



JOHNNY CASH'S NORTH COUNTRY ADVENTURE

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Earlier this month, I saw the movie, "Walk the Line," about the turbulent life of Johnny Cash. Everybody clearly worked hard on the picture but the character on screen was not the same man I remembered from a series of north country concerts I produced with him during the mid-80's.



On stage, Cash seemed shy yet confident, in command and strangely out of place. He took chances with new songwriters, but he also kept alive a tradition rooted in westerns, folk ballads, and the same dust bowl populism that inspired Woody Guthrie.

He once said, "I love singing about horses, railroads, land, judgment day, family, hard times, whiskey, courtship, marriage, adultery, separation, murder, war, prison, rambling, damnation, home, salvation, death, pride, humor, rebellion, patriotism, larceny, determination, tragedy, rowdiness, heartbreak, and love. And mother and God."

And he'd lived it all.

Our Lyndonville show played to 3000 people and closed a sold-out three-town tour. After it, Cash greeted fans, then invited me onto his bus.

"I never even knew this place was on the map," he said. "What do you say we do a few more of these?"

"More shows?" I said, thinking maybe we should quit while we're ahead. But I agreed.

Produced on less familiar ground, our second tour played to half-houses in Castleton and Keene, before heading north to Berlin, New Hampshire.

There, a few local folks ran up to greet Johnny Cash's bus as it pulled up to the old hockey rink at the edge of town.

As Cash stepped out, a slender fellow in a tan jacket stepped up.

"Ha!," he blurted out, accusingly. "You're not Johnny Cash. You're just a Johnny Cash look-a-like."

Cash gave the slender man a cold blank stare. "If I ain't Johnny Cash," he said, "then what am I doing, riding around on this bus with his wife?"

The local man persisted. "Don't think you can fool us," he said. "Because you can't."



Word had gotten around town that this was a Johnny Cash impersonator show. That night, only three hundred people showed up.

Minutes before showtime, Cash stepped in to look at the gaggle of fans in the cavernous rink. He shook his head, tired and resigned.

"I'm too old to be a pioneer," he said.

I would have laughed if I hadn't been so worried about the looming financial losses and the seeming futility of it all.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Well, it was me that put you up to this," he said.

"Don't worry about the money. I'll take care of you."

He'd read my mind and lifted a huge burden.

Moments later, the stage came alive and the band kicked off "Ring of Fire." Then, the Man in Black stepped to the microphone. "Hi, I'm Johnny Cash," he said.

That night, three hundred people enjoyed an unforgettable show. And every one of them came away knowing one thing. They'd seen the real Johnny Cash.