

Reviews



PRODUCERS: Billy Sherrill, John Carter Cash, Steve Berkowitz

LABEL: Legacy

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ALBUM

Johnny Cash, *Out Among the Stars*

It's a fine thing when music that's historically valuable also happens to be a good listen. Such is the case with *Out Among the Stars* — so much so you'd hardly know that when these long-lost performances were recorded, in the early 1980s, Johnny Cash was at one of his lowest career ebbs.

His style of country music had faded out of vogue, his record sales were tanking, and he had become, as he put it in 1997's *Cash: The Autobiography*, "invisible" to his label, Columbia. In an attempt to change the situation, Cash teamed up for a few sessions with producer Billy Sherrill, who'd recently been named vp at CBS Nashville. The tactic made sense: Sherrill had displayed his hit-making mojo time and again with George Jones, Tammy Wynette and many others. Still, the records he was famous for were slick "countryopolitan" stuff with masses of backing singers and string sections, the antithesis of Cash's more traditional, hardscrabble sound.

In the end, Sherrill and Cash reached an aesthetic compromise. They tailored the production to fit then-current tastes — making it a tad antiseptic in the process — but went

easy on the aural sweeteners and hired a top-notch band that featured Marty Stuart on guitar and mandolin and Pete Drake on steel. Columbia didn't find the results very enticing. The label issued one disc's worth of the Cash/Sherrill material in 1981 (*The Baron*) and passed on the rest, including further sessions from 1984. Within a few years, Cash was off Columbia, but he hung on to the Sherrill tapes until his 2003 death. They languished in a vault until last year, when his son John Carter Cash discovered them and decided to release them, after some extra polishing and new overdubs by Stuart and others.

The album that never was turns out to be a charming addition to The Man in Black's catalog. Cash is in rich voice throughout, even when he betrays some discomfort on the maudlin ballad "After All" and the double-entendre fest "If I Told You Who It Was." But for the most part, the force of his personality overcomes any mawkishness in the arrangements. It seems far more Cash's album than Sherrill's, despite the fact that only two songs were self-penned. One of them, "I Came to Believe," seems to reference the 1968 spiritual rebirth Cash underwent after attempting suicide in a Tennessee cave, and

it closes the album in stirring fashion.

Not surprisingly, the darker songs provide many of the high points. The title track gets philosophical about a liquor store heist, while "I Drove Her Out of My Mind" details a murder plot with sinister relish. The breakup songs are splendid too, both wistful ("She Used to Love



Skrillex's first full-length may do what three EPs and two Grammys couldn't: Silence the skeptics.

ALBUM

Skrillex, *Recess*

After winning two consecutive best dance/electronic album Grammys (for 2010's *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites* and 2011's *Bangarang*), Skrillex has released the first thing his own team is actually willing to call a real album. And he did it without warning, through a video-game app that slowly started unlocking songs on March 9 — servicing the fans first, as is his way.

It's a slight distinction, really, from his past efforts: *Recess* is 11 tracks, about four more than his three previous EPs, which were still long enough to qualify for those Grammy nods. But this album is his biggest, grandest statement to date — and that statement might just be, "I told you so."

The world judged Skrillex, born Sonny Moore in Los Angeles — "the world" in this case being music critics, bloggers, European dance-music gatekeepers and people older than 18. They wholly rejected his shocking, squelching

bass drops, which were labeled "dubstep" at the beginning, raising the ire of the genre's purists. They derided his artistic integrity, lumping him in with the laptop producer trend — the same one they say is lowering the musical bar across the board, 'natch. They made fun of his hair, his fans, his screamo band origins.

But the 26-year-old never changed his story or his process, keeping close to a tight team that supported him doing his thing. He always presented himself as a fan and student of all types of music, wide open to collaboration (and willing to share the love), and generally sub-hype.

Recess displays all of those qualities, with a focus sometimes lacking in Skrillex's eager early work. Of its 11 tracks, nine are collaborations — with other dance producers, yes (including Diplo and Kill the Noise), but also Chance The Rapper, Fatman Scoop, atmospheric Swedish band Niki & The Dove and