In the matter of personal relations, Walk the Line both respects the claims of ordinary domesticity and understands the strains that pop-idol celebrity might enjoin on a marriage. In professional matters, it makes us privy to the awfulness of the touring life. Not since Lolita (the novel especially) has a film given us such glimpses of the tattiness of American motel life: the temptations of easy lays; the quick gratifications of drugs and drink that might make you forget their nasty downsides; the scruffy, morning-after feel of a misspent night; then trying to get some sleep in a bus not designed for comfort.

Unlike in the case of Sid Vicious and his girlfriend, the subjects of Alex Cox’s film Sid and Nancy (1986), for Cash and Carter there was to be a long and loving epilogue. In this respect, they were also lucky by comparison with Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, who both got their start with Sun Records and who are seen hovering around the edges of Walk the Line. Mangold’s film doesn’t spare viewers the unattractive aspects of the Cash persona—the addictions and moral sloppiness—before June finally sorts him out. It does, though, try to understand him. This is more than just a matter of seeing him succumb as so many prime rockers did to the seductions that came with the territory. Cash’s career started in gospel, took in rock but remained essentially country in its emphasis, but he shared with the rock greats the sort of temptations that ordinary lives can barely grasp. In Cash’s case, the other key influence is surely the violent drunken father who couldn’t say more than ‘Don’t miss your bus’ when Cash is heading for Germany, then spits, and who years later scornfully derides his son as a ‘rock star’. When Cash asks him what he thinks of the house he’s bought, his father (played with an exact, buttoned-down envy and disapproval by Robert Patrick) can only say that it’s ‘not as big as Jack Benny’s’. The film is too intelligent to lay all Cash’s failings at the door of an unsympathetic father—or to underestimate the importance of such an influence.
With two dazzling performances at the film's centre, it would be easy but indefensible to overlook the people (and their faces) who surround them. Tyler Hilton's Elvis doesn't amount to much, on stage or off; Waylon Payne's Jerry Lee Lewis has more to work with and does more with it, in a sketch of narcissistic insolence. Robert Patrick and Shelby Lynne, eloquent of face and voice as Mrs Cash, and Sandra Ellis Lafferty and Dan Beene as the cautious and forgiving Carter parents, father Ezra seeing off a drug-dealer threat to June and Johnny's final idyll, are all immaculate in suggesting how parents may not be the best judges of our potential but they're what we all have. And there is a tiny, perfect uncredited sketch of a self-righteous check-out woman in a supermarket who bitterly abuses June for her divorce. Even the crowds at the concerts have been carefully directed: they convince one of their excitement as a group and as individuals, and they, like the subtly modulated dress and hair styles, change in the degree—and manifestation—of their abandon from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s.

They say that films, like books, can change your life. I wouldn't go quite so far about *Walk the Line*, but the intoxication I felt on first viewing led me to find out more about the Cash–Carter duo so that on second viewing the effect was little short of exhilarating. As a result, life has been much richer (and noisier, say those nearest to me).