

Johnny Cash: The Criminologist Within

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This paper examines the criminological underpinnings of song lyrics in the collection of Johnny Cash. We have examined the lyrics of 60 songs performed by Johnny Cash (although not necessarily written by Cash) that reflect on issues including crime, prison, chain gangs, the death penalty, and redemption. Using a content analysis of these lyrics, we examined Cash's criminological view of crime and punishment. While not versed in criminological theory, Cash nonetheless sang eloquently of a rational choice model of crime in which offenders accepted responsibility for their acts, punishment was justified, and yet incarceration should be humane and rehabilitative.

Keywords: Johnny Cash, content analysis, song lyrics, criminology,

*Well I saw you with another
It made me lose my mind
Shot you with my '38
And now I'm doing time
And you put me here
You put me here, Kate
– Johnny Cash*

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INTRODUCTION

Johnny Cash was born in 1932 in Kingsland, Arkansas. In 1950, at the age of 18, Cash enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and spent four years as a radio operator at air bases in West Germany (Cash, 1996). Soon after leaving the service he recorded three of his trademark hits, *I Walk the Line* and *Folsom Prison Blues* in 1956, and *Don't Take Your Guns to Town* in 1959. During the 1960s, probably his most prolific and successful period in his early career, his recordings included *Ring of Fire*, *Orange Blossom Special*, *Jackson*, and *A Boy Named Sue*. Against the advice of his producers, Cash recorded two live performance albums, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*, considered one of the most popular albums of 1968 as well as one of the most important albums of the 1960s, which was followed by *Johnny Cash at San Quentin* in 1969 (Streissguth, 2006).

His recording career stumbled through the 1970s and 80s, largely due to an addiction to uppers and downers. Beginning in 1994, however, Cash created what became a series of five recordings produced by Rick Rubin under his American Recordings label. The first album, *American Records*, received a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Album of the Year and is widely considered one of the top 500 albums of all time. The last album, *American V: A Hundred Highways*, was released in 2006, three years after Cash's death at the age of 71 (See Cusic, 2004).

Although Johnny Cash had a long and very respectable musical career, what could he possibly have had to say of a criminological nature? If he tended toward criminological musings, what was his theoretical orientation? What academic arguments might have

informed those musings? Were Cash's songs simply reflections of the criminological theories of the day, or did he develop an independent perspective on crime and punishment?

Cash And Criminological Theorizing

Cash was born during the middle of the Great Depression and the heyday of the Chicago School, which dominated criminological thinking at that time. Within two years of Cash's birth the discipline of criminology saw the publication of Clifford Shaw's *The Jack Roller* (1930), Clifford Shaw and Maurice Moore's *The Natural History of a Delinquent* (1931), Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay's *Social Factors in Juvenile Delinquency* (1931), Paul Cressey's *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (1932), and Edwin Sutherland's *Principles of Criminology* (1934). Theorizing about the role of social disorganization and culture conflict was also found in a number of important articles published by criminologists such as Louis Wirth (1931), William Healy and Augusta Bronner (1933), and Frederic Thrasher (1933). Even for a very young child, the ideas and theorizing about economic hardship, culture conflict, and how powerful and negative social forces acted upon individuals were likely to have permeated Cash's home.

In 1954, Cash returned home from his service in the Air Force. He got married and settled down in Memphis where he got a job and began playing music on the side with Luther Perkins and Marshall Grant. They referred to themselves as The Tennessee Three. As Cash moved from Arkansas to Tennessee, criminological thinking also shifted from an emphasis on culture conflict to theories stressing the role of inequality, anomie/strain, and alienation (Cohen, 1955; Merton, 1957; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Clinard, 1957; Cloward, 1959), psychopathy and personality traits (Glueck & Glueck 1952; Redl & Wineman, 1951;

Thompson 1953; McCord & McCord, 1956; Roche, 1958), and low self-concept and relational bonds (Reckless, Dinitz, & Murray, 1956; Nye, 1958) as causes of crime.

According to the criminological theorizing of the 1950s, crime was the result of social, structural, and economic inequality, a sense of alienation, personality defects, a low self-concept, or weak and problematic family ties. While Cash was born into a poor, rural family in the midst of the Depression, by the end of the 1950s he was married with children, had already accumulated a string of national hit records, and had become a star on the Grand Ole Opry. He was living the American dream (Wren, 1971).

The 1960s found Johnny Cash living in California but spending time in New York City experiencing its folk scene and developing a sense of social justice, which was reflected within his music in songs such as *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, which made it to number 3 on the charts in 1964, and two live albums, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*, recorded in 1968 and *Johnny Cash at San Quentin* recorded a year later. Both albums contained songs reflecting Cash's strong identification with prisoners and criticism of America's prison system. Cash was not immune to other forces at work in American society in the 1960s. In 1965 Cash was arrested on federal drug charges in El Paso, Texas, and more than a few concerts were canceled when Cash, too high on uppers and painkilling drugs, was unable to perform (Cash, 1997; Streissguth, 2006).

Criminological theorizing in the 1960s had taken a significantly more critical approach with its new focus on the effects of labeling and the role of legal, social, and economic inequalities in the criminal justice system. Howard Becker's *Outsiders* (1963) and *The Other Side* (1964) and Edwin Lemert's *Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control* (1967) were widely popular with their emphasis on the role of societal interaction

and the power of stigmatizing labels in the production of crime. Herbert Packer's *The Limits of the Criminal Sanction* (1968) and Karl Menninger's *The Crime of Punishment* (1968) raised questions about punishment and the nation's prison system while Austin Turk's *Criminality and the Legal Order* (1969), William Chambliss' *Crime and the Legal Process* (1969), and Richard Quinney's *Crime and Justice in Society* (1969) explored how conflict, power differentials, and capitalism were responsible for crime. Crime, from this perspective, was not the result of individual flaws or poor choices, but rather a predictable consequence of an unjust society.

The 1970s and 80s saw Cash continuing to struggle with his addiction and giving erratic concert performances. In spite of these personal problems, in 1985 Cash found himself back at the tops of the music charts for the first time in nearly a decade as part of a country music super-group, The Highwaymen, with Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, and Willie Nelson. However, Cash's role as "outlaw" was short lived and his recording contract with Columbia expired in 1986.

An increasing diversity in criminological theorizing characterized the 1970s and 80s partly as a result of the influx of federal expenditures on the criminal justice system and an explosive increase in the number of academic departments of criminal justice across the country. Travis Hirschi's *Causes of Delinquency*, although published in 1969, quickly rose to the top of the theoretical charts through the 1970s and much of the 1980s with its emphasis on the role of weak social controls in causing criminality. Critical criminology continued to be strongly represented in works such as Quinney's *The Social Reality of Crime* (1970), Taylor, Walton, and Young's *The New Criminology* (1973), Michalowski's *Order, Law, and Crime* (1985), and Messerschmidt's *Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Crime* (1986) although it

was competing with new more conservative theorizing about crime in such works as Wilson's *Thinking About Crime* (1975) and Van den Haag's *Punishing Criminals* (1975).

Johnny Cash met Rick Rubin of American Recordings in February of 1993 and between May and December of that year Cash recorded a number of songs in Rubin's home studio. A new album, *American Recordings*, was released in 1994 and included newly written material as well as songs from other artists. A music video was produced to accompany Cash's *Delia's Gone* and both the song and video were considered controversial and heavily criticized by feminists as misogynistic. The album, which won a Grammy, also included the haunting *The Beast in Me*, suggestive of the inner struggle of a person aware of his inability to control outbursts of violence. Two years later, the second of Cash's last five albums, *Unchained*, was released. While it included an eclectic selection of songs, Cash stayed far away from issues of crime, punishment, and redemption that he had given attention to in the 1960s. On his third album in the American series, *American III: Solitary Man*, Cash included a cover of Nick Cave's *The Mercy Seat*, a penetrating emotional commentary on the death penalty. The fourth American album, *American IV: The Man Comes Around*, was released in 2002 and included a number of songs that may have been selected by Cash to represent his final observations on crime and redemption: *Give My Love to Rose*, *I Hung My Head*, *Sam Hall*, and *Streets of Laredo*. Each of these songs expressed acceptance of responsibility for crimes committed as well as the ultimate legitimacy of punishment, from imprisonment to execution. The album also garnered Cash a Grammy for Best Male Country Performance for *Give My Love to Rose*. The music video of *Hurt*, a song written by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, was nominated in seven MTV Music Video Awards categories, winning for Best Cinematography. It was the last album released during his lifetime (Urbanski, 2003). The

fifth album of the series, *American V: A Hundred Highways*, was released posthumously in 2006.

The field of criminology in the 1990s opened with a clear shift from critical criminology to a focus on an individual's lack of self-control as the cause of crime. Gottfredson and Hirschi's *A General Theory of Crime* (1990) suggests that both adolescents and adults who engage in crime do so largely because they are deficient in normally developed self-control over their behaviors and are unable to resist easy gratification. However, over the rest of the decade the field of criminology saw an increasingly eclectic assortment of writings. The diversity of concerns included a critical approach (Milovanovic, 1997) and a focus on the developmental effects over the life course (Laub & Sampson, 1993), attention to the problems associated with the exploding prison population across the nation (Mauer, 1994), debates over capital punishment (Bohm, 1999), and an emerging focus on white-collar crime (Jamieson, 1994).

Did Johnny Cash pay any attention to what criminologists were putting forth over these decades? Cash never went to college or took courses in criminology, and he likely never read a criminological text. Yet, he appears to have found a way to become a "folk" voice regarding crime and punishment. Interestingly, 54 percent of all the songs Cash recorded or performed that dealt with crime and justice appear in the 1960s; another 30 percent appeared in the 1970s. These two decades also happened to be a period of great social unrest, dramatically rising crime rates, increases in funding for institutions of law and order at federal, state, and local levels, and an expansion of the country's prison system. Cash's attention to crime and justice likely reflected the country's attention. But as public concern over law and order began to subside by the 1980s, so did Cash's focus. Only a single

recording spoke to these issues in the 1980s and just eight between the 1994 *The Beast in Me* and the release of *Further on Up the Road* in 2006.

Johnny Cash wrote, recorded, or performed on television over 400 songs and sold over 90 million records. This paper will examine that portion of Cash's body of music, some 60 songs, which gave voice to concerns dealing with the causes of crime, punishment, and the potential for rehabilitation and redemption.

Analyzing Lyrical Content

Quentin Tarantino, writing in the liner notes for Cash's 2000 CD titled simply *Murder*, suggests that the lyrics found in Cash's songs are "poems to the criminal mentality."

However, Tarantino also notes that most of these songs are located not during the "high times" of criminal activity, but rather "after the cell door has slammed shut or a judge's gavel has condemned a man to death." These songs are not about criminal bravado, but of "an overwhelming sense of regret."

Song lyrics produce more than temporal entertainment. Language in the form of music has demonstrated great potential as a means of disseminating ideas, beliefs, and values. Richardson (1991) characterizes language as a constitutive force that individuals use to create and recreate reality. When language is consumed, whether in print or in the form of music lyrics, there is transformative potential and one may find their reality altered by their interpretation of the content being communicated. Music can impact the listeners mood. Lyrical content often has multiple layers, subtlety, and design. It may reflect philosophical musings, political agendas, and can affect the perceptions of listeners about contemporary issues.

The examination of lyrical content in contemporary music reflects a wide array of interests and concerns. For example, Richard Cole (1971) examined the content of the Top 10 popular songs of each year for the decade of the 1960s and found that there was no particular formula for popularity. In spite of the protests, violence, and drug use of the 1960s none of the songs making the Top 10 contained lyrics referring to drugs and only one made mention of violence. Richard Dukes and his colleagues (2003) looked at themes of love, sex, and hurt found in the “all-time greatest hits.” The role and pervasiveness of sex and violence in the lyrics of rap music has been the focus of numerous studies (Lena, 2006; Hunter and Soto 2008; Armstrong 2001). Theresa Martinez (1997), for example, observes that rap music is a medium for the dissemination of counter cultural messages of resistance and empowerment, and is also used as a format for critiquing the social structure.

Guarino-Ghezzi (1994) observes that stereotypes about law enforcement officers are rampant in the influential medium of rap music. She cites the song “One in the Chamba” a song recorded by the Almighty RSO after a minority youth was shot by a law enforcement officer who was off duty. The song portrays law enforcement officers as corrupt and describes how officers patrol the inner cities looking for trouble. According to Guarino-Ghezzi these representations of inner-city cops contributes to the growing distrust and fear that is commonly reported among inner city youth (Reuss-Ianni 1984).

Nisker (2007) explores Tupac Shakur as a pop culture icon. Nisker observes that Shakur sits atop the list of the most influential hip-hop artists of all time. Furthermore, Nisker argues that hip-hop has, “emerged as a powerful discourse that draws attention to the harsh realities of urban life while questioning and subverting the prevailing cultural ideologies” (p. 177). Rap music, he argues is a distinct cultural force. According to Nisker, Tupac’s lyrics

represent a counterproductive force, “that engenders a negative survival ethic among Black youths and contributes to further racial disparity” (p.176).

Country music also has been subjected to the researchers gaze. For example, Angela Stroud (2007) used content analysis to examine how mainstream country music contributes to the construction of white masculinity, while Paula Lippard (1977) looked at the lyrics of 100 country-western songs to explore the primary subject matter of the songs, the portrayal of female and male roles, as well as the value system implicit in the song lyrics. Finally, Beth Messner and her colleagues (2007) conducted a content analysis of images of hate in country music from the 1960s to explore how white racial extremists use music to advance their goals through lyrics negatively portraying African-Americans while creating imagery of white unity and solidarity.

Past research has indicated that music can have a significant impact on people’s perceptions and often acts as a conduit for cultural transformation (Abramson, 2002). An example of the significance of music may be found in how rap and hip-hop music is often considered a means of cultural expression, and the genre is frequently localized to particular geographic areas and communities (Bennett, 1999). West and Martindale (1996) suggest that the ecological properties of music, such as the values and meanings of the lyrics, are a key factor in the stimulus potential of music. They conducted a content analysis of songs written or recorded by the Beatles to determine whether lyrical content had a significant influence on the popularity of their albums. They found that as lyrics regressed in complexity over time, the popularity of songs continued, allowing the overall popularity of the Beatles actually to increase (West & Martindale, 1996).

This research also seeks to explore the message and meaning in the work of a pop culture icon. Although Johnny Cash did not write all of the songs included in this analysis, he did select them among the many to be recorded and performed, giving a voice to the subjects and offering the lyrics to be interpreted by the listener.

METHODOLOGY

The current research involves an examination of a subset of 60 songs selected from the catalogue of more than 400 songs recorded or performed by Johnny Cash. From this catalog, the researchers employed a purposive sampling technique to identify songs containing lyrics related to issues of crime or justice. Criteria for selection required that lyrics involve references to criminal acts, involvement of subjects with law enforcement or the courts, life in or escape from chain gangs, jails or prisons, punishment, or critical observations of the criminal justice system or process. Ultimately, 60 songs were determined to meet the criteria for inclusion. Three researchers independently coded the lyrics of each song. Discrepancies regarding the coding were resolved by discussion and final agreement.

Analysis focused on an examination of manifest and latent content within the lyrics, including types of crime committed, issues related to prisons and jails, the level of criminal responsibility acknowledged, the use of drugs and alcohol, and contextual indication of the cause of crime. Of primary interest was Cash's portrayal of how offenders viewed their crimes, their reaction to their arrest or punishment, and whether the circumstances of the criminal act as described by the offender reflected a criminological explanation for the crime. The investigators identified four variables considered to suggest the degree of criminal responsibility: claim of innocence, no denial of crime, acceptance of responsibility for the

crime, and indication of remorse. An expression of a defiance of authority was coded separately. Additional variables examined included evidence of police or guard brutality and critical remarks regarding some aspect of the criminal justice system.

Although Cash was not a trained criminologist, the lyrics he gave voice to in these songs may provide insight into his beliefs about the causes of crime and the appropriateness of punishment. Three broad theoretical categories were used for coding causes of crime: choice theories, trait (biological or psychological), and sociological theories.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Of primary interest was Cash's portrayal of how offenders viewed their crimes, their reaction to their arrest or punishment, and whether the circumstances of the criminal act as described in the lyrics provided a criminological explanation of crime. Sixty of the songs Cash recorded or performed were analyzed for their content about crime and justice related issues. These songs include a total of 58 identifiable crimes: 22 homicides, four assaults, four cases of domestic violence, and one robbery. In 27 songs, the crime is unknown.

Table 1. Crimes Noted in Song Lyrics

Crime	Frequency	Percent
Crime Unknown	27	45.0
Homicide	22	36.7
Assault	4	6.7
Domestic Violence	4	6.7
Robbery	1	1.7

Life behind bars, in jail or prison, is the subject of 27 songs while being on a chain gang appears as a subject in nine. Of the songs critical of the justice system, three make reference to police or correctional officer brutality. The criminal justice system's ultimate punishment, the death penalty, appears in 13 different songs.

Table 2. Criminal Justice Institutions and Related Issues Noted in Song Lyrics

Issue	Frequency	Percent
Prison	18	30.0
Prison Escape	5	8.3
Jail	9	15.0
Chain Gang	9	15.0
Brutality	3	5.0
Defies Authority	2	3.3
Death Penalty	13	21.7
C.J. Critique	13	21.7

Theorizing Crime In The Work Of Johnny Cash

While Cash often notes some contextual provocation for the criminal acts, his songs predominantly reflect a rational choice model as an explanation of criminal behavior.

Although the protagonist may feel disrespected by a girlfriend or boss or be down and out without a job or money to buy food for his children, Cash's use of a choice model is readily apparent as protagonists readily take ownership of their decisions. This appears equally true for simple crimes of theft as well as for the most serious and the most frequently identified crime of homicide.

Table 3. Theoretical Explanations Identified in Song Lyrics

Theory	Frequency	Percent
Choice	19	31.7
Social	6	10.0
Trait	2	3.3
None	33	55.0

In *Oney*, Cash describes a hard-working factory man, frustrated and exhausted after 29 years of toiling in a factory and about to retire. Oney, the shop steward, has made his life miserable, but he contemplates his retirement day and says, “Today’s the day I give old Oney his/ . . . /When I’m gone I’ll be remembered/As the workin’ man who put his point across/With a right hand full of knuckles/’Cause today I show old Oney who’s the boss.”

A humorous description of a rational thief is found in the lyrics of *One Piece at a Time*. Here, a man working in a Detroit auto plant building Cadillacs determines that the only way he was going to get “one that was long and black” was to steal it, one piece at a time, from the factory floor, “The first day I got me a fuel pump/And the next day I got me an engine and a trunk/Then I got me a transmission and all of the chrome/The little things I could get in my big lunchbox/Like nuts, an’ bolts, and all four shocks/But the big stuff we snuck out in my buddy’s mobile home.” Although the man appears to express a sense of material deprivation, he also takes pride in his ability to steal all the necessary parts.

Murder is the most frequently identified crime found in songs sung by Cash. Of the 22 instances of homicide identified through the lyrics, 13 (59.0%) of the murders are most

appropriately explained through a rational choice model. However, as noted earlier, external circumstances or forces, such as loss of a job or being disrespected by one's girlfriend, preceded the decisions to kill the victims. In the remaining nine songs involving murder, there was one social explanation and no causal context given in the lyrics of the remaining eight songs.

There is a long tradition in both country & western and folk songs known as the "murder ballad" in which the man kills his woman who "done him wrong." These killings are intentional acts reflecting pure choice on the part of the killer. There is no psychosis, no stress from poverty or inequality, and no blame placed on others for dysfunctional learning. If blame is to be laid, typically it is placed on the homicide victim.

Cash presents us with a number of murder ballads. For example, in *Delia's Gone*, he sings about a man who feels wronged by his girlfriend. In spite of the expressed desire to have Delia for his wife, her being "low down and trifling, . . . cold and mean" was sufficient justification to shoot her, not once, but twice, "First time I shot her I shot her in the side/Hard to watch her suffer/But with the second shot she died." Moreover, the advice to other men is clear: "If your woman's devilish, you can let her run/or you can bring her down and do her like Delia got done."

In *Cocaine Blues* Cash sings "Early one mornin' while makin' the rounds/I took a shot of cocaine and I shot my woman down/I went right home and I went to bed/I stuck that lovin' 44 beneath my head." Although this protagonist is arrested and sent to prison for 99 years, he exhibits no more remorse for his actions than the murderer of "poor Delia" concluding "I can't forget the day I shot that bad bitch down." While not denying full

responsibility for shooting his woman, he does have advice for others, “lay off that whiskey and let that cocaine be.”

In *Sounds of Laughter*, Cash sings another murder ballad about a man angry with his former lover. After having been left by his “girl” when the money runs dry, the protagonist is moved to action. In this instance, the lyrics give an account of a calculating actor who seeks to exact his revenge on his former lover, “I spent every dime I had on her/And when it was gone/She said hun, it's sure been fun/But its time you moved along. So I stood there in the shadows/And I had my .44/I could hear her mocking laughter/But she won't laugh anymore.”

In *Banks of the Ohio*, the protagonist recounts how he stabbed the girl he loved after she rejected his proposal for marriage, “I plunged the knife into her breast/and told her she was going to rest/She cried ‘Oh Willy, don’t murder me/I’m not prepared for eternity.’” While accepting responsibility for the intentional murder, unlike the three earlier murder ballads, here one can see remorse for the act, “Lord, what have I done?/ I've killed the girl I love/because she would not marry me.”

These murder ballads do reflect more than simple conscious choice; the killers are hurt, they have felt rejection, and they believe they have been mistreated or done wrong, by their women. In some instances, the lyrics reflect a “blaming the victim” approach. For example in *Kate*, the protagonist has seen his girlfriend with another man, causing him to shoot her which then leads to his being convicted and about to be executed, “Well I saw you with another/It made me lose my mind/Shot you with my ‘38/and now I’m doin’ time/And you put me here/. . . There’s just one way to figure/Your cheatin’ pulled the trigger/As sure as your name’s Kate/You put me here/. . . Kate, you just plain bad, you know that.”

Pure choice, committing an act only because one wants to, is found in *Folsom Prison Blues*, one of Cash's trademark songs. Here the subject of the song states that he "shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die." While showing no remorse for his act, the killer does feel bad about being confined in prison. His imprisonment is not viewed as unjust, but only unfortunate as he did intentionally kill the man. He would rather not be in prison and is frustrated as he imagines the people riding in the trains that pass near the prison, "I bet there's rich folks eatin'/In a fancy dining car/They're probably drinkin' coffee/And smokin' big cigars/But I know I had it comin'/I know I can't be free/But those people keep a-movin'/and that's what tortures me."

Cash gives little attention to trait explanations of crime of either a biological or psychological sort. A biological, trait explanation is suggested in *Going to Memphis*, when Cash sings of a man on a chain gang reflecting that "Just like a bitter weed I'm a bad seed." In *The Beast in Me* the protagonist recognizes an inner inclination toward violence, "The beast in me is caged by frail and fragile bars/Restless by day and by night rants and rages at the stars/God help the beast in me/The beast in me has had to learn to live with pain/And how to shelter from the rain/And in the twinkling of an eye might have to be restrained." Cash suggested a similar split of good and bad in himself when he told Lisa Robinson of the *New York Post*, "I've got to remember that the black stripe is always there. Nobody's all good. Nobody's all bad. I guess I'm personally afraid of my dark side" (quoted in Johnson, 2008:75-76).

It is not surprising that Cash sometimes gave voice to songs reflecting sociological theories of crime. In *Man in Black*, one of Cash's signature songs, the lyrics state, "I wear the black for the poor and beaten down/Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town/I wear it for

the prisoner who has long paid for his crime/But is there because he's a victim of the times." And in *Ned Kelly*, a song about a bandit in Australia who "loved his people and he loved his freedom/And he loved to ride the wide open land." He resisted the inevitable change brought about by rapid population increase and expansion into the open spaces, "Ned Kelly as a victim of the changes/That came when his land was a sprout and seed/And the wrongs he did were multiplied in legend/with young Australia growing like a weed/ . . . /But everything was changed and run in cycles/and Ned knew that his day was at an end/He made a suit of armor out of ploughshares/But Ned was brought down by the trooper's men."

In *Johnny 99* Cash sings of a man who, having lost his job at an auto plant, unable to find a job, and facing the bank foreclosing on his mortgage, gets drunk and then goes out and shoots a night clerk. In a similar vein, a crime resulting from the stress of a farmer unable to financially survive is reflected in *This Side of the Law*, "You see I didn't mean any harm/But I simply couldn't make it on the farm/When the land won't give a lot/You gotta do with what you got/And all I got's the muscle in my arm/ . . . /Well, I didn't really think that what I did wrong/So long as I stayed here where I belong/I did the only thing I could, same as anybody would/And I was simply trying to get along." In *Busted*, the stress of a failed farm leads another man to do what he needs to do to care for his family when he's "busted, "Lord, I'm no thief, but a man can go wrong/When he's busted/The food that we canned/last summer is gone/But I'm busted." Although social or strain explanations such as these were present in the Cash's songs, they were found less frequently (See Table 3).

While this paper suggests a dominant rational choice model in this collection of songs, the authors also recognize the influence of external forces moving protagonists to act found in many songs performed by Cash. There are several instances in which the actors

suggest their choices were influenced by economic or social forces, such as the failure to achieve positively valued goals through conventional means or moved to action after being presented with negatively valued stimuli in the form of rejection from a significant other. However, even in these instances conscious decisions were made to commit the criminal acts.

In the song *Oney* for example, one might suggest that Oney's poor treatment over a number of years contributed to Oney's decision to give his former boss "a right hand full of knuckles". While the authors would not disagree with this assessment, it should be noted that the poor treatment from his boss was never enough to move Oney to action during his years working at the factory. The fact that Oney takes action on the day that he retires reflects that Oney has control over his behavior despite the environmental stimuli. This is a demonstration of human agency *in context*. While not denying the influence or power of the situation, at least as far as Cash is concerned, human agency is a more powerful force.

The song *Delia's Gone* features yet another example of human agency in context. The authors recognize the impact of Delia's actions, for if she were not "low down and trifling" and otherwise "acting devilish," the protagonist may never have been moved to kill her. However, the lyrics continue with "if you woman's devilish, you can let her run or you can bring her down and do her like Delia got done." This suggests that the protagonist was aware of the options before him and ultimately decided to shoot poor Delia.

The authors recognized environmental influences in a number of songs. However, without significant conjecture it could not be determined that these forces were enough to outweigh individual autonomy. At the same time, the lyrics often suggested that the individual actors recognized the options before them and in the end they simply chose to act.

Guilt, Innocence, And Taking Responsibility

In line with a rational choice perspective, Cash often advocates personal responsibility for one's decisions. The protagonists in Cash's songs rarely deny responsibility for their actions as demonstrated in several of the songs previously discussed. Overall, there was no denial of responsibility on the part of the subject in 26 (43%) of the songs. In 20 of the songs, the lyrics make it abundantly clear that the offender accepted responsibility for the crime(s) identified.

Table 4. Guilt, Innocence and Taking Responsibility in Song Lyrics

Response	Frequency	Percent
No Denial	26	43.3
Accepts Responsibility	20	33.3
Remorse	5	8.3
Claims Innocence	6	10.0

In *Sounds of Laughter*, a man convicted of murder appears at ease with the sentence as he accepts his responsibility for committing the crime and acknowledges that the punishment is deserved, "Well the jury showed no mercy/And I never asked for none/Cause I know I've got it coming/I'm not proud of what I've done." A convict breaking rocks on a chain gang while looking forward to being released in just a few more days also appears to take responsibility for his crime(s). In *Doing my Time*, the subject sings "Gotta do my time, I gotta do my time/. . . /Well now it won't be long, just a few more days/They'll let me out of

here, I'm gonna stay Lord, Lord." In *Give my Love to Rose*, Cash sings of a man who finds a recently released inmate dying near a railroad, "He said they let me out of prison down in Frisco/For ten long years I've paid for what I've done/I was trying to get back to Louisiana/To see my Rose and get to know my son."

In at least five of the songs the protagonists appear to not only accept responsibility for their acts but to openly express feelings of remorse. In *I Hung My Head*, a young man has borrowed his brother's rifle and seemingly intends to just practice aiming the gun, "I saw a lone rider/Crossing the plain/I drew a bead on him/To practice my aim." With no clear explanation "My brother's rifle/Went off in my hand/A shot rang out/Across the land." The rider is dead, the young man runs, but is soon caught by the sheriff. "The sheriff he asked me/Why had I run/And then it came to me/Just what I had done/And all for no reason/Just one piece of lead/I hung my head." The subject becomes very remorseful when he senses the consequences of his act and begs forgiveness, hanging his head in shame, "I orphaned his children/I widowed his wife/I begged their forgiveness/I wish I was dead/I hung my head/I hung my head."

Orlean's Parish is sung through the eyes of a father whose son demonstrates remorse for the murder that he committed. The father pleads for his son's forgiveness, noting that his son showed remorse when being led away to jail, "I heard him say, as you let him away/ Sorry for what he's done."

Not all of Cash's protagonists admit responsibility. In six songs, the subjects actually claim to be innocent of the crimes they are accused of having committed. Cash often employed the protagonists' claims of innocence to critique the criminal justice system, suggesting that innocent men and women have been sent to prison, or worse yet, sentenced to

death for crimes that they did not commit. Of the six songs featuring claims of innocence, four include lyrics critical of the criminal justice system and three involve a man sentenced to death for a crime that he did not commit.

Table 5. Claiming Innocence as a Critique of Criminal Justice

Claims Innocent	Critique of Criminal Justice		Total
	No	Yes	
No	45	9	54
Yes	2	4	6
Total	47	13	60

In *I'm Free from the Chain Gang Now*, an innocent man is wrongly accused of an unstated crime, "All the years I was known and respected/ 'til one day I was wrongly suspected/I was shackled in chains in a cold freezin' rain/ but I'm free from the chain gang now." In *Joe Bean*, the protagonist, a man named Joe Bean, is scheduled to be executed on his twentieth birthday. Although Joe is a ruthless killer, having killed 20 men by the time he was 10, he finds himself sentenced to death for a crime that he did not commit. The certainty that he was innocent of the murder he was charged with is because at the time of that crime he was actually robbing a train some distance away, "Well, Joe - your mother is at the Capitol/asking the governor for a stay/And it's hard on her/ 'cause she knows where you were/on that particular day/You were working Joe Bean/ hard working/ robbing the Santa Fe."

In the *Long Black Veil* the protagonist is sentenced to death for a murder that he also did not commit. However, he faces a difficult dilemma regarding his alibi, “The Judge said son, what is your alibi?/If you were somewhere else, then you won't have to die/I spoke not a word, though it meant my life/cause I was in the arms, of my best friend's wife.” Rather than dishonor the woman, he goes to meet his fate at the top of a scaffold.

In these songs, Cash also employs one of the strongest arguments against the death penalty: that it has been used to execute innocent people. Thus it would appear that when Cash breaks from his message of personal responsibility, often the lyrics are offered as a critique of criminal justice, and at least as far as the lyrics are concerned the claim to innocence by the subjects appear to be true. Interestingly, the fact that Joe Bean, while innocent of the crime for which he was convicted, had actually murdered at least 20 people, crimes for which he was never brought to trial suggests a minor dilemma for many who hear the lyrics. Some might not see this as a criticism of capital punishment, but rather an ironic achievement of justice.

When Cash sings Nick Cave's *The Mercy Seat* there is no irony and no missing that the song is a critique of the death penalty. The prisoner's guilt is not entirely certain. It is noted in the first verse that “It all began when they took me from my home/And put me on Death Row/A crime for which I am totally innocent, you know/ . . . /And anyway I told the truth/And I'm not afraid to die.” The lyrics go on to graphically describe process of being electrocuted, “The mercy seat is burning/And I think my head is glowing/ . . . /And the mercy seat is smoking/And I think my head is melting.” The uncertainty comes in the last verse in which the protagonist expresses wanting, “To be done with all this twisting of the truth/An eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth/And anyway I told the truth/But I'm afraid I told a lie.”

The ongoing debate is whether the lie is about being innocent of the crime or of not being afraid to die.

Critique Of Criminal Justice

Cash frequently used his lyrics as a forum to critique what he believed to be a sometimes unjust and often inhumane justice system. In 13 songs Cash's lyrics serve as a stinging critique of the treatment of inmates and those identified by society as 'criminals,' whether they were justly convicted or not. In *All God's Children Ain't Free*, Cash's gives a voice to the down trodden; the poor sharecropper, the men in the penitentiary, and the man condemned to die. In *San Quentin*, Cash describes life behind bars as a "livin hell" and empty of rehabilitation. The song recounts the story of a beaten and broken man, a man whose heart and sole were tortured by life behind bars. The lyrics cry for reform, "San Quentin, I hate every inch of you/You've cut me and have scarred me thru and thru/And I'll walk out a wiser weaker man/Mr. Congressman why can't you understand?/San Quentin, what good do you think you do?/ ... And may all the world regret you did no good."

In *City Jail* Cash describes a man who is arrested for disorderly behavior in a bus station. His flirtatious and smart alec comments, however, do not justify the brutal treatment he receives in jail, "Well he put me outside in a dark corner/And before you could say hypocrite he hit me on the head/And I said oooh don't hit me on the head/I can't protect myself with the handcuffs on/Please don't hit me on the head/Then he hit me again he hit me again he hit me again."

Criticism of the criminal justice system is not reserved just for the death penalty and brutal treatment by police and guards. The corruption of jailers and the unnecessary

humiliation of persons brought into the system is dramatically illustrated in *Jacob Green* in which Cash tells us of a man “busted for possession” and placed in jail to await a later trial date, “At the jail they took away his clothes to shame him/and to make sure Jacob Green had no pride left/They cut off all his hair/Today they found him hanging there/afraid to face the day he killed himself.” While his father hires a team of lawyers to inquire into the event, the “reforms” are limited, “The sheriff then retired/and the papers said two guards were fired/They put a brand new coat of paint on Jacob’s cell/But like a tomb that looks so white and shiny/inside you’ll find corruption never seen/And somewhere out there tonight/In a dirty cell without a light/There will be locked up another Jacob Green.”

CONCLUSION

As a criminologist, Cash appears to see outlaws, robbers, and even murderers as people with free will, choosing to do wrong and more often than not, while sometimes uncertain of their motivations, eventually accepting responsibility for their deeds. As Yolanda Estes suggests, “Cash’s impulsive delinquents dimly glimpse their own motives, but they offer no excuses for their wicked deeds or appeals to their mitigating circumstances” (Estes, 2008: 146). Gordon Barnes (2008:124) seconds this view when he writes “Cash never denies that people are responsible for their actions. The point is just that every one of us is capable of doing something wrong if we are placed in the wrong situation. . . . We should hold them responsible for their actions, but we should not automatically condemn them as people.”

Cash accepts the need for punishment for criminal acts, but argues that punishment should be applied justly, fairly, and humanely (Clapp, 2008. As Jamie Watson (2008:233)

notes, the prisoner in Folsom Prison never displaces blame for his crime, and never complains of any injustice in his incarceration . . . the offenders recognize that they are justly paying the price.” According to Johnny Huss (2008:184), “The fact that just about any convict mentioned in a Johnny Cash song knows he ‘had it comin’—provided he’s guilty—is good evidence that ‘justice as desert’ is a widely held principle.” As Cash makes clear in *San Quentin*, prisons should be reformed, not abolished, and should focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment. Furthermore, “Cash doesn’t deny that the criminal needs to serve his time; he objects to the prisoner serving ‘overtime’” (Johnson & Schmitz, 2008:155).

Cash believed that prison could rehabilitate offenders and reduce crime in the community, “If we make better men out of the men in prison, then we’ve got less crime on the streets, and my family and yours is safer when they come out. If the prison system is reformed, if the men are reformed, if they are rehabilitated, then there’s less crime and there’s less victims” (quoted in Strissguth, 2004:164). Prisons damage those who are incarcerated according to Cash, “All [prisoners] have had the same things snuffed out of [their] lives. Everything that makes a man a man—women, money, a family, a job, the open road, the city, the country, ambition, power, success, failure—a million things” (Cash, Liner notes from *Folsom Prison*).

Cash’s live prison recordings (*Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* and *Johnny Cash at San Quentin*) and numerous performances not recorded reflected his identification with convicts (Urbanski, 2003) as well as his commitment to prison reform. But by the late 1970s Cash stopped prison concerts, sensitive to the increasing hostility and conflict in prison and concerned about the band’s safety. Perhaps more importantly, Cash had become

“disheartened perhaps by the hostility . . . and the failure of real prison reform in America, he laid aside his sword and banner” (Strissguth, 2004:165).

In conclusion, the lyrics of these songs given voice by Cash provide a glimpse into his criminological worldview. His songs speak decisively on his views about the causes of crime and on the treatment of those identified by society as criminals. Offenders are ultimately responsible for their crimes and should be held accountable through humane punishment designed to help or rehabilitate. Cash’s music also reminds us that those sentenced to prison are our brother, sisters, fathers and mothers and while their punishment may be justified, one should work towards a benevolent punishment that respects human dignity and seeks to improve those who appear to have lost their way.

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APPENDIX

Song Title	Year	Song Title	Year
Folsom Prison Blues	1955	A Boy Named Sue	1969
I Heard the Lonesome Whistle Blow	1955	I Don't Know Where I'm Bound	1969
Don't Take Your Guns to Town	1958	San Quentin	1969
Columbus Stockade Blues	1960	Starkville City Jail	1969
Going to Memphis	1960	This Side of the Law	1970
Delia's Gone	1962	Man in Black	1971
I'm Free of the Chain Gang Now	1962	Ned Kelley	1971
In the Jailhouse Now	1962	The Little Man	1971
Lost in the Desert	1962	Kate	1972
Another Man Done Gone	1963	City Jail	1973
Busted	1963	Oney	1973
Chain Gang	1963	Jacob Green	1974
Tell Him I'm Gone	1963	Please Don't Let Me Out	1974
Banks of the Ohio	1964	The Lady from Baltimore	1975
Give My Love to Rose	1964	Dear Mrs.	1976
All of God's Children Ain't Free	1965	Doing My Time	1976
The Ballad of Boot Hill	1965	Michigan City Howdy Do	1976
Long Black Veil	1965	Once Piece at a Time	1976
Twenty-Five Minutes to Go	1965	My Cowboy's Last Ride	1977
Sam Hall	1965	How Did You Get Away From Me	1978
Streets of Laredo	1965	There Ain't No Good Chain Gang	1978
The Wall	1965	Who's Gene Autry?	1978
Austin Prison	1966	Johnny 99	1983
Joe Bean	1966	The Beast in Me	1994
Cocaine Blues	1968	The Man Who Couldn't Cry	1994
Greystone Chapel	1968	Devil's Right Hand	1995
I Got Stripes	1968	I Never Picked Cotton	1996
I'm Here to Get My Baby Out of Jail	1968	The Mercy Seat	2000
Send a Picture of Mother	1968	I Hung My Head	2002
Walls of a Prison	1968	Further On (Up the Road)	2006