

VOICES IN THE HALL
ROSANNE CASH EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. Today's guest, Rosanne Cash.

ROSANNE CASH Coming here as a teenager, I thought Nashville was kind of backwards. The girls were still really curling their hair and we were all like dead straight hair hippies growing up near Los Angeles. And we were infused with the Pop and Rock of Southern California in the late 60s and early 70s. And it was like coming to a little bit of a different time.

My dad cast an awfully large shadow and people were happy to try to look through me to see him and try to find out what of him was in me, and I wanted to know who I was without him.

You can't really explain inspiration. I don't know how inspiration works. But I have been doing this long enough that I have a sense of mastery about at least knowing when it's right.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall with Rosanne Cash.

"Tennessee Flat Top Box" - Rosanne Cash (King's Record Shop / Columbia)

PETER COOPER That was "Tennessee Flat Top Box," recorded by Rosanne Cash, written by her father Johnny Cash, and featuring stellar guitar work from the great Randy Scruggs. Rosanne Cash is a heralded songwriter, a luminous vocalist, an essayist, a deep thinker, and the author of one of the greatest musical memoirs I've ever read, a book simply called *Composed*. Her life experience is unique, as she sought and fought and found her way out of her father's formidable shadow, while retaining the creativity and intellectual curiosity that runs in the royal family. For more than 40 years she's been writing and singing songs of charm, merit, and consequence, and she has scored top Country hits with self-penned songs including "Seven Year Ache," "Blue Moon with Heartache," "I Don't Know Why You Don't Want Me," and "If You Ever Change Your Mind." Rosanne Cash, welcome.

ROSANNE CASH

My pleasure.

PETER COOPER We're sitting here in a museum that's devoted to the upkeep of things that you and your family have been involved in building for a long time. We're rife with Cash here, at this museum.

ROSANNE CASH It's quite a feeling to walk through here and realize that the Hall is the repository for a lot of my family memories, not just music business memories, but real artifacts from our history. It's a source of great pride for me.

PETER COOPER Rosanne, your father was of course a powerful writer. Did you feel compelled to write songs yourself, or was that daunting?

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ROSANNE CASH Didn't feel obligated. It was a drive. It was so funny, I was playing St Louis recently, and I got a note backstage from this woman, and she said, "I used to babysit you and you used to ask me, 'How does somebody put poems to music?'"

PETER COOPER Wow.

ROSANNE CASH I had no memory of that. Then she said, "When you were a teenager, you would ask 'How to put Rod McKuen's poems to music?'" You're probably too young to know who Rod McKuen was, but in the hippie era he was a very beloved poet. So yeah, I guess it was early on that I thought I was going to be a songwriter. And then I started playing guitar. I played piano as a small kid, started playing guitar at 18, and that's when I started writing songs.

PETER COOPER Now did you want to write songs specifically for the Country music world?

ROSANNE CASH No, because I was really influenced by Lennon/-McCartney, by Joni Mitchell, by Elton John, and then Jackson Browne and that whole California singer--songwriter era. The Country songwriting had gone in by osmosis at this point. And also my mother listened to a lot of Ray Charles too, and I loved Ray Charles. But I was a child of that era so those singer--songwriters were a powerful template for me. And also, Joni...

PETER COOPER Joni Mitchell?

ROSANNE CASH Yeah. That's when it dawned on me that a woman could be a songwriter. Because I thought it was a province of men until Joni. I thought, "Wow! I could write through my own life. I could put my life out there, poetically, into a melody, and it would be legitimate."

PETER COOPER Right. Not just a female songwriter, but a female writing about her own experience as a woman.

ROSANNE CASH And have it be artful. Not just have it be a diary, or a page out of a diary, or a therapy session, but have it be real art. That was such a revelation to me. That's the kind of mold that I thought, "Well, I'd like to do that." But didn't we all? Didn't every woman who was a songwriter then?

"Girl From the North Country" - Johnny Cash and Joni Mitchell (Best of the Johnny Cash TV Show / Sony)

PETER COOPER That was "Girl From the North Country," taken from the Johnny Cash TV Show, featuring Johnny Cash and a girl from the North Country, Joni Mitchell, and written by Bob Dylan. Rosanne Cash is here with me, in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

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Did you, upon writing songs, immediately start thinking, "How can I get a record deal? How can I get into this?"

ROSANNE CASH Nope. I had a really perverse trajectory through this. I wanted to just be a songwriter. I thought that becoming famous was a terrible thing to happen to a person and...

PETER COOPER How could you ever get that notion?

ROSANNE CASH Right? I was like, "This is the... Why would anybody want to become famous? You get on drugs, you get divorced, your whole life falls apart." I mean, I'm laughing, but seriously, that's what I thought. And my mother had terrible fear of fame.

PETER COOPER She had seen it up close from both ways.

ROSANNE CASH Oh, yeah. She just thought a public life was the worst thing of all. So I grew up with that around me. But I loved music so passionately and wanted to be a songwriter, so I thought this is a really noble profession, to just be a songwriter, to not need the attention of being a performer. So I thought that's what I would do. And then, I went to Germany when I was 20, and I was staying with a friend who worked for Ariola Records. And she took me to a Christmas party. And all of these executives from Ariola were there, and she said to these people, she said, "Well, she writes songs," and they said to me, "Well, send us a demo." Everybody was kind of drunk at a Christmas party, "Send us a demo, maybe you'll make a record for us." So I did. I sent the demo. Very insecure and shy about it. And then they wanted me to make a record. So I went back to Munich and I got really scared because I thought, "This is not what I set out to do. And if I make a record, I'm opening that door. I'm going to then have to promote a record, and then go on the road, and then if I want the record to be successful, I could get famous, which is the worst thing that can happen to you."

So I was supposed to go in the studio, and I was staying with my friend Renata Damm, and I couldn't get out of bed. And three days, I couldn't get outta bed. And she finally dragged me out and took me to a doctor, and she said, "What's wrong with her?" And the doctor said, "She's depressed." And I was, I was trying to make the decision to do it. And then eventually I did. And I went in the studio, and I made the record. And then, I wasn't just a songwriter anymore.

PETER COOPER What turned it for you? Why did you decide to do that?

ROSANNE CASH I don't know. I guess I knew it was my life, that this was what I was choosing. There was a part of me that wanted badly enough to make the record and to sing other songs. But I never really thought of myself as a singer. I had been making records for eight or nine years, before I realized I was a singer.

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PETER COOPER It's kind of unreal. People, by seven or eight records in, people were talking of you as a singer... I remember people talking about, "You're kind of a 'wet voice.' "

ROSANNE CASH Oh, Bobby Bare said that, yeah.

PETER COOPER Yeah.

ROSANNE CASH Well, I didn't have much confidence in my voice. And to be perfectly honest, I felt a bit of a fraud, because I would always think, "You're really just a songwriter." And then, I was covering a lot of other people's songs and not even writing that many songs. And then, I thought, "Well, you're really a fraud. Now, you're not even being a songwriter." My inner game was tough for a while. And I was around Emmylou a lot and I was comparing myself to Emmylou. And I'm thinking, "Well, I'm never going to sound like Emmylou, so I must not be a real singer because Emmylou's a real singer."

PETER COOPER She sure is.

ROSANNE CASH Yes she is.

PETER COOPER But she got that way by finding her own voice.

ROSANNE CASH Yeah, and so did I. Eventually, I did too.

PETER COOPER When you begin having enormous commercial success, and "Seven Year Ache," a song you wrote by yourself, about your experiences in your life, becomes a number one song, was there a measure of happiness to that? Or was it just an internal skirmish?

ROSANNE CASH It caused me a tremendous amount of anxiety. At the same time I was really proud. And also I felt like, well this is what happens. This is what I knew would happen. If I wasn't just going to be a songwriter in a quiet room and I was gonna make records... it's kind of like I thought, well this is what happens in my family when you make records. So I was proud of it. It wasn't a shock to me. I don't say that with hubris, but it was a natural course of events. But it also made me so anxious. And I had just had my first baby. And I thought, "How do I take care of this baby, and accommodate this record, and try to be gracious about it? And yet, my private life is so important to me. How do I protect that?" I was 24. It was a lot to juggle.

"Seven Year Ache" - Rosanne Cash (Seven Year Ache / Sony BMG)

PETER COOPER Rosanne Cash's huge hit, "Seven Year Ache," a smash in 1981. I asked Rosanne if after scoring that kind of blockbuster success, is the next song harder to write?

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ROSANNE CASH I may have felt that about the records, but not about the songwriting. It was inspiring. If a song was successful, it was inspiring rather than debilitating. A successful record and all the attention that came with that, that could be debilitating, if I wasn't careful.

PETER COOPER David Olney told me one time, after he had written this staggering song called "1917," that I was like, "Well man, that's gotta be inspiring to write something like that." And he says, "I'm in a terrible writer's block. I'm depressed. I'll never write something this good again and I know it."

ROSANNE CASH Ooh, ouch.

PETER COOPER Yeah.

ROSANNE CASH Well, I do have a thing of, after finishing a song I think that's it, that I'll never write a song again. That was my quota, I've used it up.

PETER COOPER Do you beat yourself up after the fact, years after the fact, on places you ziggled and should've zagged, the same way you're talking about having a song and going, "Oh, wait, that's not right." Do you think, "Oh, five years ago, I really screwed up here?"

ROSANNE CASH Well, not much. 99% of the regrets I have have to do with mothering. I wish I had known that this kid could have used more sports programs. I wish I would have known that this child needed this and not this, because I knew how to give this, but she actually needed this. I wish I hadn't done a million things really. Maternal guilt is a heavy thing. I try not to indulge in guilt anymore. I used to, but I do have regrets. So most of my regrets are about parenting.

PETER COOPER Which is interesting because you were criticized by some folks in the country music world for paying too much attention to mothering and not going out there and touring incessantly and beating your own drum.

ROSANNE CASH And yet I regret time spent away from them. I mean I always stayed connected. It's about connection, even if you're not in physical proximity, connection's everything. And I managed being on the road, I thought, pretty well. I wasn't gone for weeks at a time ever, because of my kids. And even now, my son's in his last year of high school, and I still won't... I do a strategic three, four- day strike, and then come home and be home for him to go to school and everything. But regrets about career, I never think about it.

PETER COOPER It's turned out pretty good.

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ROSANNE CASH It's good. And I see the whole career, just like songwriting, it's like abstract painting too. I don't have five -year plans. I don't have these strategic plans of how to get more successful and more famous, because it's all built around the songs. It all hangs on that.

PETER COOPER Rosanne Cash, thank you so much for being here.

ROSANNE CASH My pleasure, Peter. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.

“A Feather’s Not a Bird” - Rosanne Cash (The River & the Thread / Blue Note)

PETER COOPER That was Rosanne Cash’s Grammy winning “A Feather’s Not A Bird.” I’m so glad to have been joined here by Rosanne Cash, and thankful for the great audio work of Alan Stoker here in our audio lair. There’s more from Rosanne on our website, VoicesInTheHall.org. and on our social channels, [@VoicesintheHall](https://www.instagram.com/VoicesintheHall). Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to learn about upcoming episodes. This podcast is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio. I’m Peter Cooper, thanks for listening. Please come and visit us at the Museum in beautiful downtown Nashville. We’ll see you when you get here.