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HENRY WALTON BLOWS IT

“I got a new assignment,” I told Carson Daly. “Tomorrow I fly to Nashville to interview Johnny Cash.”

“That’s great, Henry,” Carson said, putting his glass down on the bar. “He’s probably going to die soon, so people are starting to care about him again.”

“Who’s Johnny Cash?” slurred the girl who was hanging all over Carson. I guessed from her braces and her Hello Kitty tube top that Carson had plucked her straight off the set of *TRL*.

“Can you believe that she doesn’t know who Johnny Cash is?” Carson laughingly asked me as he nibbled at the girl’s ear. “At least she has an excuse: she’s fifteen years old!”

“They’re gonna arrest you someday,” I said over my shoulder as I walked toward the bathrooms at the back of the club. Actually, I myself had only the vaguest idea of who Johnny Cash was: some elderly musician who always dressed in black? I’d told five or six music people about my new assignment, and none of them had mentioned anything useful about Johnny Cash. Now I was so desperate for information that I decided to admit my ignorance and just ask the next music journalist I saw, “Who the hell is Johnny Cash?”

Kurt Loder was staring at himself in the big mirror above the sinks in the men’s room.

“Hey, Kurt,” I said, “could I ask you a question?”

“Shoot, Weldon,” Kurt replied, still looking at his reflection.

BLACK & WHITE
N U M B E R

“Can you believe that she doesn’t know who Johnny Cash is?” Carson laughingly asked me as he nibbled at the girl’s ear. “At least she has an excuse: she’s fifteen years old!”

“Actually, it’s ‘Walton,’” I corrected him.

“Shoot, Walton,” Kurt said, turning to smile at me. His forehead was beaded with sweat.

“Kurt, who’s Johnny Cash?”

“Shoot, Walton, you’re beautiful.” Before I knew what was happening, Kurt hustled me into a stall and began to tear at my clothes. Evidently he wasn’t in the mood to tell me about Johnny Cash. “I accidentally swallowed a handful of my hair gel, Walton, and I just realized that I love you. I love you more than the new Bell Biv DeVoe CD.” I just closed my eyes and waited for Kurt to finish with me. I hated his hair gel-induced babbling, the reek of his perspiration, and the feeling of his body against mine, but I couldn’t very well say no to Kurt Loder—he’s been big on MTV for, like, twenty years.

The interview was a disaster from the moment I turned on my tape recorder and asked Johnny Cash my first question: “Johnny, out of all the great tracks you’ve laid down over the years, what’s your favorite one?”

“Well, I reckon that’d have to be one of my hits for Sun Records, ‘I Walk the Line,’” Johnny said, adjusting the black string tie that hung down the pleated front of his black shirt.

“Uh, yeah, that was a great one, huh?” I improvised.

I didn’t hide my ignorance too well; Johnny smiled indulgently and said, “Here, let me refresh your memory.” He walked to the other side of his large, tastefully furnished living room and put a crackly record on his stereo system’s turntable.

“Whoa, vinyl,” I observed. “Is this, like, a special dance mix for DJs?”

Johnny raised an eyebrow. “No, back in the fifties, all recordings were released on vinyl.”

I decided I’d better shut up and listen to the song. After it was over, I said, “I like how you ironically imitate country music. It’s not as good as Ween’s country album, but it’s still pretty funny.”

Johnny just stared at me, so I figured I should elaborate. “I mean, can’t you picture a bunch of hicks in, like, some hick bar listening to that song and actually taking it

seriously?” I laughed. “You know, like, Elroy turns to Joe Bob and says, ‘Ayup, ayup, I walk the line, too!’”

“You don’t know anything at all about my music, do you, young man?” Johnny asked sharply.

“No, I don’t,” I admitted.

“Did Willie Nelson put you up to this?”

“No, man,” I said, “my editor asked me to interview you, but I don’t know why he chose me. I usually profile, like, alternative pop-rock bands like Soul Coughing, Cake, Local H, and—”

A woman’s voice cut in from the doorway behind me: “I thought you boys might like a snack.”

“This is my dear wife, June Carter Cash,” Johnny said.

I turned to face Mrs. Cash, a well-preserved old woman who held a tray of chocolate chip cookies. She wore a large wooden crucifix around her neck. I felt that it would be impolite not to comment on such a bold and hilariously ironic fashion statement, so I grabbed a little figurine of Jesus dressed as a shepherd from a side table and waggled it at her. “Hey!” I whined in my best squeaky little Jesus voice. “You stole my cross! Give it back!”

But Mrs. Cash seemed shocked rather than amused. Johnny lunged at me and snatched away the Jesus figurine. “Young man,” he wheezed, out of breath from this brief exertion, “get out of my house!”

As I waited outside Johnny Cash’s house for my taxi, I tried to think of a way to describe that black-clad old weirdo in my article. At first I was at a loss for ideas, but when I sat down on the curb, I felt a twinge of pain in the seat of my pants. That naturally reminded me of that creep Kurt Loder, and then I remembered how Kurt had once described the enduring popularity of Limp Bizkit: “A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” I guess that’d be a pretty good description of Johnny Cash, too.

— FABRICANT/

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