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Greystone Chapel: The Ballad of Glen Sherley

Chris Morris · Wednesday, June 28th, 2017

On January 13, 1968, Johnny Cash performed “Greystone Chapel” for the first time before two audiences of convicts at the state prison at Folsom, California. The song — which climaxed the album Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison, which was released later that year — was written by Glen Sherley, a career criminal and three-time loser then serving a sentence for armed robbery at Folsom.

*Cash grew close to Sherley and helped secure his parole in March 1971; two weeks later his own release, Glen Sherley **Live at Vacaville, California**, recorded with a top-flight band of Nashville session musicians at the like-named prison, was issued by Mega Records. Cash personally promoted the album on his network TV show.*

Sherley was hired by Cash’s music publishing company and married a fellow employee; testified at Cash’s behest before a congressional committee on prison reform; and, after joining Cash’s touring show, performed “Greystone Chapel” in a documentary shot at Tennessee State Prison. It looked as though his life had turned around.

But the ex-convict returned to drugs and his behavior turned erratic, and Cash was forced to fire him. Reduced to feeding livestock for a living and sleeping in the cab of a semi, he killed himself at his brother’s house in Gonzales, California, on May 11, 1978. He was 42 years old.

This is what may have passed through his mind in his final hours.

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They were there to greet me when I got off the plane in Nashville. John and June, the both of them, bigger than life. I guess I thought I was dreaming, that everything the last three years had been something like the greatest dream the Lord can hand a poor man.

I had been doing a three-year jolt for robbing an ice cream shop with a toy gun. Don’t know how long I might have sat in that old rockpile if Reverend Gresett hadn’t given “Greystone Chapel” to John the night before the shows. I didn’t know I’d written something that would ring like a bell with him. He heard that song and it spoke to him, that notion that God could unchain the lowest soul if he fell to the chapel floor and prayed for mercy.

I was in the front row in the Folsom dining hall the first time he played it. He looked right down at

me and told me he hoped he was singing it right, leaned over and shook my hand. And 800 bad men gave the loudest cheer I'd ever heard. After, he got permission from the warden to invite me back to meet him, June, and the band. I was already a big dog and a stepper on the yard, but all of a sudden I was something like a god to the other losers and lifers on the block.

It was just miracles from then on. John got my song "Portrait of My Woman" to Eddy Arnold – fucking *Eddy Arnold* – and it got to No. 26 on the chart. The label came a-callin', and pretty soon I was recording my own album in Vacaville with the best pickers money can buy. That didn't even happen to Merle Haggard, and he was in Quentin!

Right then, John and Reverend Graham got Governor Reagan to get me a pardon. And I rode to my new place in Nashville in the back of Johnny Cash's Cadillac.

And pretty soon there I was, with the best gal, new clothes, the finest shoes made, my own damn car, and a slot on the biggest touring country show in America, playing with John and June, the Carter Family, the Statler Brothers, and Carl Perkins. John even recorded one of my other songs on the *Man in Black* LP. Damn, I'd been high before, but this was higher than high. Some days I felt like I was looking down from the clouds and seeing myself from way up above.

But...it didn't stop me from wanting to get even higher.

I don't know when it was, or where it was I got touched by the hunger. The towns started to blend into each other, and I began to think I was living in somebody else's skin. I'd got used to freedom but I couldn't live in it. I'd wake up in the middle of the night itching, feeling like there was a hole in me that had to get fed. And you know if you're working on the road as a musician you're going to meet people who will know exactly how to fill that hole and with what, 'specially if they know you've been inside.

John had wrestled with those feelings, too, but he believed, as a child would, that a good job and a higher power could keep a man straight. He sold me as a model of what the squares call "rehabilitation." He'd never spent more than a night or two in a small-town lockup, and he didn't know what it was like to get clawed by the devil at every sunrise.

He'd never stood on the yard and seen a man get stabbed in the eye with a shiv, heard a newjack screaming at 2 a.m. as his cellmate turned him punk, smelled the burning flesh of a man who'd set himself on fire in his bunk.

What did J.R. Cash understand about a thief and a junkie like me? About the only thing he knew about thieving was stealing "Folsom Prison Blues" from that Jenkins fella, the one that worked with Sinatra. That was the con in him.

I come to know that people on the Cash show looked at me and didn't see a musician – they saw a criminal, or maybe just a monkey in a cage. And you know what a monkey in a cage does. It takes a handful of its own shit and tries to throw it through the bars.

I was strung out when I told that fat gum-chewing fuck Marshall Grant that I could cut his guts out and string his bass with them if I wanted to. That forced John's hand. Even he could see I still carried hell inside me. I was an animal who'd failed the man who saved me, a stray dog gone rabid.

Drifting from door to door, wanting more time but afraid to get it. I left the wife and kids in Utah,

but it didn't matter, because they couldn't recognize me no more. I'd look in the mirror and see a face that'd frighten Jesus. The royalty checks dried up, and I looked up my brother in San Jose, and set to work at the feed store.

One night John's show pulled through town. They knew me at the stage door and let me back to see him. There was a question in his eye as he looked at my long hair and my beard, the dirt under my nails, the hobo smell, but he still drew me to him, hugged me in a bear grip, pounded my back, just the way he did the day I got off that plane in Nashville.

He was always a good man.

Now it's just me and the Saturday night special. I thought it might be good for a job, but maybe it's best to put it to another use. I have run out of angels and it's time to go home. I hope there's truth in my song, that my Lord will set my soul free. Free.

Top image: Johnny Cash (left) and Glen Sherley.

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