

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 10 – Katie Oates – Something True

Johnny and June

And now a personal word,

Katie Oates' music and the yearning for and the celebration of human connection that is her work transports me to the moment I witnessed Johnny and June Carter Cash on stage. I wrote this reflection many years ago of that moment and here it is reworked like an old song.

Shortly after the first of his comeback American Recordings was released, Johnny Cash stood on a stage in Miami and opened his concert with the familiar harmonica and rumble of the "Orange Blossom Special." The train might as well have rolled right through me. I sat in the balcony and held on. Johnny wore black, as he always did, harkening midnight hurt and godly redemption.

That night I was invited backstage and a friend took a photograph of me standing beside Johnny. He was graveled and dark and holy. I was young and proud and overwhelmed. We were both grinning.

Johnny is often on my mind. I look at the photograph often in my album, a period in my life before I was married, before Internet gold rushes and asset allocation and this town that I now find myself in. It was a time of bachelor instincts, of breaking rules and the trauma of self-inflicted truth.

Now, in a different time, I see Johnny portrayed on screen. On my birthday, my bride took me to see "I Walk the Line." She knows about me and Johnny. Both of us got caught up in Johnny and June.

The movie brought me back to a place of struggle about the source of creativity. In the land of convention, of suits and schedules and finance and bills and children going to school, emotions that would otherwise change the world are boxed in. The rules are defined, we judge ourselves and others by them. We avoid the slippery slopes and rebellion that would otherwise rewrite what we could do.

Johnny and June were both married to others when they fell into their ring of fire. Their unresolved sexual tension fueled an explosion of music and song that changed the

world. Loyalty to them came at a price, as did betrayal, as it does for all of us. When they married, and the danger was gone, their music changed to something timeworn and ultimately safe in its repetition. Only in their final years, with death looming, did their creative majesty return as they, together, reached back to the stripped-down chords of their early days.

It is an arc many of us know. There is no story without choices. There is no love without tragedy. We have our hearts torn, and we have the intimacy of every touch on our minds.

That night in Miami, June joined Johnny on stage. They sang their signature song, the one they sang as unrequited lovers for years before June finally said yes to Johnny's marriage proposal. I heard the playfulness, the tug and yearning of two falling hard for each other, but bound not to hurt others they had made vows to in their lives. If ever there is a song about lust, the conventions that extinguishes it, and the desire to have it back, this is it:

*"We got married in a fever, hotter than a pepper sprout,
We've been talkin' about Jackson, ever since the fire went out.
I'm goin' to Jackson, I'm gonna mess around,
Yeah, I'm goin' to Jackson,
Look out Jackson town."*

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