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# Performing "Hurt" : Aging, Disability, and Popular Music as Mediated Product and Lived-Experience in Johnny Cash's Final Recordings

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Performing “Hurt” : Aging, Disability, and Popular Music as Mediated Product and  
Lived-Experience in Johnny Cash’s Final Recordings

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

Sitting at a rarely examined intersection between aging, disability, and popular culture, this project explores how the aging body becomes the disabled body in the context of popular music. In what follows, I trouble the distinction between bodies and mediation, between lived-experience and cultural product, and I argue that the voice of the aging artist engages with his lived-experience even as he performs socially-constructed conceptions of aging and disability.

I read Johnny Cash's 2002 cover of Trent Reznor's "Hurt" on *American IV: The Man Comes Around* as a performance of the singer's age and disabled condition. Through pain-saturated lyrics, music filled with unresolved tension, a damaged voice, and a video that puts his aged body on display, Cash performs a disability script that presents his age and personal health as disabling burden. I explore how country music, Cash's performance past, and strategies pursued by his producer, Rick Rubin, all contribute to a performance that is both successful popular song and a manifestation of the singer's declining condition. The project invites subsequent explorations of the intersection of age and disability in popular music, and highlights several artists whose voices and performances of old age and disability demand attention. The project aligns with an interactive approach to disability research, breaking down the dialectic between social and individual priorities in disability studies and foregrounding how each influence the overall performance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sitting at a rarely examined intersection between aging, disability, and popular culture, this project explores how the aging body becomes the disabled body in the context of popular music. How do aging artists perform age and age-onset illness? And how do the individual cares and concerns of a body in decline get realized in mediated cultural products? In what follows, I trouble the distinction between bodies and mediation, between lived-experience and cultural product. I argue that the voice of the aging artist engages with his lived-experience even as he performs socially-constructed conceptions of aging and disability. The dialectic between real and imagined bodies presented in these performances foregrounds a tension in disability research, between social model concerns to expose the ways environmental forces disable and the medical model's focus on how individuals negotiate bodily and cognitive impairments. The tension between the social and individual is also an abiding concern in aging studies, and it highlights a core feature of what it means to perform age-disability and to perform music. That is, both music and age-disability imply the inescapable presence of a body (Honisch 250, Straus 126). Analyzing popular music in the context of aging and disability provides an opportunity to listen to the body of the old musician and to consider how his performance complicates the tension between the individual and the social, and my project looks for a middle ground, what has been called an "interactionist" approach (Shakespeare 74-75).

The opening line of the B-section of Johnny Cash's 2002 recording, "Hurt," begins with a question: "What have I become?" Though Cash did not write it, his performance of the song and

the stirring question resonated with a new generation of fans. Along with an award winning video, the success of the song propelled the album, *American IV: The Man Comes Around*, to become his first million selling record since the famous *At San Quentin* (Prison) album of 1969 (Hilburn 606). It was the last record Cash released before his death in September 2003.

The moment the singer utters the question in the song the tone shifts from pensive to driving, encapsulating the pain of the singer's personal reflection on the mess of his life. So pervasive is the pain, loss, and regret that the singer looks inward, does not recognize himself, and asks the question. For the song's creator, Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, a young man in his late 20s at the time, finishing his second full-length record, the song's allusions and images reverberate with his struggle with heroin addiction (Hilburn 595). The Nine Inch Nails version and record tap into the explosive, anxious sounds that seemed to be taking over popular music in the late 80s and early 90s, as represented by the soaring success of heavy-metal, gangster rap, grunge, and industrial, the genre most closely associated with Nine Inch Nails (Szatmary, 293, 333-334). For Johnny Cash, the song and the question suggest a different context, defined not only by the production choices of the artist and his producer, Rick Rubin, but also by the circumstances of Cash's life. Cash is an old man, struggling with compounding ailments that are slowly robbing him of his strength, his abilities, and, a little over a year after making the recording, his life.

Recorded by two different artists, produced in unrelated contexts, and surrounded by a combination of sounds unique to each particular performance, the ultimate answer to that rhetorical question lies veiled in limitless possibilities. But does the autobiographical moment for Cash in the recording process, as a man suffering from multiple age-related ailments, within a year and a half of his death, also figure into how one answers that question? Can an answer

include both the multiplicitous influences involved in production, distribution, and reception of a cultural product made for sale *and* the lived-experience of the artist in the moment, whose aged body cannot help but manifest itself in and through the mediated product?

Other aging recording artists have also challenged the listener to consider the autobiographical moment for the artist. Glen Campbell continued to record and perform even after revealing in 2011 that he had Alzheimer's Disease (Lovejoy). In one of his final recordings, released only two months before he died in 2017, he sings, "Have I lost your love or have I lost my mind?" (Pollak). The line leans toward the longstanding narrative trope in country music of the "heartbroke tore-up fool" but also ironically alludes to the personal life of the singer (Fox 149). David Bowie, a masterful performer of provocative identities throughout his career, filled his final album, *Blackstar* (2016), with allusions which, heard in the context of his shocking death from liver cancer only two days after the album's release, sounds like a man grappling with his impending demise (Edgers). In the opening line of the second track on the album, "Lazarus," the artist croons, "Look up here; I'm in heaven." In the video, a gaunt but smiling Bowie floats with arms outstretched above what appears to be a hospital bed (Bowie 00:34). Is the video and song a mere characterization or something more? Leonard Cohen's deep, scratchy, and old sounding voice, long a performative strategy for the poet-singer, voices lyrics that sound content with the end. "I'm ready my Lord," he sings on the title track of his last record, *You Want it Darker*, released in October 2016, a month before his death at 82 ("Leonard Cohen Obituary"). Johnny Cash's final recordings, however, offer more than the suggestion of personal context. As he sings with his aged, frail voice, he performs both a body in the midst of physical decline and a mediated representation of the sometimes disabling experience of age. Whereas



Campbell, Bowie, and Cohen's biographies suggest an interpretation of their performances, Cash's life frames the performance itself.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THREE DISCIPLINES IN INTERACTION

Johnny Cash presents and grapples with, i.e. performs, his declining body in his final recordings, as his voice sings lyrics and music engaged with the frailties of old age and as his voice sounds the aging-disabled body. Through his vocal performance the listener hears not only the metaphors, tropes, and larger cultural assumptions that frame experiences of aging and disability, but the listener also encounters the sounds of age and age-onset illness. Heard alongside visual materials that accompany these final recordings, the listener confronts both the individual body in the midst of decline and the ways our culture seeks to define, understand, avoid, and even exploit these physical realities and the artist who experiences them. I argue that you cannot explain one without the other.

As mentioned above, this approach advocates an interactionist perspective on disability that seeks to keep socially constructed forces and the experience of the individual in mind. The disciplinary intersectionality (used here not in the technical sense but only to highlight the connection between disability, aging, and popular music as fields of study) foregrounds this tension between culturally mediated product and lived-experience. On the one hand, popular music typifies the ways our culture constructs meaning through mediated performances that mobilize existing discourses in order to make money (Brackett 19). Typically, country songs do not seek to radically reshape or overturn the ways we think or act in the world (Malone 13, 28). In what ways, then, do Cash's final recordings reinforce existing assumptions, particularly about the experience of aging and disability? But on the other hand, Johnny Cash is not the typical

country artist, defying genre designations and presenting conflicting images and messages (Edwards 1). Cash's age and personal struggles become a focal point for his expressions, magnifying the individual's pain and suffering in the context of age-onset illness. How are the discourses transformed, or, at the very least, accommodated to his performance strategies and impairments? Do these transformations challenge dismissive interpretations of popular music as merely passing fantasy, derivative fluff, or as simply an entrenched capitalistic enterprise (McKay 13)? Do these performances illuminate aspects of the aging process and the challenges of negotiating the unstable, progressive, and often unstoppable onset of debilitating illness?

The voice of the artist provides a particularly important and intimate window into the interplay between mediation and body as it both carries the message of the song and attests to the body of the performer (Zumthor 7). For my project, I listen to the voice of Johnny Cash in some of his final American Recordings performances. Primarily, I focus on Cash's "Hurt," on *American IV: The Man Comes Around* (2002) – attending to both the recording and the video of the song and how Cash performs his age and condition both audibly and visibly.

I supplement the discussion of Cash's final work and voice with the work and the voices of other artists, some who still performed right up to the end of their lives. The original performance of "Hurt" by the song's author, Trent Reznor, provides context and musical counterpoint for Rubin's production choices and Cash's performance. Glen Campbell's *Adios* (2017) supports and challenges my analysis of Cash's performance of age and age-related illness. Artists like Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, and Neil Young offer their own voices and recorded examples of popular music's engagement at the intersection of age and disability.

I listen to these recordings with one ear on the disabling discourses of our culture, attending to the ways the words, music and accompanying video display and reinforce

assumptions that age and age-onset illness are a burden, looked upon with pity and, perhaps, sympathy, but, undoubtedly, to be avoided. This ear will also hear the ways age and disability get construed as an opportunity to overcome adversity, how the performer and the performance are statements of defiance and denial of the cascading impairments so common in the aging process. In either case, these utterances become opportunities for artists and record companies to make money. The other ear, however, listens for the clues, hints, and overt manifestations of a body burdened with impairment and in decline. The voice articulates both the physicality of the artist and his thoughts that form speech and nuance that language through musical, visual, and more primitive and visceral voicings. Together, my ears and my readings argue for a composite picture – one that receives these recordings as both culturally constructed products *and* manifestations of the aging body. I listen in order to add the aged voice of the aging popular music artist to the ongoing work of exploring the cultural constructions of disability and age. I listen in order to marvel at the performance strategies of artists like Cash, leveraging the body and production technique, making music that sounds “authentic” and compelling listeners to keep listening and buying. Finally, I listen in order to encourage research that foregrounds the interaction between the social and individual, the cultural representation and lived-experience, as we explore the dynamics around disability and aging in our research and in our world.

### **Disability, Popular Music, and Aging**

My project sits at the intersection of three disciplines, disability, popular music, and aging studies, none of which seems to engage much with the others. Two current readers, *The Disability Studies Reader* (2017), edited by Lennard Davis, and the *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (2013), edited by Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone, and Carol Thomas,

comprising more than 70 articles on disability between them, contain only one article on aging and none on music. Another, *The Popular Music Studies Reader* (2006), edited by Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee, has over 40 chapters on topics ranging from industry issues and technology to race and sexuality, but none of the articles have any direct relationship to disability or aging. Even in the substantial volume, *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies* (2016), only 4 of 72 chapters focus in on the popular music of the last 60 years.

With the maturation of a generation that came of age listening to or performing rock n roll in the 50s, 60s and 70s, some recent work focuses on the intersection between aging and popular music. From a sociological perspective, Andy Bennett and Paul Hodkinson look at how popular music continues to be enjoyed by aging fans, and they question the long held assumption that popular music is about and for the young (*Ageing and Youth Cultures* 1-2, *Music, Style, and Aging* 2). Another study, *'Rock On: ' Women, Ageing and Popular Music* (2012), edited by Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner, considers how female artists negotiate their bodies and images as they age. This work resonates with my project as the authors consider performance as central to understanding how age manifests in music making (2). Nevertheless, these works do not examine disability as an aspect of the aging process or in the context of the aging artists' performances.

Seeking some additional communication between the three fields, my project hones in on disability as interaction between social processes and individual experience. I employ the scholarship and methods of performance and popular music studies while keeping in mind how aging informs and shapes the conversation, especially highlighting the often progressive and uniquely personal aging-disabling process. This crossroads brings together these three fields as

one converging dynamic both making meaning in our culture and engaging with real bodies in the world.

For this project, the social model of disability is an inescapable touchstone because it pervades the literature on culture and disability and because it offers critical insight into the artistic products created in this culture. Scholar Lennard Davis suggests “that the object of disability studies is not the person using the wheelchair or the Deaf person, but the set of social, historical, economic and cultural processes that regulate and control the way we think about and think through the body” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 2). Environmental and material forces and not individual impairments disable, and these forces have structured the way we approach the body, defining who is considered disabled and who is not. That disability can be understood, to some degree, in the same light as gender and race, as defined by social and institutional structures, and not necessarily as inherent to the individual, means that our cultural products often index and reinforce assumptions, structure power dynamics, and marginalize groups of people because of bodily difference (Oliver and Barnes 19, 109, 173). And because popular music exists as a capitalistic enterprise, the social model also informs how disability gets wielded to uphold the institutional structures for economic gain (162-163). Below, I explore how marginalizing discourses work to reinforce the economic viability of Cash’s performances. Nevertheless, the social model goes too far in drawing a hard distinction between impairment and disability, the former as individual bodily experience and the latter as exclusively environmental and material barriers. I argue, instead, that Cash’s individual experience of impairment is intertwined with the social forces that shape disability. One cannot be separated from the other.

In that light, my project resonates with medical sociologist Tom Shakespeare’s critique of the social model. Because the social model separates impairment and disability and takes aim at

the social forces that produce disability, he argues, it necessarily minimizes the role that impairment plays in the life of the individual (Shakespeare 42). Further, he raises concerns regarding the assumption that disability can be eradicated merely by social change, and, in its place, he argues for a “realist” or “interactionist” approach, maintaining that “disability is always an *interaction* between individual and structural factors” (42, 74 emphasis added). As stated above, the bodily experience and social implications of disability are intertwined. But Shakespeare remains suspicious of projects like mine – what he calls “Cultural Disability Studies.” He argues that these projects and scholars seem “more interested in texts and discourses than the ordinary lives of disabled people,” that they lack empirical evidence to support claims, and are “oriented more towards the academy than towards activism” (47, 52, 70). I resonate with his concerns but believe this work charts a different course, seeking to uncover the ways an artistic text *does* engage with the person behind the performance and, while not strictly empirical evidence, my project takes Cash’s performances as representative of his personal experiences alongside the existing discourses, especially in the light of audio, video, and biographical evidence that substantiates the disabling effects of his condition. Making much of the person in the context of the performance, in my mind, is a kind of activism. In that light, my project seeks to open new ground for talking about the aging-disabling, bodily experience, even in the context of a culturally mediated product like a popular song.

Keeping Shakespeare’s framework and concerns in view, my effort at “Cultural Disability Studies” takes popular music as the site for the meaning-making and lived-experience of age and disability. George McKay’s important work, *Shakin’ All Over* (2013), lays the groundwork for future scholarship uniting what he calls, the “trashy ephemera of pop and rock” with the burgeoning scholarship around music and disability (13). McKay aligns himself with a

cultural model approach to disability that nuances the social model. As articulated by Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell in *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006), the cultural model suggests that “impairment is both human variation encountering environmental obstacles *and* socially mediated difference” (10). While breaking down the distinctions between impairment and disability, the key modifiers in this definition, “environmental” and “socially mediated” both connote an external source for impairment. In other words, impairment like disability is the result of outside forces. I disagree, and while McKay takes this model as a key component of his work, he also presents what he calls a “more affirming version of the cultural model,” one that looks closely at specific sites and particular artists who grapple with their own experiences of impairment in the context of their musical performances (McKay 8, 73, 138). I do not believe Snyder and Mitchell deny the human, even impaired contribution to cultural representations, but, rather, that their objects of concern tend toward the environmental, external forces constructing disability in the context of those representations.

My project, like McKay’s, adds to this endeavor by nudging the perspective away from merely external explanations for the manifestation of disability, honing in on the corporeality of the artist. McKay begins his study by suggesting that “there are identifiable and powerful links between popular music and the damaged, imperfect, deviant, and extraordinary body or voice, which can be, and surprisingly often *is*, a disabled body or voice” (1). Uncovering these “links” underlies his project and mine.

Analyzing musical performance explores the links between represented and lived bodies. McKay writes that “popular music is one of those contemporary cultural zones in which the body signifies centrally” (88). Bodies are the object of lyrical description and visual representation but, more importantly, produce the sounds heard in popular music. According to Blake Howe,



musical performance, as an embodied artform, produced through “certain actions, behaviors and appearances,” whether live or recorded, calls attention to the interaction of socially constructed modes of representation and the bodies that produce them (Howe 191). I explore this interaction between cultural ways of presenting age and disability in popular music alongside the person and the impairments that make up the performance. I argue that one is inseparable from the other. I also suggest that the study of musical performance, as a cultural form that inherently holds the social and the corporeal in interaction, offers a model to the disciplines of disability and aging studies, encouraging an interaction between social and corporeal concerns rather than a focus on one or the other. Interjecting features of the aging process into the discussion is one way my project opens new ground beyond McKay’s important exploration of the territory around popular music and the performance of disability.

Aging and the scholarship associated with it play a critical role in my overall project, because it complicates the aforementioned approaches to disability and popular music. Keeping the topic in view highlights important challenges to the social and cultural model approaches and lends itself to the interactionist view. Aging tends to magnify “individual differences,” i.e. individual bodies, rather than collective identity, suggest Eva and Jeffrey Kahana, in *Disability and Aging: Learning from Both to Empower the Lives of Older Adults* (2017) (27). They see disability and aging studies in a dialectic, the former, as stated above, emphasizing external social and cultural factors and the latter foregrounding the experiences and concerns of individuals (40). “The notion,” they argue, “that some people consider their disability as burdensome... has not been widely accepted by the disabilities studies community” (39). In other words, the “burden” of individual impairment has not been a priority for the more socially and culturally focused approach. The focus on the individual’s burden, however, opens the door for

considering how Cash's expressions work both as cultural product and lived-experience. On the one hand, as he invokes images of aging and impairment as a burden, I argue he represents aging as a primarily negative experience, consistent with the onerous and othering discourses around disability in our culture. On the other hand, I suggest that he sings of aging and its effects as a burden because he *is* burdened with impairments, and his efforts reflect these personal concerns and experiences of pain and suffering. My project, then, intervenes in the aging-disability conversation, breaking down the dialectic, asking for serious consideration of aging and its implications on the broader conversation, especially in light of the prevailing emphasis on external forces. In the largest sense, aging, as a progressive, dynamic, and unstoppable disabling reality, cannot be theorized out of existence, rehabilitated beyond its effects, or ultimately avoided by societal structural change. Zeroing in on Cash's final musical performances highlights these realities.

### **Discourse and the Body in Performance**

The analysis below uncovers the controlling discourses that structure disability and aging as a burden. I explore how the artist and the industry wield these utterances to reinforce cultural assumptions for economic gain and, ironically, to carve a unique (i.e authentic) expressive space for the artist. Attending to these discursive dynamics means looking at how the lyrics and sounds in the song reinforce what Michel Foucault calls "systems of exclusion," defining the struggles in ways that set the aged-disabled apart (Foucault 219). Performing aging-disability as a burden to be avoided, I argue Cash reinforces these exclusionary systems by reassuring the listener of her distance from the perceived threat of bodily difference. Simon Frith asserts, "If music gives lyrics their linguistic vitality, lyrics give songs their social use" ("Why Do Songs Have Words?")

93). This “social use” frames my look into the word plays, metaphors, and tropes invoked by Cash and how the markers of weakness, pain, and suffering in the song tell the story of aging as disabling burden. Further, I maintain that the exclusionary portrayal of aging as a disabling burden enhances the viability of the song as a cultural product. Musicologist David Brackett links authenticity to “marginality,” – the perception of a person or group’s existence outside mainstream society. “Music... at the ‘margins,’” he writes, “is frequently the most available for appropriation and economic exploitation precisely because it carries the greatest charge of ‘authenticity’” (Brackett 89). For Cash’s song, I maintain, the connection with authenticity ties the exclusionary discourse to the opportunity to sell records. While it seems oppressive and maybe even sinister, leveraging discourse that excludes and marginalizes makes for successful capitalism (Oliver and Barnes 159-160). Below, I wrestle with these practices, even as the song and my analysis uncover a more complicated picture.

Cash’s own voice complicates this picture. Even as Cash’s song structures a conversation around aging and disability that reinforces prevailing, disabling assumptions and takes advantage of these oppressive assumptions for economic gain, his performance also confronts these assumptions by giving the listener access to his aging, disabled body. I build my argument for recognizing the lived-experience of the artist behind the products on a phenomenological framework that foregrounds how human perception involves a connection to the body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that “the thing [perceived], and the world, are given to me along with the parts of my body... in a living connection comparable, or rather identical, with that existing between the parts of my body itself” (Merleau-Ponty 205). I cannot separate my perceptions (i.e. listening) from my own body in the act of listening and from how that connects me to the body producing the sounds. I employ this connection between perception and the body through what

scholars have referred to in music as “the trace of the body” or more famously and more germane to my topic, by Roland Barthes as the “grain in the voice” (Iyer 399, Barthes 267). Reflecting on Barthes’ “grain,” Vijay Iyer writes that, “the physicality and resistance of the voice point to its producer, the performer, and to the act of it being produced... the meaning of a vocal utterance is constituted not simply by its semantic content or its melodic logic, but also by its sonorous content” (Iyer 399). I listen to the sounds of the voice in “Hurt” as articulations of the “physicality and resistance” of an aging-disabled body. Breathing and breathiness, unfinished phrases and melodic missteps all become articulations of a body burdened and in decline.

Discourse and the body, called the story and voice below, come together in a performance. Cash brings narrativized disability and vocalized disability together in interaction rather than in opposition. His song presents an aged man singing through the disabling cultural assumptions that transform the experience of aging into a disabling experience. “Hurt” sets up what Joseph Straus, relying on Rosemarie Garland Thomson, calls an “encounter” with disability (Straus 130). The confrontation is both “audible” and “visible” through Cash’s vocal performance, the musical production around his voice, and the accompanying video (Howe 192). I listen and look for the audible and visible markers of Cash’s performance of disability – the way the production foregrounds his old voice, the way words and music are transformed by his biographical context, and the way the video puts the old man’s body on display. The burden of aging provides the context for these audible and visible clues and for what Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander call a “script” or stereotypical representation for the performance of disability (3-4). I seek, in what follows, to uncover the script of Cash’s performance, how he performs what it means to grow old and acquire physical impairment during the aging process.

In sum, my project holds the articulations of the body in the grain of the voice alongside the exclusionary practices of the popular music industry. I argue that these come together in Cash's performance of aging and disability. This conjunction complicates the distinction between mediation and bodies and encourages an interpretive framework that wrestles with both in interaction. First, I consider the context of Cash's performance, how the tools of popular music, his previous performance strategies, and his present condition play into the "Hurt" performance. Country music tropes shape the opportunity to sing a disability script of aging as a burden. Vocal lateness, instability, and damage instill the performance with the narrativizing power of disabled, old age. And Cash's long history of genre bending, contradictory images provide continuity between Cash's past and his rendition of a modern song. Then, I analyze the song as both discourse and the body – a story and a voice in interaction. I listen to the disability script of aging as burden manifest in the sounds and sights of the "Hurt" performance. Finally, I consider the implications of this interaction for Cash as an artist in the popular music industry, how perceived "authenticity" shapes the opportunity to make money, and how the song reinforces and challenges cultural assumptions of disability and aging. Looking beyond the performance, I consider a future for aging-disabled performers and their culture shaping performances, including the opportunities to confront the script wielded by Cash in "Hurt," the creative and technological possibilities for future performances of age-disability, and the ongoing challenges presented at the intersections of aging, disability, and gender in popular music.

### III. PERFORMANCE CONTEXT: CASH'S VOICE AND STORY

Johnny Cash's award winning video for the song "Hurt" (2002) begins with the image of a bronze statue – probably a table ornament – of a bearded man bearing a load on his back. Faux ivy and flowers sit on top of what appears to be a woven basket or large sack, and the figure's back bends under the supposed strain. Full beard, long shaggy hair, and rugged face ambiguously suggest age and maturity. The first cut in the video closes in on the face and the viewer sees the eyes, straining upward, below a deeply furrowed brow, with one eyelid struggling and half-closed. The raised eyes peer not toward the sky or heaven, as in a crucifix, but toward the load, the burden, that undoubtedly marks off the experience of the never-ending moment for the bronzed man, and for the viewer-listener of the video-song, setting the tone for what follows.

Cash sings of what the title states overtly, hurt, or more to the point of this analysis, disabling hurt. I argue that Cash performs a view of life at the end of life as an experience of disability. As the aged artist sings, his damaged voice, as suggested by the image of the statue, presents aging as burden, an inevitable season of pain, loss, and regret. It presents aging in the light of cascading impairment, of diminished influence alongside physical decline. Cash realizes these effects as his voice utters lyrics and music that construct a narrative of disabling hurt. Alongside and within this construction, the voice itself sounds a body broken and in pain from age and age-onset illness, and the musical production both foregrounds the old man's voice and then eclipses it in layers of texture and distortion. In short, Cash performs aging as disability. He performs both socially constructed discourse and lived-experience in interaction. His

performance resounds a troubled perspective on what it means in our culture to grow old and face physical decline, and it engages with his body in the midst of that decline.

### **Performing a Voice in a Story *and* a Story in a Voice**

Disability happens. It happens when environmental barriers prevent access to those with bodily differences, as the social model of disability maintains (Oliver and Barnes 112). It happens when marginalizing discourses get mapped onto impairments and construct stigmatizing beliefs about bodily difference. Cultural representations, as in a song, wield these discourses in ways that reinforce the negative assumptions and associations. For example, 19th century ballad, “Mary of the Wild Moor,” performed by Cash on *American III: Solitary Man* (2000), invokes disability in the lyric, “But her father was deaf to her cries, not a sound of her voice did he hear.” Though it remains unclear in the song whether the lack of hearing refers to a bodily difference or a callous attitude on the part of the father, deafness, in this case, results in the tragic death of the daughter and her child, both left out in the cold. Disability, construed as a negative force on the action, serves as a metaphor that conflates deafness with an individual’s lack of concern – resulting in profound tragedy. The perceived impairment provides the narrative twist that propels the story to its sad conclusion. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, in their book *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000), suggest that disability often serves this purpose in stories, providing the impetus for conflict and, therefore, momentum toward resolution (Mitchell and Snyder 8, 51). Disability, and, thus, the disabled, are presented as the source of the problem needing to be fixed or avoided or, as in the song above, propelling the action to a tragic end. Recalling Lennard Davis’ assertion, quoted earlier, that “cultural processes... regulate and control the way we think about and think through the body,” in what follows, I consider how Cash’s song invokes a

“cultural process” that makes meaning around age as a disabling burden. Infusing the song with the sights and sounds of his weak, old body becomes the “narrative prosthesis” that moves the song forward.

But disability also happens in an individual’s body. Experiences of pain and suffering, physical weakness, or decline of cognitive function can disable apart from contact with environmental barriers, social discourses, or cultural processes (Shakespeare 84-88). Bodily differences sometimes mean negotiating the world differently. Cash’s final recordings bear this out. In his posthumously released record, *American VI: Ain’t No Grave* (2010), songs like the title track, “Ain’t No Grave,” and “I Don’t Hurt Anymore,” while overtly invoking images of the body, its frailties, and death – even in the titles – sound the frailties of the human body through Cash’s scratchy, breathy, and shaky voice. There is a marked difference in strength and vocal presence heard in these recordings when compared to earlier recordings. It is the result, I maintain, not merely from manipulated recording and vocal technique but of Cash’s age and weakened condition. This lack of strength and presence, while aligning nicely with the subject matter of the songs, also highlights Cash’s broken voice and condition.

I ground my approach to his performance of age and disability in the belief that disability happens in interaction between the discourses and the individual’s body, between external and internal forces, and, specifically, between the story and the voice (Shakespeare 74). For Cash’s version of “Hurt,” the voice invokes images of pain, loss, and regret and infuses them with particular meanings in a particular context. That is, Cash wields these images to tell a story. Lennard Davis writes, “When one speaks of disability, one always associates it with a story, places it in narrative” (Davis 3-4). While Cash’s song does not tell a story in the typical sense, like the ballad mentioned above, the context of his particular performance connects the



invocations of pain, loss, and regret to the narrative of an aged body in decline, in the twilight of his career. Images from the video juxtapose his present situation with the prowess and vitality of his past. Chord progressions thwart a sense of resolution, and instrumental texture builds to a tense climax. Both play a role in the developing narrative. As a cover song associated with the meanings of the previous performance and performer, Cash transforms it from addict to old man's lament (Edwards 59). This is the *voice in the story*.

Cash's voice also sounds the sounds of his age and condition. In "Hurt," I hear the grit and "grain" of an old man's voice (Barthes 267, Iyer 395). Recording technique accommodates the ailing performer but leaves his voice front and center. The distinctively rough and deep baritone sounds frail and mired down with limited lung capacity and strength. The close miked and sparse accompaniments highlight Cash's ebbing stamina. Faltering phrases and a marked tremor reveal what Barthes calls "the *friction* between music and something else" (Barthes 273). They are the sounds of age and age-onset illness – the *story in the voice*.

I read the song through the lens of aging in order to understand how Cash performs disability, narrativizing it while also manifesting it in his body and, particularly, his voice. I zero in on the idea that older people see the onset of disabling conditions and circumstances as an individual burden to be avoided or managed (Kahana and Kahana 39). I also consider the aging-disabling process as a season of decline, what the Jeffrey and Eva Kahana refer to as a cascading, gradual slide into "functional impairment" (28-29). These two categories, burden and decline, as the video's first images suggest, form the backbone of the disability script I argue Cash performs. They frame an answer to the rhetorical question at the emotional turn in the song: "What have I become?"

## The Aging-Disabled Script in Popular Music

The connection between aging and disability in popular music is not new with or unique to Cash's performance, though, as I will argue below, "Hurt" provides a striking and culturally significant example. Neil Young's classic song from 1972, "Old Man," subtly evokes the aging-disabled connection. The two-chord introduction establishes a sense of ambivalence as the guitar toggles back and forth between a dissonant version of d-minor and a standard position D-major. Young's shaky falsetto suggests fragility and instability (McKay 63-64). These musical cues accompany and convey lyrics that link old age to loss and loneliness as the singer relates to the "Old Man" through his own struggles: "Old man, look at my life, I'm a lot like you were." Being needy and hardened by disappointment are the primary points of contact. "Love lost, such a cost," he sings: "give me things that don't get lost, like a coin that won't get tossed." The "Old Man" is a metaphor for personal struggle, longing and even regret – associating the experience of aging with a burdened, disabled experience. John Denver's "Old Folks," on *Spirit* (1976), provides a far more overt connection between aging and disability. Dissonant piano chords – mimicking a clock chime - punctuate verses sung by Denver in a serene voice, with arpeggiated guitar and piano accompaniment. The lyrics frame the life of "Old Folks" as resigned to the relentless passage of time, powerless against the debilitating effects of aging – physically, socially and psychologically:

You'll see them as they walk, through the sun filled parks  
Where children run and play, it hurts too much to smile  
It hurts so much, but life goes on for still another day  
As they try to escape the old silver clock, when day is through

Loss and burden structure the perspective on aging in these two examples. The portrayals resonate with what Sandahl and Auslander call the cultural script of the disabled as “charity case,” or as I will argue for Cash, with aging as a burden (3). Whether as a point of personal connection or eliciting pity, both songs imply that the aged exist out of the norm, estranged and impaired, i.e. disabled.

Glen Campbell offers a more contemporary example and salient counterpoint to Cash’s performance of age-disability. After announcing that he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease in 2011, Campbell continued to record and perform, and even participated in a documentary film aimed at presenting his battle with the disease (Patton B-1). His final album, *Adiós* (2017), connects his performances to his battle with Alzheimer’s, as classic country songs are transformed by his condition. His wife, Kim Campbell, in the album’s liner notes, makes explicit the connection between his condition and these performances: “Glen’s abilities to play, sing and remember songs began to rapidly decline after his diagnosis in 2011. A feeling of urgency grew to get him into the studio one last time to capture what magic was left. It was now or never” (Jackson and Campbell). Broad themes around the mind, memory and remembering, the inevitable passage of time, and relational separation pervade the record. The opening lines of the opening track, “Everybody’s Talkin’,” a hit for Harry Nilsson in 1969, sets the tone for what follows: “Everybody’s talkin’ at me, I don’t hear a word they’re sayin’, *only the echoes of my mind*” (italics added). The next three tracks, “Just Like Always,” “Funny How Time Slips Away,” and “Arkansas Farmboy,” all reflect on memories and remembering, sometimes with nostalgia and sometimes with regret, but always unchangeable and out of reach.

The songs on the album often draw upon typical country music lyrical devices to connect with the tradition but also to engage the present moment for Campbell. Like Cash, the interplay

between musical convention and personal experience happens in interaction rather than in opposition. Aaron A. Fox, in his book, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (2004), argues that the “poetics” of country music often include the “literalization” of wordplay, using common puns, metaphors, and cliches, but reappropriating them in the song to new meanings (231-232). In Carrie Underwood’s song from 2015, “Heartbeat,” the image of the heartbeat both metaphorically expresses the passion between lovers and acts as a musical instrument: “dancing to the rhythm of your heartbeat... I wanna feel it like a kick drum, beating faster in your chest.” This process – taking the phrase and extracting it from its figurative sense and deploying it in a more literal way – infuses country music, Fox suggests, with the speaking conventions of working class people (37, 230). In Campbell’s case, however, it connects his performance to his age and disabled condition.

“Am I All Alone,” the fifth song on *Adiós*, plays on the double meaning throughout. Hinging on the question, “Am I all alone, or is it only me?” the song pushes and pulls against a figurative and literal meaning of the phrase – maintaining the tension between the lovers’ relational distance and the literal experience of being alone. The literalization enhances the connection with Campbell’s present circumstance as the singer grapples with whether his physical faculties are to blame for the failing relationship: “Am I seeing things, or am I going blind?” Disability facilitates the literalization as the singer toggles back and forth between the image and reality. The device gives the song its country music connection but also plays into the experiential moment for the performer.

In “Postcard from Paris,” the road-life of the performer-singer symbolizes the separation between lovers, and the postcard cliché, “I wish you were here,” stands in as the term of affection for the absent companion. Literalization occurs in the context of the performance itself,

clarified both in the liner notes by producer Carl Jackson and in an interview with Campbell's daughter, Ashley. In the song, Campbell sings the cliché phrase along with Ashley and her two brothers as background vocalists. As the song nears the end, Campbell's voice recedes behind the voices of his children singing the line. In the liner notes, producer Carl Jackson writes, "The vivid images of [Jimmy Webb's] lyrics matched with the voices of Glen and Kim's own children, Ashley, Shannon, and Cal, singing the line, 'I wish you were here,' deliver a powerful and emotional message that extends far beyond and much deeper than the normal 'missing you' song" (Jackson and Campbell). Of the circumstance around the performance and the double meaning of the line, Ashley Campbell observes, "it couldn't be more true or heartbreaking" ("See Glen Campbell's Daughter Ashley Preview Father's Final Album"). The production choices, then, contribute to the literalization process, taking a worn-out cliché and imbuing it with meaning that transforms it. Campbell performs his experience of age-onset illness.

Like Campbell, Cash's repertoire includes many songs that deploy this and other country music conventions. Trains often serve Cash as metaphors for the passage of time or a better life outside the singer's circumstance, but they also offer the means of escape from those circumstances, such as in "Folsom Prison Blues" (Fox 231). Another device, the trope of "imperfection," figures heavily in his arsenal and performance persona (109). A quick survey of the song titles on his hit album, *At Folsom Prison* (1968), attests to the significance of this theme in his performance. After the title track, the track list includes "Busted," "Dark as a Dungeon," "I Still Miss Someone," "Cocaine Blues," and "25 Minutes to Go," a song about a man awaiting his execution. These songs, aimed at his audience in that particular performance (a prison), also point to his larger image as an outsider and rebel, and it underscores why his two most successful

albums prior to *American IV: The Man Comes Around* were both live recordings of performances in prisons. Imperfection became a standard in Cash's repertoire.

Metaphorical literalization and imperfection factor prominently in Cash's performance of "Hurt," though they are not deployed in a conventional country music idiom. As will be explored below, the approach chosen by Rubin and Cash challenges the conventions even while the producer and singer make explicit connections with Cash's past performance persona. Aging and disability provide a connective resource for bridging the gap between the Cash of the present and the past. In the song, images of pain and suffering – needles that tear holes – get literalized in the context of Cash's frail voice and body. Production elements, particularly musical texture and distortion, also facilitate a sense of literalization – foregrounding Cash's disabled voice even while drowning it out in sound. And Cash sings in the light of his imperfections, especially those caused by his age and failing health. As opposed to Campbell, whose voice remained full and clear on his last album, Cash's version of a popular song becomes an opportunity to hear his aging, frail voice-body, performing disability as the script of a burdened life.

### **Cash and Rubin: Enabling Disability**

Cash's collaboration with producer Rick Rubin and American Recordings began in 1993, well after many had already written Cash's career off as beyond recovery. With Cash's current label, Mercury Records, showing little interest in finishing out their contract for one more album, Rubin took over and helped Cash by recovering his 'authentic' voice and performance style (Hilburn 513, 540). Cash was in his early 60s and Rubin was 31, but beyond their ages, the relationship seemed unusual in other ways: Rubin, the successful New York producer of groundbreaking rap artists like Run-D.M.C. and Public Enemy, and Cash, often travelling and

performing with Christian evangelist Billy Graham, had not had a hit in any genre in over a decade (Streissguth xxi, 218-219). Rubin tapped into the unprecedented nature of the moment by stripping down the production on their first album, *American Recordings* (1994), and even asking Cash to perform live by himself, something he had rarely done (Hilburn 550). Rubin saw an opportunity to present Cash in a new light, showcasing the man behind the performance, but he hoped the newness would really be more like a fresh look at the old Cash. “What I was looking for was a direct transmission from his heart,” the producer said (qtd. in Hilburn 550). The notion of presenting one’s real self in a recording made for public consumption is fraught with complication and contradiction, yet Rubin’s early desire with Cash highlights an ongoing feature of their collaboration as it continued for the next decade. Even as Cash aged and his health declined, Rubin’s approach foregrounded Cash’s voice, the presumed signifier of the man behind the song, and the manifestation of his ailing body.

Cash’s singing voice had always been distinctive and marked by a sense of weight and age. In his earliest days at Sun Records, Cash endured comparisons with his label mate Elvis Presley, whose energetic and silky sounds garnered overwhelming success in popular, mainstream music despite his southern, rockabilly roots (Streissguth 3, 44). From the start, Cash’s voice seemed “desperate and mysterious,” giving it a gravity that belied his young age though it complimented his rural subject matter (3, 35). An early commentator heard “a quiver in his voice,” though not from fear (43). Another called it “big and lonely,” and still another, in 1959, said he had a “deep, twanging baritone” that allowed him to sing about “sorrow with spectacular success” (49, 52). Richard Elliott, in his book, *The Late Voice* (2015), considers how time, age, and experience figure into performance in popular music. Arguing that “lateness” in the voice does not necessarily coincide with the chronological age of a performer, he suggests

that themes of “experience gained and/or anticipated” along with vocal timbres and techniques influence the listener’s perception, creating associations with age and maturity (Elliott 3, 47-48). Poet and singer-songwriter, Leonard Cohen, one of Elliott’s case studies, exemplifies vocal lateness and how it relates to the performance of old age. Cohen’s low and scratchy voice, speak-singing style, and weighty subject matter on songs like “Bird on the Wire” (1973) and “Hallelujah” (1984) mask his actual age (125-126, 132). Even as he continued to age, commentators and critics found it difficult to discern a stylistic shift, largely because he already sounded old. One writer remarked on the sense of continuity in Cohen’s style, suggesting that at 70, “he did not sound much older than he did at 35” (“Leonard Cohen Obituary”). The vocal performances on his final album, *You Want it Darker* (2016), released just 3 weeks before he died at 82, do not sound markedly different from songs released 20 or even 40 years earlier. Cash’s early performances, as well, are marked by this “lateness,” a weight and seriousness in sound and subject matter. It gave him a long-standing expressive vehicle, a performance style that projected authenticity through sounding old and weighed down with heavy burdens, long before his age corroborated those assumptions. Below, I consider where and how this performance technique merges with reality in Cash’s singing voice.

Rubin capitalizes on this expressive power in seeking to resurrect Cash’s flagging career. Stripping down the production in the first record to just Cash’s voice and acoustic guitar, and generally maintaining that aesthetic throughout their six record collaboration (the 2nd album as the exception, backed by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers), Rubin fills the recordings with Cash’s voice (Hilburn 561). Stephanie Vander Wel points to the connection between microphone recording techniques and the expressive possibilities in country music, noting how technology gets wielded to foreground manipulations of the voice-body, highlighting moments of strain and



intensity alongside more subtle expressive cues, and providing a means for constructing a particular aesthetic in the performance (163). Sounds of strain and nasality (note the description of Cash’s “twanging baritone” above), “sonic instability” in Vander Wel’s terms, become markers of sincerity and authenticity in country music, establishing a perceived connection to the roots of the genre in poor, Southern working-class culture (159, 161). Rubin’s production choices capture the sonorous authority of Cash’s dark, powerful but raw vocal quality and conjure associations with Cash’s past – his personal history as the son of an Arkansas farmer, his initial recordings with Sun Records, and his raw and rebellious performances at Folsom and San Quentin prisons (Hilburn 544).

The initial reception of the first three albums, spanning 1994-2000, affirmed this effort. Critics noted, with praise, the “*physical* sound of his voice,” calling it “deep [and] raw,” and commenting that “his bass-baritone voice has gone from gravelly to grave” (qtd. in Streissguth 222 (*italics original*), 239, 247). The opening line of “Delia’s Gone,” the first song on the first album, exemplifies the effect of the production choices around Cash’s voice. After only four quickly arpeggiated notes from the acoustic guitar, the listener encounters Cash’s voice, front and center. It is bold and authoritative. The delivery has a conversational, speak-singing quality and the twangy, nasal dialect infuses it with the earthy, “sonic instability” mentioned above. The singer laments having shot and killed a woman he might have married: “If I hadn’t a-shot poor Delia, I’d a-had her for my wife.” The vocal placement, authoritative delivery of a playfully yet arresting line, and the vocal twang work together to present the new Cash, though older in years, with the presence and vocal sonority of his past successes.

After the release of the third album, *American III: A Solitary Man* (2000), commentators also took note of the effects of aging and illness in Cash’s voice, referring to his “shaken” vocal

performance, but marveling at how his “resolution [remained] undaunted” (qtd. in Streissguth 262). One critic wrote hyperbolically of the effect of listening to Cash’s voice, even as it waned in strength: “...the words are weighted by force of personality and by inherent importance: Things quite literally matter because Johnny Cash says them” (267). The effect of Cash’s vocal placement, even as he aged, enhanced the connection between Cash the (old) person and Cash the (always perceived as old) performer, keeping the sense of authenticity squarely in the mix.

But not everyone was convinced. Country music critic Chris Dickinson saw the collaboration with Rubin and the American Recordings albums as another career resurrecting leap-in-the-dark for Cash and a barely concealed marketing strategy for Rubin – trying to set Cash apart from the “weak pop and soft rock” dominating the country charts (qtd. in Streissguth 252). The photo on the cover of the first record, she wrote, presented Cash as “the kind of pretentious icon that Charlton Heston became after he made *The Ten Commandments* and started believing his own myth” (252). Dickinson’s concerns center around authenticity, and she sees the spare arrangements and unusual song choices as merely an effort to rebrand Cash rather than the ‘true’ expression that Rubin desired (252-253). Nevertheless, when she comments on Cash’s live performances (also produced by Rubin), she cannot help but note his “overwhelming presence... penetrating arrangements,” and the power of his voice, though “hoarse and ragged” (253-254). In comparing the performer on stage with the performer in the recordings, she presents the very tension I argue exists in these recordings and, especially, “Hurt” – that Cash’s voice communicates both as an instrument of the mediated, commodified product and as a representation of a lived, aging, struggling body, and that this combination enhances the sense of authenticity.

The intimacy of Cash’s vocals highlight not only the perceived authority, whether convincing or not, but also the toll of age and illness. By the early 90s, when he and Rubin began working together, Cash had endured heart surgery in 1988 and regularly suffered from pain in his jaw from a botched dental procedure in 1990 (Hilburn 521, 526). As the collaboration developed, so did Cash’s ailments. In 1995, he showed signs of asthma, perhaps related to diabetes, from which he also suffered (Hilburn 561, Edwards 19). In 1997, he began experiencing neurological issues, including disorientation and tremors, first believed to be Parkinsons and then Shy-Drager syndrome, though doctors later ruled out both conditions (Streissguth 219). Between the second and third albums, Cash fell gravely ill with double pneumonia and lapsed into a coma, prompting an almost four year gap between the two records (262). “The bold baritone,” writes Michael Streissguth in *Ring of Fire: The Johnny Cash Reader* (2002), “that on [the second album] reverberated like a train in a tunnel was now more withered than withering” (262). Aging and age onset illness had marred Cash’s already distinctive voice.

As stated above, Cash’s old-sounding voice is one of the features of the “Hurt” performance that highlight the interaction between body and mediation. Is his voice in “Hurt” the sounds of a skilled performer, known for conveying a sense of gravity and maturity? Or are these sounds the sounds of a voice grappling with the physical burden and decline of his ailing, failing voice-body? I hear both. Cash brings the depth of timbre and steady delivery that made him a distinctive and engaging performer. “Hurt” stands alongside great early hits like “I Walk the Line” (1956) and “Folsom Prison Blues” (1957), where the deep sounds and mature subject matter disguise his young age. “I Walk the Line” particularly highlights the sense of perceived (i.e. performed) maturity. The low humming between verses and the descending key changes in the 2nd half of the song attach gravity and significance to the singer’s pronouncements of his

faithfulness to his lover. Even though Cash struggles to hit the low B of the final verse on “because your mine,” the power of the move downward accomplishes its mission – pushing the declaration of fidelity to the extreme – not upward in a kind of youthful exuberance but down into the foundation of vocal ability and stability. Like the continuity of Cohen’s early and late performances, Cash’s voice still reverberates almost 50 years after “I Walk the Line,” as Elliott puts it, with “absolute authority” in his performance of the Nine Inch Nails cover (Elliott 140).

But aging in “Hurt” is more than the sounds of maturity, stability, and experience, which is part of what makes disability a salient component of my interpretation of Cash’s performance. Cash’s voice, as I read it, sounds his body in a struggle with his age and poor health. Listeners noticed a change between the second and third albums, and biographical accounts confirm Cash’s declining condition. The third and fourth albums lack songs with a light, upbeat delivery, reminiscent of early favorites like “Get Rhythm” or “Big River” and still present on the first and second American Recordings records in songs like “Let the Train Blow the Whistle” and “I’ve Been Everywhere.” Songs like the opening track of the third album, “I Won’t Back Down,” and “The Man Comes Around” and “Sam Hall” on the fourth record lean toward a quicker pace but they lack the pep and playfulness of earlier recordings. Instead, even where tempos are relatively upbeat, there is a slowness in Cash’s delivery that hints at his growing difficulty to sing in anything but short spurts (Hilburn 577). Could it be merely a production choice? Certainly, though such a choice seems inconsistent with the trajectory of the Cash and Rubin collaboration, unless that choice is informed by Cash’s present condition. That is, Rubin and Cash are intent on recapturing the “old Cash” – the powerful and provocative performer of earlier days – by foregrounding the old Cash, the present, weakened though still toughing it out, version of the man and artist. I argue, his performance of age and disability merge as his long-held, and

mediated, performing style intersects with his present bodily circumstances. Rather than a performance of “lateness,” merely leaning in on time, age, and experience, Cash’s song taps into another script associated with aging – one focused on the burden and decline experienced as age brings loss of ability. His already distinctive vocal style now includes the deteriorating effects of his physical condition.

Cash performs ‘Hurt’ not in spite of but with his damaged voice. Laurie Stras unpacks the effects of the damaged voice in performance and suggests that the sounds of a declined, strained voice might even be “preferred,” and, similar to Vander Wel’s assessment above, be perceived as marks of “authority, authenticity, and integrity” (“The Organ of the Soul” 174). The strain of age and illness shows up in a “tremor” throughout these later recordings as well as in the slow delivery mentioned above (Streissguth 230). More specific sounds of damage manifest in songs like “Wayfaring Stranger,” on the third album, in the breathiness of the tone, in trouble maintaining pitch on long held notes like, “I’m just *goin’* over Jordan,” and in the shaky ends of phrases where consonants, melody, and breath seem to stumble over one another (*italics added*). In some cases, these effects – loss of vocal control and tone – might disable a singer by prohibiting participation or loss of commercial success, but these same manifestations, as Stras suggests and Cash’s performance confirms, can also enhance the perceived value and power of the performance. Pathologically, the aging vocal apparatus, on its own, often exhibits many of these symptoms – breathiness, loss of tonal control – without any reference to other bodily ailments (Hall 76). And younger performers also “simulate or manipulate” the voice to achieve the desired “damaged” aesthetic (“The Organ of the Soul” 174). The opportunity to manufacture the sounds of a distressed, disabled voice complicate the effort to hear the real body behind the mediated vocal performance. However, for Cash and these recordings, I argue that setting one

against the other – mediation and the body – is equally problematic. Calling Cash’s old sounding voice mere mediated, vocal “lateness” ignores the physiological, biographical, and performative moment. Rubin’s desire to put Cash’s voice in as unobstructed space as possible alongside a video that highlights his aging body and with the biographical accounts and critical observations of Cash’s deteriorating condition suggest that the sounds in the recordings include the damaged voice of the aged performer. Different from Leonard Cohen, whose damage-sounding voice had been a consistent performance strategy for decades, and unlike Glen Campbell, whose struggle with age-onset disability seemed, remarkably, to leave his powerful voice unaffected, Cash performs with and through a voice damaged by age and circumstance. Performing aging-disability in “Hurt” is an intentional choice by Cash and Rubin to foreground the frail, aged, lived body of the performer alongside the pain-saturated music and lyrics. Disability actually enables the performance.

### **Genre and Contradiction**

The opening of Cash’s recording of “Hurt” has little in common with a country song, but he tended to defy genre categorization throughout his career (Edwards 19-20). An early commentator, in comparing him with Elvis, called him “a true country singer” but also wrestled with how some of his songs sounded like rock n roll (qtd. in Streissguth 44-5). Others took note of how songs like “I Walk the Line” did well in both the country and popular music markets (46, 48). Later critics, looking back on this era acknowledge the difficulty in pinning Cash’s sound down, suggesting he was “more than a country singer” or “not quite country or rockabilly” (239, 253). Generally, his voice and the subject matter of his songs, sometimes light-hearted and nostalgic but then dark and political, tended to keep people guessing. “My music – I just call it

Johnny Cash – type music,” Cash once responded to a question about genre; “I don’t imitate anybody,” he insisted (101). The *American Recordings* (1994) record got labeled as “Alternative,” a designation that confounded Cash, along with many long-time followers (226).

The author and original performer of “Hurt,” Trent Reznor, also challenged and redefined genre categorization. Breaking into the popular music scene in 1989 with the album *Pretty Hate Machine*, Reznor, under the band moniker of Nine Inch Nails (though he is essentially the sole member), started with an established indie sound known as industrial – a fusion of disco-inflected synthesizer music mixed with raw machine-like sounds, hard-edged intensity, and highly distorted vocals (Szatmary 304). Reznor added loud, angry guitars, reminiscent of heavy-metal, and colored his material with more attention to harmonic and melodic development, hinting at traditional pop music (Szatmary 305, Reed 211). Over a 2-year period, the album sold a million copies, the first in what was still generally heard as “industrial” to do so (Gold). Reznor, like Cash, eschewed the music industry’s bent toward categorization, refusing to embrace the industrial or heavy-metal labels (Gold). One radio personality suggested, “What Trent does is make pop songs that sound industrial; he takes a great pop song [and] destroys it...” (qtd. in Rosen).

Genre in popular music has multiple functions. Steve Waksman, in *This Ain’t the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk* (2009), calls attention to the power of genre considerations because these labels exist “at the nexus of musical form, social organization and cultural identity” (8). A genre label points to the musical similarities and differences of performances, provides an organizational schematic for the industry, and shapes how listeners perceive their relationships to recordings and artists. While it is not the purpose of this project to explore the full implications of the genre bending “Hurt” performances, that both

recordings and artists challenged prevailing genre notions while working on this song attests to the musical, social, and cultural impact of the performances. Nine Inch Nails offered these sounds in an amalgamation that, consistent, with both industrial and heavy-metal, energized a fan-base of youth eager for a way to channel angst and rebellion. Cash and Rubin's genre busting use of songs like "Hurt" present the old Cash in a new way – seeking to recapture a sense of authority and authenticity while acknowledging and, more pointedly, exploiting the present condition of Cash's body.

Popular genre aside, Reznor, as Nine Inch Nails, produced raw and emotional tracks – something Rubin thought Cash could transform through his own performance style and circumstances (Hilburn 590). Rubin knew Reznor and admired his work as Nine Inch Nails, offering his advice and personal encouragement to Reznor during a difficult patch in the process of making the record that includes "Hurt" (Gold). The song is the final track on the second full length album that became known as *The Downward Spiral* (1994). In general, the album continues the pessimistic and controversial tone of previous Nine Inch Nails recordings. One author considered it "a cry for something to believe in during a time when such traditional support systems as religion and family had failed for so many" (Hilburn 590). The song's sparse accompaniment, industrial-synthesized prelude/postlude, and Reznor's whispery and then almost screaming vocals imbue "Hurt" with intense pain but mystery – a longing for resolution to the painful circumstances described in the lyric and a resignation that overshadows a hope of ultimate relief. Reznor saw the song as particularly personal; "We were crying when we made it," he told an interviewer (qtd. in Gold). Eight years after its initial release, Rubin encouraged Cash to offer his own personal take. Reznor, though initially hesitant, ultimately praised Cash's performance (Hilburn 607). Some differences in music, lyric, and production between the



original and Cash's version will be considered below in the analysis of Cash's performance, but, overall, the choice to record "Hurt" demonstrates Cash's continued willingness to push the boundaries of how listeners understood the interaction between Cash the man and Cash the artist.

Genre considerations and the song choice illustrate the contradictory tensions in Cash's performance persona. Leigh Edwards, in her book, *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity*, argues that contradiction is a regular part of the Cash performance arsenal. He embodies tensions, what she calls "thematic binaries" or "dualisms," that manifest in Southern, white working-class masculinity, including "the rural past and the urban present, home versus rambling, and freedom versus restraint" (Edwards 9, 11). She maintains that country music (choosing this genre as her starting point) and Cash as a primary exemplar, provide a site for these contradictory expressions of American identity (8). For example, Cash sometimes sings of reckless sexuality and immediately follows it with a spiritual longing for redemption and rest in Christ, such as the pairing of "Blistered" and "(There'll Be) Peace in the Valley" on the *At San Quentin* prison album. The first collaboration with Rubin upholds this same type of thematic ambiguity. Though not paired in order on the record, "Delia's Gone," mentioned above, a song in which the singer reflects on having shot and killed his lover, and "Redemption," an extended meditation on the blood sacrifice of Christ, juxtapose the rough and religious poles of the Cash image (Streissguth 245). Rubin intentionally exploits these kinds of contradictions. "I'm talking about the original Johnny Cash who loomed large and was surrounded by all this darkness, yet who still had vulnerability," Rubin says of picking the songs for the first album (qtd. in Hilburn 544). A similar tension unfolds when Cash performs "Hurt" – an aging singer singing the song of a young, industrial music artist – making a compelling recording even as his voice and body seem to be failing him.

#### IV. SONG ANALYSIS: PERFORMING “HURT”

I begin my analysis by foregrounding the “voice in the story,” how the song constructs disability through the narrative, the script, of aging as a burden and decline. Lyrics, sound, and the sights from the video structure a presentation of a painful life for the aged singer of the song. Cash’s body, in interaction with the discourse, connects this pain to age both visibly and audibly. The music structures it through harmonic stasis and building textural tension. The biographical connections of the video further engender a sense of regret, confusion, and loss over the past, filling the present with pain. The lyrics, in the light of Cash’s own biography and present condition, point the listener toward his condition as a disabled condition. Cash performs the story of a burdened, disabled life.

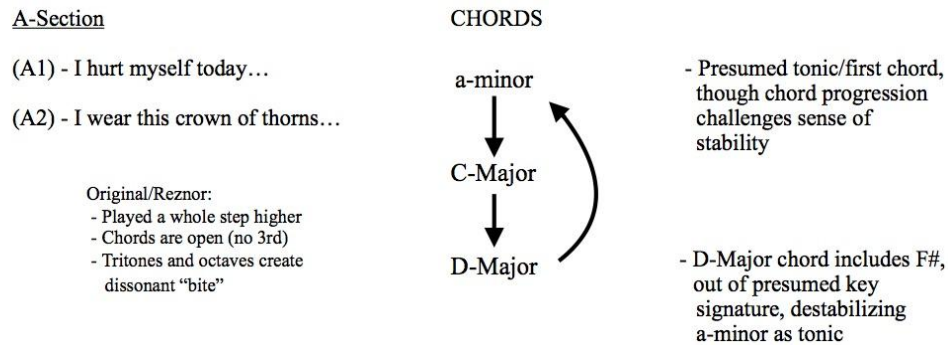
##### **The Voice in the Story**

The acoustic guitar, after Cash’s voice, perhaps the only country music signifier in the recording, opens on a minor chord, striking a solemn and personal tone. Played deliberately and without the precision of the modern Nashville country sound, the guitar both connects with and challenges contemporary sensibilities of the genre. Bill C. Malone, in *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (2006), laments the obsession with perfection in contemporary top 40 country music and sees value in “the rough ‘edges’ that made country music believable and appealing” (257). Cash’s recording nods to these concerns – using the trope of imperfection discussed earlier – with the less-than-pristine acoustic guitar opening.

The guitar is actually at least two guitars, panned separately into the right and left sides of the stereo field. There are slight variations in each rendition of the chord progression, infusing the song in its earliest moments with a sense of broken tension, imperfection, and ambivalence as each ear hears a slightly different version of the progression simultaneously. Ambient fret noises also fill the breaks between chords, foreshadowing the way Cash's voice will sound the "grain" underneath the discourse. The squeaks and scratches of fingers moving across guitar strings remind the listener of the hand, attached to a body, that moves across the fretboard in between the arpeggiated chords.

The chord progression, just three chords, thwarts sonic expectations and engenders instability. The opening a-minor chord, presumably tonic, is followed by a C-major and then a D-major chord. The third chord, as major, challenges the listeners expectations by including a note out of the natural a-minor scale (an F#). This slight harmonic variation pushes against the listener's sense of a-minor (the first chord) as tonic, normally the place of stability and release of tension (see Figure 1). In other words, the static progression, played consistently over the introduction and A-section of the song infuses the supportive harmonic structure with unresolved tension, absent a sense of resolution. Reznor's original version employs a different harmonic technique to accomplish the same thing. All three chords lack a 3rd, normally the note responsible for establishing tonality, whether major or minor. Non-harmonic tones and notes played at octave leaps give the original version more bite. In Cash's version, using conventional chords played in standard tuning on the guitar reduces the tension of individual notes or chords (the bite) but highlights the cyclical nature of the short progression. The repetitious stasis of each turn of the progression gives equal weight to every melodic phrase. It foregrounds the voice

while limiting the forward momentum of the narrative, which, in itself, is part of the unfolding story. The singer has arrived at a place of pain, with no end or resolution in sight.



**Figure 1: A-Section Chord Progression**

Cash's frail voice enters after two turns of the progression. He sings of the burden of his age, of the pain and loss and regret of past and present. He sings of a disabled life. Physical pain takes center stage right from the beginning of the lyric: "I hurt myself today." The words imply a self-inflicted injury. The singer, however, focuses not on the 'how' or the 'why' but on the experience of pain itself. He sings of it as "the only thing that's real." As stated above, Cash himself suffered from chronic pain as the result of a dental problem in 1990. Over sixteen surgeries on his mouth and jaw never released him from the agony (Hilburn 526-527). Recording this song over a decade later, Cash's opening lines evoke a life marked by pain, a burden common as people age and acute for the singer. In the video, most of the time, he seems to sing out of one side of his mouth.

Despite these biographical associations, the pain in the lyrics never locates in any particular part of the body or experience. It is pervasive. "The needle tears a hole," he sings. Illicit drug use comes to mind, associated with the song's author and original performer and resonating with Cash's own battles with addiction, but the needle also suggests his late-in-life struggle with diabetes. In general, along with drug use, needles suggest medical intervention and,

particularly, a rupture of the skin of the body. This needle “tears” and elicits “the old familiar sting.” Disability scholars acknowledge that for all the good of addressing disabling social, environmental barriers, experiences of chronic pain often remain inescapably disabling as well (Shakespeare 6). Aging often involves managing chronic pain through medicalized intervention in an effort to stave off the “disability trajectory” (Kahana 38-39). Cash’s words focus not on the mode of delivery but on the sting itself, its familiarity and constancy, which is part of what makes pain disabling. “Try to kill it all away,” he sings, “but I remember everything.” The burden of physical pain is present and inescapable.

As mentioned above, the repetitious chord progression creates stasis and challenges the forward momentum of the song. Richard Middleton notes how riffs in popular music, whether short, repeated melodic figures or simple chord progressions like the one in “Hurt,” tend to “level out temporal flow [and] to challenge any ‘narrative’ functionality attaching to chord patterns and verse sequences” (Middleton 281). In other words, harmonic motion (the chord progression) and lyrical story-telling take a back seat to other musical elements in order to propel the song forward. The growing story builds around this sense of cyclical tension. “Hurt” moves along through augmentations of the texture as additional instruments play in repeated patterns along with the chord progression established by the acoustic guitar.

In the first time through the A-section, under the sung lyrics described above, a piano enters halfway through, adding an additional element. The piano plays in a mid-low register, not differentiated much from the register of the guitars, tending to obscure their distinctive sounds in favor of simply adding weight to the texture. The piano plays open 5ths on the a-minor chord of the progression, accenting the second beat of each measure in which it sounds. It punctuates the end of every lyrical phrase – sounding one beat after the final word. It calls attention to the a-

minor chord, at first heard as the tonic and opening chord of the progression, but now, because of the way each lyrical phrase begins and ends and with the piano accent, sounds like it is the last chord of the progression. This disorienting effect, moving the listener further away from a sense of tonic stability, magnifies the burdened plodding through each lyrical description of pain. As the lyric implies, experiences of pain demand attention and make it difficult to focus on anything else. On its own, the accented second beat, further magnified by the piano, highlights the last word of each phrase: “today... feel... pain... real... hole... stain... away.” In this one shift in texture, by adding the piano, the story of pain unfolds in Cash’s shaky voice. The pain is present and undesirable and marks the body. In other words, it is a burden.

The burden of aging, however, as represented in the song involves not just physical pain but also the experience of loss. The loss takes three forms in the song: memory, influence and relationships. Fear of loss often structures the way older people relate to disabling circumstances (Kahana and Kahana 10). The aged seek medical intervention, therapy, and personal assistance to manage the effects of age-related impairments, trying to avoid the loss of freedom and ability. But Cash’s “Hurt” aims at confronting and acknowledging the sense of loss, entering into rather than avoiding the disabling experience. It is part of the pain.

The tension in these seemingly competing approaches to loss troubles the distinctions between them. Cash’s song conveys loss fatalistically, as the inevitable consequence of the singer’s painful circumstances. But Cash performs these weighty ideas in a successful pop song, leveraging his own powerful image and the resources of the music industry to great effect and personal gain. The individual’s desire to avoid the disabling realities of age and age-onset illness unmask the negative cultural assumptions around the experience of a body in decline. Yet, as the Kahana’s argue, in a variety of ways, the experience of loss and the disabling discourses

around that experience can be transformed by an individual's efforts (32, 36). Loss as an experience of aging, whether physically, psychologically, or circumstantially, in the song and for our culture presents as both inevitable and malleable. It reinforces the need to keep bodies and discourses in interaction rather than as forces in opposition (40).

In "Hurt," the singer's sense of loss dominates, even in memory. As quoted above, the first verse ends with, "I remember everything." Cash sings of "broken thoughts I cannot repair." A high pitched note enters at the end of the phrase. Sounding like a sampled or synthesized flute, the instrument, like the others, plays a simple repeated pattern. In a much higher register than Cash's voice and the pounding low piano notes, it opens up the sonic space but sounds disquieting, like a ringing in the ears. The video at this point cuts between the aged Cash singing in front of a banquet table and footage of an old farmhouse, apparently Cash's boyhood home (Edwards 61). The home sits dilapidated in an open field, in contrast to the lavish table (considered below). A younger Cash in the video wanders around in the weeds outside the house and peers into a dark window, presumably projecting his memories into the empty space within. Loss means living with what seem like empty memories. The singer suggests that "beneath the stains of time, the feelings disappear." Not that there is no pain, rather, Cash sings that any orienting emotion toward memory, any personal connection to the past, like the empty, abandoned house, are now buried under the "stains of time." Aging, in the passage of stain-filled time, magnifies rather than avoids a sense of painful loss.

This painful loss also locates in diminished influence and relationship. "Everyone I know goes away in the end," Cash laments in the chorus. The consequences of disabling circumstances further disable as friends and caregivers drift away. Only the closest companion remains, but the singer has nothing to offer. Loss of relationship and influence intersect as the singer can only

offer his “sweetest friend” an “empire of dirt” and can only promise that “I will let you down; I will make you hurt.” Alienation and powerlessness define the moment. The video returns often to the “House of Cash” – a museum of his life and career, now closed, empty and in disrepair. Johnny’s boyhood home, as mentioned above, suffers from neglect in an overgrown field. The song structures this experience as profoundly confusing. The friend becomes “someone else,” but the singer is “still right here.” At this point in the video, the aged Cash at the table lifts a shaky hand and points to the camera-viewer in direct address, like he is preaching, and then he looks down and spreads his hands across the sprawling banquet table. The table, shown both in wide shots and grotesque close-ups, overflows with flowers, a turkey, fruit, fish on a platter, wine, and statues like the one mentioned earlier. The imagery recalls 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch still-life painting, particularly works inscribed by the artist as “*vanitas*,” meant to convey the fleeting nature of these lavish appointments and to remind the viewer of the passage of time and death (Slive 277, 282). The paintings often include visual reminders of life’s ephemerality, such as an hour glass, candles, and skulls. In this case, Cash’s old body provides the visual contrast. In the act of waving his hands over the table (and later pouring out a glass of wine over the fare), he acknowledges the emptiness of provision and possession when relationship is lost. In these acts and in the words, Cash makes his performance of loss visible, not only bodily but circumstantially. Even as an old man, even while his “empire” crumbles, he still must relate to others through a mediated product like a song in a video. It suggests how the industry contributes to this disabling process (McKay 151-152). The loss in memory and relationship is itself painful, both bodily and psychologically, as the singer laments his disabled condition.

The opening line of the chorus encapsulates the experience of pain and loss in a question: “What have I become?” Though old age is often seen as an opportunity for reflection, this



question infuses the reflection with regret. The burden implied in the question casts the past in a negative light and the present in hopeless sadness. Even the final two lines of the song, though striking a defiant and, perhaps, hopeful tone for new possibilities, begin with an unresolvable resignation. “If I could start again,” he sings – suggesting in the small first word that his reflection here has no actual bearing on his reality. Change is only wishful thinking. The video at this moment in the song shows Cash with fists clenched in front of his mouth. His head and hands shake as if in a sob.

Cash’s rendition of the song elides aging and burden, and this disables. Rosemarie Garland Thomson suggests that when “constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control and identity” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 6). Cash’s performance moves Thomson’s assessment beyond the confines of the physically disabled body and into the larger context of an aged-disabled life marked as insufficient and deviant. “I wear this crown of thorns upon my liar’s chair,” Cash sings with an audibly broken voice in the second verse, reminding the listener that he does not measure up. Reznor’s original line reads, “I wear this crown of shit,” which grotesquely communicates a sense of worthlessness. But Cash’s rendering of the line adds a spiritual dimension – associating his personal failure with the sufferings of Christ, his life with the death of the Son of God. The presumed cost of his “liar’s” life magnifies the insufficiency and deviance of that life which reinforces the pain and suffering in a vicious cycle.

Presenting the experience of aging in a negative light, as pain, loss, and regret, as a burden, taps into Thomson’s “social anxieties” and construes age and disability as things to be pitied and avoided. In “Man in Black” (1971), Cash sings about these isolating effects of age and

illness in the broader social context: “I wear it for the sick and lonely old.” According to the song, sickness and isolation (loneliness) come together in old age, and Cash dons black to call attention to those in such a condition and to mourn the state of our culture and its tolerance for this and other injustices. In the final stanza he reflects, “I’d love to wear a rainbow every day, and tell the world that everything’s OK, but I’ll try to carry off a little darkness on my back, ‘till things are brighter, I’m the man in black.” The representation in “Hurt,” 30 years later, suggests that little has changed. Performing the isolating effects of old age, confirmed by his voice and his black outfit in the video, resonate with the social anxiety of growing old and the presumed disabling experiences that accompany aging.

But the representation also recalls Mitchell and Snyder’s prosthesis metaphor. That is, the burden of age as performed by Cash is the device on which the narrative of the song depends. Even as the song portrays the experience negatively, the song upholds its necessity (Mitchell and Snyder 51). Davis writes, “The longer we live, the more likely we are to be disabled” (Davis 8). In one sense then, the aging-disabling process, as nearly ubiquitous, ought to be a source of solidarity and, perhaps comfort, given its almost universal place in human life, but Cash’s dark rendition pushes into the anxiety and away from a more comforting view. His *voice in the story* promotes the othering, negative outlook on aging-disability even while he makes age and disability visible, and his voice tells its own story (Mitchell and Snyder 55).

### **The Story in the Voice**

Apart from the effects of illness, the singing voice may be weakened and damaged by old age. Natural physiological changes include hardening vocal folds, muscle atrophy, and loss of lubricating fluids around the vocal apparatus (Lortie 112e1). As a result, the old voice sounds

“hoarse, shaky, weak, breathy,” and often changes in pitch (Hall 76). Singers like Cash may stave off these effects through continual use, but performance standards and overuse can also exacerbate rather than avoid damage (Lortie 112e9, “The Organ of the Soul” 175). Two recordings of folk singer Joni Mitchell’s “Big Yellow Taxi” highlights the dramatic shift of her singing voice over a 40 year span of her career. In the first recording, from 1970, her voice sounds bright and airy. She leans in on her high and clear head voice as the song bounces along cheerfully, in an ironic contrast to the confrontational lyric. In the 2007 version on the record *Shine*, Mitchell sings much lower and her voice is husky, with a noticeable rasp. The effects of continual use and age have altered the timbre of her voice, limited her vocal range, and have curtailed her ability to perform regularly (Elliott 222). For Cash, beyond his weakened health condition, he likely battled a tendency in the older male voice to start ascending in pitch as the vocal cords thin (Hall 76). To maintain his low, deep baritone, Cash would have had to increase muscle tension on his vocal apparatus, perhaps finding that Cash ‘sound,’ but also further straining the weakened voice, causing hoarseness and instability.

Cash’s voice performs his age, and his old-man’s voice blurs the lines between the imaginary and real of a pop music recording. Laurie Stras argues that vocal damage in the singer can break down the barrier between performer and listener, giving access, through the sounds of a damaged body, to the performer’s personal experience (“The Organ of the Soul” 176, 178). Cash’s voice sounds his aging body. His voice struggles to maintain pitch and has the rough quality of a man lacking the air support necessary for a full, controlled sound. The roughness recalls Roland Barthes’ “grain,” resonating underneath the language it voices, and, more importantly, signifying the body from which it sounds (Barthes 269). The video displays his age in his body, particularly in his face and thin grey hair, though the viewer gets no clear sense of

Cash's physical strength as he remains seated throughout. Little in the video directly speaks to the age of the performer as much as the sound of his voice. Stras writes, "The singer is no longer just a conduit for the composer's musical intentions and the poet's literary ones but a person whose own flesh speaks its history wordlessly through the voice itself" ("The Organ of the Soul" 176). In this context, even with Rubin as producer and Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails as the previous performer and author, Cash's rough voice interjects his own flesh and history in and through the performance. In "Hurt," cultural product and lived experience collide as Cash's voice sings of and embodies age as burden and decline. This is the *story in the voice*.

Cash's faltering phrases and breathy, gravelly tone vocalize an aging body on a slide toward disability. The first two lines reveal the old man's struggle: "I hurt myself today, to see if I still feel." Rubin used spare arrangements and kept Cash's voice front and center of the mix because, he said, "I wanted his presence to fill the record" (qtd. in Hilburn 550). Now the microphone reveals an old man's voice, the shakiness, breathiness, and coarseness, like the scratches and scrapes of the fingers on the fretboard. The first word exposes the "tremor" mentioned by contemporary commentators and heard as a warble, the general signifier of old-age in the voice. Wherever Cash voices a longer note, the tremor is there. In the first phrase, "today" finishes in a whisper, as the tone drains out and the breath fizzles. Lack of strength to maintain air-support and loss of control over the delicate tissues in the vocal apparatus produce these toneless whispers at the ends of words and phrases (Hall 76). By the time of this recording, Cash's breathing problems were well known, making recording a slow process and live performance almost impossible (Hilburn 592-594). Phrases like "I wear this crown of thorns upon my liar's chair" manifest this descent into toneless whisper, sounding weak, scratchy, and painful. Underneath every phrase, the voice is gravelly and hoarse. This may be because of

muscle strain applied to sustain the longer notes. At the very least, it manifests “the certitude of the body,” the roughness that marks a body underneath the sung words (Barthes 277).

Throughout the song, the shakiness on longer notes, the broken ends of phrases, and a rough, gravelly tone, call attention to the aged performer and his broken body. I argue these markers of weakness and age are more than mere constructed vocal “lateness” but are manifestations of Cash’s body as he performs with and through his present physical condition.

A particularly distinct marker of Cash’s failing voice-body occurs at one of the more expressive moments in the song, on the opening question of the chorus: “What have I become?” It is the moment a producer and performer hope for – when performance serendipitously brings together the imaginary and the real, the product and the body. For Cash, the question in the lyric works into the construction of an aged life as burden and decline, and his vocal performance matches the pain-filled expression with the materiality of his present condition. The descending line of the melody plays into the moment, further encouraging a sense of the downward, uncomfortable trajectory of the question. Cash’s voice sounds his body as he voices the line, connecting “have” to “become” through a vocal slur on the word “I.” His voice bends the notes between the two words, sliding downward, sounding shaky and out of control. The word “I” warbles as he slides; the gravelly roughness apparent on the held note. The specific pitches are indistinct and only realized as he lands on “become.” In the original, Reznor, singing in a whispery tone, makes a leap down a 4th between “have” and “I” before descending another step on “become.” With the clarity of his vocal move, his version, surprisingly locks into the major tonality of the B-section progression, whereas Cash’s less distinct version sustains the ambivalence of the tonal shift between sections of the song. Aaron Fox, in *Real Country*, analyzes “crying” effects in country vocal technique. “Breaks, bends and pulses,” he writes,

“vividly express the upwelling of bodily processes in the sound-stream.” The breaks add to the expressive weight and intensity of a word or phrase, and often occur at the central emotional moment of the song, such as Hank William’s slight “hiccup” in the middle of the titular phrase of “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” (280-281). For Cash, his voice on the phrase bends as in a sigh or cry. He performs the question both as transitional phrase into the emotive peak of the song and as the lived-experience of the singer in a weakened state. He sounds on the edge of losing control of his voice because he is.

Rubin’s production magnifies this weakened state as the song turns on the rhetorical question toward the final emotional climax. Like with the A-section, the harmonic progression makes room for other musical elements to move the song forward. As Figure 2 outlines, the song transitions on a pivot chord (G) that operates both as the missing tonic from the A-section and the dominant, leading into the new progression of the B-section. The new chords, an iteration of the ubiquitous vi-VI-I-V chord progression, fails to provide a clear sense of home or tonic. One author calls the progression “tonally ambiguous,” because the chord cycle starts in minor but hints at major tonality through the sonic relationship – sounding like tonic and dominant – of the third and fourth chords of the cycle (Richards 4). Melodic structure, as in the Reznor line on “What have I become?” mentioned above, also influences the perception of one or the other tonality, and each may sound at different phases of the cycle depending on the melody (2). In “Hurt,” the second half of the B-section (B2) further challenges the sense of tonic when the C, presumed major tonic, is eliminated altogether. Music theorist Mark Spicer writes that progressions like this have a “fragile tonic” because the perceived ‘I’ chord is buried in the middle of the cycle, and he suggests that this dynamic sometimes mirrors the overall emotional message of the song (Spicer). As Cash sings, his weakened voice and the pain-filled lyrics of

“Hurt” merge with the perceived fragility of the progression. The cyclical nature subverts a sense of resolution and permits other musical elements to propel the song forward. Rubin and Cash take advantage of the moment to make the fragility more than just about tonality.

Transition

Original/Reznor:  
 - Same move to tonic/dominant pivot chord  
 - B-Section chords start before vocal enters

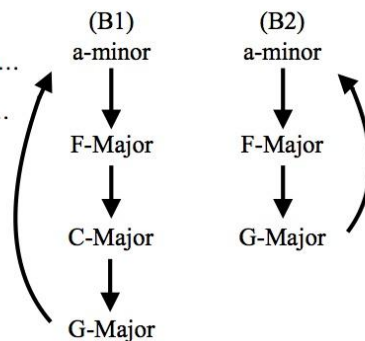
G-Major

- Repeated with building texture  
 - Sounds as actual tonic of A-section and dominant of B-section

B-Section

(B1) - What have I become?  
 (B2) - And you could have it all...  
 (B2-ext) - If I could start again...

Original/Reznor:  
 - same structure and chords



- (B1) - vi, IV, I, V tends to downplay sense of tonic  
 - (B2) - removing C from progression further avoids sense of stable tonic and resolution

**Figure 2: Transition and B-Section Chord Progression**

At the onset of the B-section, the guitar rhythm becomes more pronounced, accenting every beat equally. In the absence of a bass-drum rhythm section, the guitar establishes a “four on the floor” rhythm, common in dance and club beats. Every beat has equal weight. This is decidedly not dance music, but the rhythm provides a distinct, driving forward motion as the texture builds around Cash’s voice. The intensity expands as instruments layer and fill the texture. An organ plays long, held chords along with the synthesized flutes – sometimes sustaining notes even as the chords change. As the chorus progresses, the piano becomes more prominent. The right hand begins pounding higher octaves on the beat. In the video, among the increasingly fast paced cuts between images of his past, the aged Cash sits at the piano. Close up shots of his wrinkled hands show him playing only one note at a time, out of sync with the driving rhythm.

Alongside this developing texture, Cash sings twice through the second half of the B-section form, but the second time through Cash's voice goes from old and weak to overwhelmed by the sounds of the instruments. What ultimately overtakes his voice in the final moments of the song, however, involves more than building instrumental texture. Along with the instruments, Cash's voice becomes audibly distorted. There is no conclusive explanation for the distortion or any available comment by the producer. The distortion is likely an overdriven microphone, not set up properly during recording or, perhaps, configured and recorded that way on purpose. It could also be an effect or processor inserted at any stage, from recording to mix-down to mastering. In any case, Rubin chose to leave it on the recording and not redub a clean take of the vocal performance. While the cause remains a mystery, the listener, nevertheless, hears and confronts the sound and its effects on the message of the song. At the moment of greatest emotional intensity in the song, when each instrument pounds out the rhythm in straight quarter or eighth notes, and the organ plays full in the mix, Cash's voice recedes in distortion. The voice of the artist struggles, producing the shaky, gravelly, and weakened sounds of a weakened body. *And* the voice crackles and pops as the sound literally breaks up in distortion on the volume-peaks of the phrases. The effect delimits the vocal intensity, preventing the voice from getting louder in the mix, even as the instrumental texture grows to the climax. In the moment of greatest intensity, the diminished body and the representation of that body become indistinguishable.

Cash performs with and through his disabled voice. On the one hand, as if mirroring the cascading regression of old age, the song disables his voice. In resonance with social model concerns, the environment of the music produces disability in Cash's impaired, distorted voice. On the other hand, Cash's voice needs no augmentation to perform age and its disabling effects.

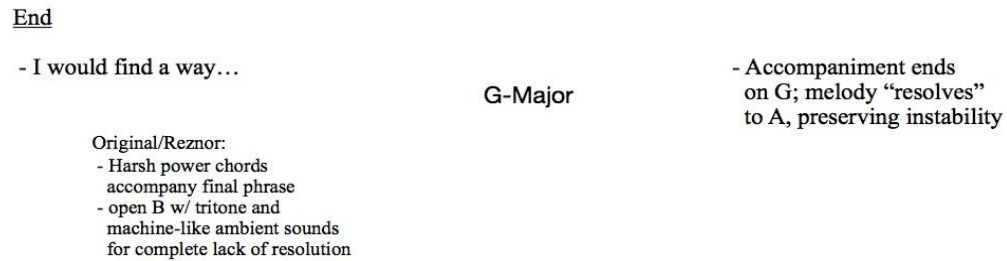


The song and the production only add weight to the interpretation by letting the distortion further cripple the place of his voice in the mix. Cash, with the help of Rubin, merges cultural product and lived-experience in performing his aged, disabled voice-body.

The final moments of the song demonstrate the overall effect of Cash's performance of aging as disability and point to the *voice in the story*. The song is a cultural product, structured around the expectations and possibilities of the music industry. Rubin and Cash, in those final moments wield the technology and production choices to enhance the unfolding meaning of Cash's performance as an expression of the burden and decline of old age. The choice to leave the distortion on the recording, either a mere effect or a happy-accident, foregrounds the constructed, mediated nature of the performance of disability. At the same time, that choice was likely exacerbated by Cash's frailty – the opportunities to re-record the chorus too laborious and difficult to undertake (Hilburn 592).

Cash's old voice and body are still present in the final section of the song. On the last phrase – "I would find a way" – the instruments suddenly stop, leaving Cash's voice alone to finish the line (see Figure 3). As he sings, he again must negotiate a descending slide in the middle of the phrase. The distortion gone, fulfilling the defiance of the lyric, his voice shakes and pushes through the coarseness as it slides toward the last two syllables. He pauses after the slide, pressing hard on the final consonant of "find," as if to halt his almost out of control momentum and catch his breath. He sings the last two words as the tone drains out of his voice – fading in a hiss. With the final chord of the progression (G) still lingering in the background, the melody shifts up to an A. Not normally part of the final chord, the last note pushes against any final resolution to the questions around tonality and stability. Production collides with performer, producing a performance that magnifies both the lived-experience of aging (in a distorted voice)

and the cultural formations in the song that structure aging as disability (in a voice distorted). Cash's performance presents life at the end of life as a disabled life.



**Figure 3: Ending Chord**

### What Does Cash Become?

Disability happens as an aged voice intersects with words of pain and musical production that enacts the burden and decline of old age. Pain, loss, regret, and regression get mapped on to the performance and the performer's body through Cash's vocal utterances, Rubin's production choices, and the video imagery that accompanies the song, encouraging an evaluation of age and age-onset illness as a tragedy, to be pitied and avoided. The associations with tragedy resonate with the common trope, disability script, of disabled characters as the "victim" or, as mentioned above, "charity case" (Straus 130, Sandahl and Auslander 3). It also reflects efforts among older people to put off disability and disability identity as long as possible, viewing the onset of disabling impairments as an "unambiguously negative experience" (Kahana and Kahana 82). Either connection, to a cultural trope or the experience of older people, suggests that disability is constructed, whether by cultural products that reinforce long-held oppressive assumptions or the individuals who apply those assumptions to their individual lives.

Cash's performance, however, cannot really be reduced to a single cultural script nor can it be construed solely in negative terms (Howe 191). Even setting aside that Cash's performance

of “Hurt” garners much acclaim and commercial success (to be considered below), Cash does not sing the song as a tragic victim, but as an artist and musician, using his skills right up to the end of his life, recovering some ground as a force in the music business and as a cultural icon (Streissguth 220). In that light, the song evokes another disability trope, overcomer, as the once great artist seems to be back on top even as his body fails him (Sandahl and Auslander 3).

The performance also suggests the defiant-rebelliousness of Cash’s past. From the beginning, Rubin and American Recordings looked to this aspect of Cash’s image to stoke interest in the project, taking out a full page ad in *Billboard Magazine* after the success of the second collaboration, *American II: Unchained* (1996), with a photo of Cash at his 1969 San Quentin prison performance, raising his middle finger at the camera (Hilburn 573). Performing songs like “Hurt” defied genre expectations and pushed the creative envelope as Cash’s old voice infiltrated the next generation’s music. In that way, the song also invokes freakery, another disability trope, putting the damaged voice of the aged singer in relief against a backdrop of modern songs and unusual arrangements, simultaneously “disquieting and reassuring” the listener by putting frail, tragic old age up against hard-edged rebellion (Straus 125). Listening to Cash’s warbly voice for the first time singing the songs of my youth, “Hurt,” “Personal Jesus,” from Depeche Mode’s *Violator* (1990), and “One,” a cover of U2’s hit on *Achtung Baby* (1991), arrested my attention. The juxtaposition of old voice and modern song, reappropriating Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s term, motivates a “staring encounter,” but with the ears – listening intently to his voice against the backdrop of these new songs – like “rubber-neckers” look at a car accident or carnival goers once gawked at freak show performers, moving toward the singer to try and understand but from the safe distance facilitated by recording technology (*Staring* 3).

The above analysis does not produce a comprehensive picture of Cash's performance in "Hurt" but elucidates an important way that Cash's music draws together several important elements of culture: aging, disability, and music, and how these elements interact to make meaning. Cash's rebellious image and his former glory help put disability in the center of the performance as his present circumstance collides with past associations, and the performance of disability challenges listeners to reevaluate not only their view of Cash but also their own position in the world.

The place of disability in the song makes it political. Lennard Davis argues, "when we start conceiving of disability as a descriptive term and not as an absolute category, then we can begin to think in theoretical and political ways about this category" (Davis 8). In this case, the conflation of age and disability enhances the value of the performance, imbuing it with economic and, therefore, political weight. The pessimistic outlook of the song reinforces its marketability because it seems to authentically represent the performer. Cash's apparent sincerity as an aged-disabled man sells records. The recording and video of "Hurt" propelled the album to become Cash's first million selling solo record since *At San Quentin* (Hilburn 606). The video was nominated for 6 MTV Video Music Awards, including video of the year (624). As quoted in the introductory section, David Brackett provides insight into how the industry wields discourses like disability in order to do this work by linking authenticity to "marginality" – the perception of a person or group's existence outside mainstream social life. The song structures life at the end of life as tragic, pushing it out of the mainstream and into the margins, infusing the performance with the "marginality" of disability and, paradoxically, making it appealing. Economic, i.e. social, acceptance depends upon the perception of social alienation.

Cash's sincerity and the supposed authenticity of the performance also work because of Cash's aged-disabled condition. Laurie Stras suggests that the damaged voice might be linked to authenticity because the damage connects the listener to the body of the performer. Utilizing trauma and affect theory, Stras argues that, while marks of corporeal impairment, like the aged-voice, are normally sites of "cultural anxiety, [they] might also act as a catalyst for anxiety's release" ("The Organ of the Soul" 176). "The linking of the singer's history with the sublinguistic sound of trauma in the voice pulls the narrative together for the listener," she writes (182). The narrativizing both troubles the listener and offers "catharsis" (178). My concern here is not the framing of Cash's disabled voice and performance as trauma or on the transmission of cathartic affect to the listener. Rather, my interest focuses on Stras' linking of listener and performance through the narrativizing power of the damaged voice. The voice and story merge in an interaction through the performance of Cash's old voice, infusing the performance with that sense of authenticity. Of the songs on the third album, even after Cash's aged-disabled voice became generally apparent, one critic gushed, "Cash brings such authenticity to them, it's actually scary to hear" (qtd. in Streissguth 264).

Authenticity as an aspect of the performance, links the mediated and lived aspects of the song. It connotes the ongoing cultural assumptions about reality and intentionality in popular song, but it also acknowledges the tension of how a lived-body, a person, figures into those assumptions. Listeners keep listening because they believe the representation communicates reality, that a singer lives what he sings. A performance of disability connects explicitly to the body of the performer, no matter how staged or scripted, and that loads it with authenticity (Howe 191). In "Hurt," Cash's old voice and rich history converge with a weighty, dark rendition of the song, enlivening a new generation of followers to listen to, pay for, and celebrate

his music. By setting the song squarely in the context of his age and failing health and invoking aging as a burden and decline, Cash transforms the song. Disability becomes the story, not only of Cash's life but of the experience of aging. Authenticity expresses the two sides of the coin of the "Hurt" performance – both the assumptions around aging and the experience of it.

The song also fits into Blake Howe's category of "disablist music," shaping the "performance practices around the impairments of [the] performers" (Howe 202). Cash's age and failing health shaped the production techniques as the recording engineer worked slowly with Cash, often splicing together various takes in order to produce the overall vocal performance (Hilburn 592). Splicing recording takes is not a new practice in popular music making, but it demonstrates how Cash's body and the recording process come together in the song as disability and music making collide. Cash's body requires the accommodating (i.e. mediated) practice even as his body makes its presence heard in his scratchy voice. It is another way the mediated product and lived-experience interact. The video producer too, takes Cash's condition into account in stitching together the images, seeing the video as a way to "be extremely candid about the state of Johnny's health" (Binelli 28). Images of his haggard face and wrinkled hands anchor cuts to the Cash of the past and to artifacts of his career, now interpreted in the light of the dark song about the aged-disabled experience. The very elements of creative meaning making, in the context of Cash's age and health, get wielded to bring his body to light. As George McKay writes of other pop performers, Cash's performance has "an autopathographic impulse or trace that sounds through the voice - and even when manipulated or technologized the human singing voice resonates (with) the body, perhaps... then most of all" (McKay 56). The video always comes back to the performer of the present just as the song inescapably manifests his present vocal condition. Cash sings, commingling person and performer.

Writing about literature, Mitchell and Snyder suggest that the inclusion of disability in cultural products engenders a “paradox” (9). While representations of disability often serve to reinforce the oppressive assumptions and exploitative practices, they also unsettle the status quo. These representations make the marginal the mainstream and, therefore, challenge our assumptions about both the marginal and the mainstream. Cash’s performance brings this paradox to light, and complicates attempts to see cultural product and lived-experience as opposing binaries. Instead, as interaction, in a performance, the two highlight the complexities of growing old, navigating declining health, making music, and selling records. “Hurt” is the title of the song but also a dubious description attached to an experience, one that describes the singer’s own life, even as he records a hit song.

## V. EPILOGUE: CONSIDERING A FUTURE FOR PERFORMING HURT

In the wake of his father's passing, reflecting on his father's life and influence, John Carter Cash, wrote,

Everyone carries burdens with them. I believe the thing about Dad [sic] that people find so easy to relate to is that he was willing to expose his most cumbersome burdens, his most consuming darknesses. He wasn't afraid to go through the fire and say, 'I fell down. I've made mistakes. I'm weak. I hurt' (qtd. in Hilburn 633).

Can a cultural product like a recording of a popular song produced for sale convey what John Carter suggests his father was so effective at conveying? I have argued, yes. Johnny Cash performed "Hurt" in the context of a life weakened by the effects of age and age-onset illness. In doing so, he represented the aged life, his life, as a burden, disabled life. Performing with his frail, damaged voice-body did not undermine but enhanced the perceived value – the relatability, the authenticity – of the performance. Tapping into the always-old-sounding performance image while foregrounding his scratchy, shaky voice transformed the song into an old man's lament.

I have argued that his performance complicates an approach to disability that prioritizes the social over the individual or the individual over the social. Instead, Cash's song encourages us to see disability as an interaction between the social and individual, between external and internal forces, or particularly for this performance, between the imaginary and the real. Musical performance encourages an interactive approach by calling attention to the body of the performer in the music making act, in this case, preserved through the recording process. I focused on



Cash's voice to highlight the interactive elements of his performance – how his late sounding voice both resonates with his past technique and present condition and how a style and genre that value a sense of instability invites a performance that puts his damaged, unstable voice front and center. I also suggested that though the song reinforces othering discourses that present aging and disability as tragic, his performance makes the aged-disabled body audible and visible, staging an encounter that invites the listener-viewer into a relationship and offers the possibility for new ways of seeing and valuing – i.e. interacting with – the aged and disabled (Sontag 122-126). As John Carter captures in his reflection, Cash's long-standing, imaginative approach to music making merged with his real, present pain and suffering. Performing hurt became essential to successfully performing "Hurt."

But who else gets to perform their age-disabled body like Cash? As I just stated, the expectations around the genre and style most closely associated with his career – country music – afforded Cash the opportunity to put his frail voice on display. Is that true for everyone in country music? Glen Campbell's late performances offer an opportunity to explore another intersection of age, disability, and country music, but his voice sounds largely unaffected by his illness or his age – remarkable particularly because he was 10 years older than Cash at the time of his death (Pollak A1). His overt performance of Alzheimer's Disease, documented in the film *Glen Campbell: I'll Be Me* (2014) and on his final recordings, needs attention, adding to the work on mental illness and popular music (see McKay's *Shakin' All Over*, chapter 5), nuancing that discussion by adding age-related illness into the mix, and further probing if and how country music makes room for artists to sound their broken bodies *and* minds.

Campbell and Cash highlight other facets of the performance of age and disability in popular music left largely unexplored in the current project. Though implied in the discussion on

vocal lateness, I do not openly consider the relationship between chronological and relative age. How one ages differs from one's actual age (Kahana and Kahana 8). At what point do acquired impairments become an issue of one's age? Cash's hard-living early career and well known struggle with illicit drugs likely impacted the onset of illness, affecting his abilities at an earlier chronological age and ultimately leading to his death. One close friend and medical advisor, however, maintained that over treatment of his medical conditions and not the ailments themselves led to his demise at 71 (Hilburn 632). Campbell lives another decade longer relative to Cash. Exploring these differences highlights the performative aspects of age as well as disability. For Cash, certain signifiers of age, like the scratchy, warbly voice, become tools in the performer's tool-chest for developing a narrative in and through his aged life as a disabled one. But as performances like Campbell's suggest, what other signifiers play into the performance and how are common manifestations like the tired, damaged voice managed or avoided?

Part of Campbell's narrative includes an open use of assistive technology. The documentary shows concert performances in which Campbell uses teleprompters to accommodate his struggles to remember lyrics and to know what to do between songs. He even makes light of it, jokingly calling attention to the relationship between his growing disability and the technology (*Glen Campbell: I'll Be Me* 38:30). Popular music has a long history with technology; the development of rock n roll and country music are intertwined with the development of recording, live performance, and mass-media technology and the industry that uses them ("Industrialization of Music"). As artists age, in what ways does this technology enable continued participation in the industry? The recording process, particularly splicing together short vocal takes, accommodated Cash's weakened condition. The liner notes and documentary indicate that Campbell required the same assistance (Jackson and Campbell, *Glen*

*Campbell: I'll Be Me* 1:37:00). Alongside these examples, in what other ways can musical technology provide assistance for aging artists in overcoming environmental barriers that otherwise disable? Laurie Stras opens up the discussion on music, technology, and disability (“Subhuman or Superhuman?”). This project offers aging and its effects as a another context for music related technology and disability, opening the door a little wider for further exploration.

Are female artists afforded the same opportunity as Cash to engage their ailing, aging bodies in performance? Jennings and Gardner, in *Rock On*, argue that aging presents unique challenges for female artists who must continue to navigate pervasive expectations around youthfulness, beauty, and sexuality and often perform aging as a form of resistance to these assumptions (4, 13-14). In that sense, aging itself disables, or, more pointedly, the music industry disables aging female artists with its controlling expectations. To what extent are female artists able to wield their aging bodies? Do their voices, like Cash, manifest the damage of age and illness? Joni Mitchell provides a starting point, and both McKay and Elliott include her in their studies, though neither analyzes her later performances in the crossroads of age and disability. In country music, Loretta Lynn or Dolly Parton, among other aging artists who continue to perform, may provide additional insight as they grapple with the effects of aging. Lynn, at 85 years old, suffered a stroke in May of 2017, forcing the postponement of concert appearances, though she returned to performing later that year. On New Years Day 2018, she fell and fractured her hip – a stereotypical point of entry for the older person into the world of disability – and has cancelled upcoming performances (McDonnell). If she returns to the stage or to record, will these personal struggles become audible and visible in her performances? My study of Cash invites us to listen for these moments in Loretta Lynn and in other female artists and to attend to performance

strategies that put aging and disability together on display, calling attention to the ways the performances reinforce and challenge prevailing, controlling assumptions about women's bodies.

When one looks at the intersection of aging, disability, and popular music, examples and opportunities abound. In 2013, 67 year-old Linda Ronstadt announced that, due to Parkinson's Disease, she could no longer sing. Though she may never offer her voice in song on a stage or album – "It's a waste of people's money, and it's a waste of my time," she retorted in an interview about the prospect of returning to the stage – we must attend to the ways she and other aging artists represent their struggles with age and age-onset illness (qtd. in McNiece 94). Is an older, damaged voice really a waste of time and money? Cash's "Hurt" performance suggests otherwise. Popular music and the artists who perform it, sounding and displaying bodies through lyrics, melody, images, and, as with Ronstadt, through their public commentary, continue to shape our culture's outlook on and engagement with age and disability. Undoubtedly, age and disability will continue to challenge and transform what makes for valuable and popular music.

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## VII. APPENDIX

## Appendix A: Figures 1, 2, and 3 Combined

### “Hurt” Chord Progression

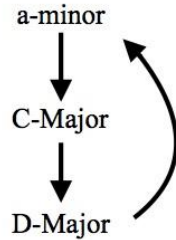
#### A-Section

(A1) - I hurt myself today...

(A2) - I wear this crown of thorns...

Original/Reznor:  
 - Played a whole step higher  
 - Chords are open (no 3rd)  
 - Tritones and octaves create dissonant “bite”

#### CHORDS



- Presumed tonic/first chord, though chord progression challenges sense of stability

- D-Major chord includes F#, out of presumed key signature, destabilizing a-minor as tonic

#### Transition

Original/Reznor:  
 - Same move to tonic/dominant pivot chord  
 - B-Section chords start before vocal enters

G-Major

- Repeated with building texture  
 - Sounds as actual tonic of A-section and dominant of B-section

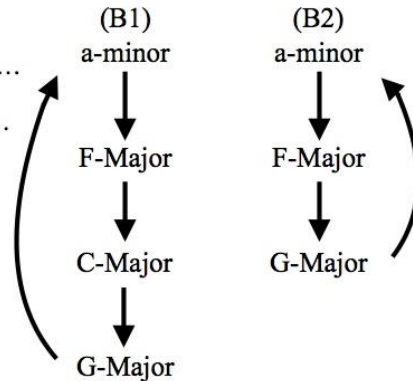
#### B-Section

(B1) - What have I become?

(B2) - And you could have it all...

(B2-ext) - If I could start again...

Original/Reznor:  
 - same structure and chords



- (B1) - vi, IV, I, V tends to downplay sense of tonic

- (B2) - removing C from progression further avoids sense of stable tonic and resolution

#### End

- I would find a way...

G-Major

Original/Reznor:  
 - Harsh power chords accompany final phrase  
 - open B w/ tritone and machine-like ambient sounds for complete lack of resolution

- Accompaniment ends on G; melody “resolves” to A, preserving instability