

“I Just Can’t Be Wrong”;  
Understanding the Freedom of “Folsom Prison Blues”

Adam Cole

# Measure-by-measure comparison of Cash and Fenders Versions of *Folsom Prison Blues* (J. Cash)

Transcription by Adam Cole

## Cash Version

Intro Guitar

8vb I

## Fenders Version

Intro Guitar

8vb loco I

5

F

hear the train a - com - in', it's roll - in' round the bend. And

F

hear the train a - com - in', it's rol - in' round the bend.

7

F7

I ain't seen the sun shine since I don't know when, I'm

F7

I ain't seen the sun shine since I don't know when, But I'm

9 11a 11b

B<sup>b</sup> F F

stuck in\_ Fol - som Pri son and time keeps dra - a - gin on\_ But that

11

B<sup>b</sup>

stuck in\_ Fol - som Pri son That's where I long to stay. When I

12

C<sup>7</sup> F F

train keeps a rol - lin' On down to San\_ An\_ Tone. When I was just a ba by, my

C<sup>7</sup> F F

hear that whi stle blow I hang my head and I cry. When I was just a baby, my

16

F<sup>7</sup>

Mama told me, "Son, al - ways be a good boy. Don't e - ver playwith guns." But I

F<sup>7</sup>

ma - ma told me "Son, al - ways be a good boy. Don't e - ver playwith guns." But I

19 21a 21b

B<sup>b</sup> F F

shot a man in Re-no just to wa-tch him - die. When I

21

B<sup>b</sup> F

shot a man in Re-no Just to wa-tch him die. When I

22

C<sup>7</sup> F Guitar solo 1

hear that whi stle blow - in'— I hang my he - ad and - cry.

C<sup>7</sup> F Guitar solo 1

hear that whi-stle blow I hang my head and I cry.

25

F

hear that whi-stle blow I hang my head and I cry.

29a                      29b                      30a                      30b

B<sup>b</sup>                      B<sup>b</sup>                      F                      F

"Suey!"

29                      30

B<sup>b7</sup>                      F<sup>7</sup>

31                      32a                      32b

C<sup>7</sup>                      F

8<sup>vb</sup>                      I

31                      32                      F

C<sup>7</sup>                      F                      F

I

33

bet there's rich folks eat-in' from a fan-cy di-ning car. They're prob-ly drin-kin' cof - fee, and

F

bet there's rich folks ea-ting in a fan-cy di - ning car. I bet they're drinking cof fee,

36

F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup> /

smo - kin' big ci gars. Well, I know I had it com in'. I know I ca - n't be

F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup> /

smo-king big ci gars, but I know I had it comin' I - just ca - n't be

39a 39b

F F C<sup>7</sup> / F Guitar solo 2

free. But those peo - ple keep a - mo - vin' and that's what tor - tures me.

39

F C<sup>7</sup> / F Guitar

wrong. When I hear that whistle blow, I hang my head and I cry.

43

F / / / "Hidey ho!"

F / / /

47a                      47b                      48a                      48b

47                      48

49a                      49b

sim. Well if they

49

loco

sim. loco Well,

51

freed me from this pri - son, if that rail - road train was mine, I

if they free me from this prison, if this rail - road train was mine, I'd

53a

53b

bet I'd move it on\_ a lit-tle far-ther down the line, far\_\_from Fol - som Pri-son,

53

move it a lit-tle fur-ther down the line, far a-way from Fol-som Pri-son

55a

55b

that's where I wa-nt to - stay. And I'd let that lone-some whi-stle

55

That's where I lo-ng to stay. When I hear that whis- tle blow,

58a

58b

blow my blues - a - way-

58

I hang my head and I cry.

**Abstract:** The Fenders' rendition of Johnny Cash's hit *Folsom Prison Blues* differs significantly from the original, most notably in metrical variation. In order to understand why the Fenders have chosen to release a version so noticeably different from the original, we must examine the Navajo culture in which the Fenders were raised. In doing so, we discover that these deviations come about for reasons having to do with the Navajo conception of the world, its reflection in Navajo artistic life, and the intended Navajo audience for the recording. The resultant record can be seen as a unique document of a particular improvisatory approach not found in Western culture.

Every genre and style of a culture's music is describable in terms of characteristics that serve as "rules" for common performance practice. Often these rules reflect the nature of the culture that the music serves; music exists only in the context of a cultural desire to hear it, and if the members of a culture do not hear what they want or need to hear, then the rules change, sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly.

When the musical trappings of one culture are adopted by another, the characteristics of the music may undergo a significant change in order to remain palatable to its new listeners. George Harrison's sitar solo in the Beatles' "Norwegian Wood" does not resemble Indian music in the least, and his technical ability on the instrument was, at that time, practically nonexistent. Nevertheless, the sound works very well for the audience for whom it is intended and, in fact, creates a sonority which had never been heard in Western Pop music before, making it influential in that sphere.

In the late 1960's, a number of Navajo Country and Western bands such as the Sundowners and Borderline became very popular in and around the Navajo Reservation. One of these, The Fenders, gained special notoriety for their cover of a song by Johnny Cash entitled "Folsom Prison Blues." The song is used as a listening example in David McAllester's article on the Navajo in the textbook *Worlds of Music*. It has been analyzed by Robert Witmer, and more recently its unusual structure has been discussed by Therese Smith in an article in the *Irish Journal of American Studies*.

"Folsom Prison Blues" as recorded by the Fenders is worthy of such analysis by virtue of the notable deviations that can be heard in the cover performance. These deviations have been accounted for in a number of ways. It is my contention that such deviations from the original are the result of the cultural upbringing of the Navajo and of the audience for whom the recording was intended. Before I expound on the differences between the recordings, I will discuss the general nature of the deviations and the rules which they seem to violate. Following this discussion, I will explain the various elements of Navajo culture that I believe played a part in the Fenders' decision-making process as they recorded and subsequently released their version.

In Western popular music of all kinds there are certain conventions which have evolved from the formalistic elements of Western Classical Music. While the other influences in American music have served somewhat to pull musicians away from these conventions they remain the rule and not the exception in most performances, and their absence is noted, even if only subconsciously, by an American audience.

Most Western popular music is based on a tonic-dominant relationship in which a simple song is written in a certain key and, because of its length, seldom strays any distance from it. These songs rarely exhibit the kind of modulations one might find in a Schubert lied. The

majority of songwriters make use of only the tonic, dominant and subdominant chords when setting their words.

Song form is a slightly more complicated matter. There are a great many ways in which American popular songs can be arranged. An extremely common form is a simple AABA structure in which each A-section contains two rhyming couplets, with a freer B-section for variety. *Twist and Shout* matches this pattern. Another often-used structure is the Blues Form which is often reduced to AA'B.

An almost invariable element of Western Popular music is fixed meter. Even the most ambitious of pop-musicians such as Peter Gabriel or Bjork are very wary about altering the meter of a song for the simple reason that such a change will be most noticeable to their audience. Since the solidifying of meter in the early Baroque era, Western listeners have grown used to a steady, regular pulse in their music. Today the steady pulse of a 2/4, 3/4 or 4/4 meter is almost religiously referred to as “the beat.” Such a pulse enables a listener to predict the shape of a song for the purposes of “grooving” to it, either by dancing, tapping, or simply nodding the head. The insertion of a 5/4 phrase within a 4/4 line will interfere with the comfortable regularity of the beat and make the work less suitable for popular enjoyment.

Johnny Cash’s enormous hit, “Folsom Prison Blues,” released in 1956, is an excellent example of the importance of the beat. The song as recorded by Cash live in Folsom Prison in 1962, has an unusual structure: a modified blues form. A typical blues contains 12 bars, nearly always in 4/4 time. In Cash’s song, the 12<sup>th</sup> bar is omitted, giving the song a forward thrust which is felt more than heard at the end of each verse.

# Folsom Prison Blues

(Modified 12-bar blues)

Johnny Cash

Intro Guitar

5 F

7 F<sup>7</sup>

9 B<sup>b</sup> F F

13 C<sup>7</sup> F Note missing 12th bar

I hear the train a - com - in', she's com - in' round the bend. And

I ain't seen the sun shine since I don't know when, I'm

stuck in Fol-som Pri-son and time keeps dra - a-gin on\_\_ But that

train keeps a - rol - lin' On down to San\_\_ An\_\_ Tone.

Figure 1

Despite the unorthodox bar-structure of the piece, the meter remains in 4/4 throughout. The beat is constant.

Furthering the cause of the beat, Cash's band observes some of the "rules" of popular-music performance: In every measure, the bass plays the root of the chord on the first half and the fifth on the second. The drummer keeps a steady pulse throughout, but emphasizes the larger form by providing slight variations in the form of fills, framing the sonic picture for the band and the audience.

These performance-practices are well-known by most musicians and are expected by audiences who may or may not be aware of them. A band's failure to observe these rules usually indicates either extreme defiance on the part of the musicians or a measure of inexperience / incompetence. Generally if a record-producer looking for a hit were to hear a recording of a band whose musicians failed to observe these practices, that producer would quickly pass it by, as either tendency does not usually make for a popular record.

In the case of the Fenders, however, this was not the case. This band, made up entirely of Navajo musicians, released five or six albums which are still in print today in limited distribution, a fact which speaks to their relative success as a band. Their citation in World Music texts alone speaks to their sometime popularity.

Listening to the Fenders music, one may be struck by a strange dichotomy between the selections. On an album such as *Second Time 'Round* on which the cover of "Folsom Prison Blues" can be found, some of the songs are very close to the original in form and content. Others, however, differ from their model in the way that I have described as being most alarming to a Western listener: the meter shifts.

"Folsom Prison Blues" is a marvelous example of this kind of deviation. Beats are added all over the place, creating a resultant form that could just as well belong to a twentieth-century art-song.

Transcription by Adam Cole

## Folsom Prison Blues

(Extremely Modified 12-bar blues)

Cash, arr. Fenders

Intro Guitar

loco I

5 F 8<sup>vb</sup>

hear the train a - com - in', it's rol - in' round the bend.

7 F<sup>7</sup>

I ain't seen the sun shine since I don't know when, But I'm

9 B<sup>b</sup>


stuck in Fol - som Pri son That's where I long to stay. When I

12 C<sup>7</sup> F

hear that whi - stle blow I hang my head and I cry. When I

Figure 2

Most likely, the resultant mixed-meter rendition is not the result of a careful rewriting by the group. The drummer and bass-player, who are attempting to follow convention, seem not to be aware of the “new form” as they continue to play steadily no matter what. The drummer keeps a steady beat, but provides no fills to steer the band back on course, providing instead a perpetual rudimentary pulse. The bass player alternates the root and the fifth like clockwork, seemingly oblivious to the consequences of the occasional added beat which reverses his emphasis entirely. Occasionally things become so chaotic that the musicians are forced to attempt what appears to be a recovery.

9 B<sup>b</sup> 

Lead Vocals

Bass Guitar

Drums

(Snare drum does not vary this rhythm even when vocal and bass deviate)

11 F C<sup>7</sup> 

Ld. Vox.

Bass

Dr.

(Bass gets off by one beat here)

13 

Ld. Vox.

Bass

Dr.

Figure 3



## Opening of "Ashre" prayer

Transcribed by Adam Cole

Ash - re yo - shve be - te - ha Od ye - ha - le - lu - ha se - lah.

A - shre ha - am she - ka - ha lo - - A - shre ha -

am she - A - do - nai e - lo - hav.

Figure 4

Recordings of early blues in this country provide more evidence that the steady beat, while pervasive, does not rule everyone's musical world.

## Hellhound On My Trail

Transcribed by Adam Cole

Robert Johnson

I got to keep\_\_\_ mo - vin\_\_\_ I got to keep\_\_\_ mo- vin\_\_\_

Blues fal- lin' down like hail,\_\_\_ blues fal-lin down like hail.

(In a "standard blues form," this passage would take only 4 bars)

Figure 5

What these types of singing have in common is that they are performed by a single musician, thus making such variation a matter of personal expression. Whether the added beat or measure is written into the structure of an ancient melody or is the result of an on-the-spot interpretation of a blues-tune, the prime impetus of the music is carried along by a musician who controls all elements of a performance. As a result, the “deviance” of such music is less apparent and thus less-disturbing to a listener.

When two or more musicians play in concert, some type of performance rules generally come into play for the purpose of keeping them together. Examples of a band extemporaneously adding beats are rare, but do exist. The obscure do-wop artists Rosie and the Originals recorded tracks in which the band appears to be following the whims of the singer. When such divergences do occur, they are usually very obvious to a listener, even in the case of a band such as the Mothers of Invention that play on such a level of virtuosity that they can roll with the changes. As with the Fenders, one is left to wonder at the cause of these alterations.

What do we know about the Navajo as regards their approach to music, to all artistic endeavors, and to life in general? The answer to the question, “What is Navajo?” is elusive. An enormously comprehensive study of Navajo culture, art and language begins with the caution that we cannot claim to understand another culture by looking at its surface. Instead, we must examine the deeper level metaphysical assumptions that inform what we are able to see.<sup>1</sup> For this very reason, it is not enough to “analyze a recording” and point to its features for answers to questions.

At its most fundamental, Navajo culture can be seen as revolving around interrelationships, rather than individual achievement or hierarchical structure. The emphasis on the connections between similar and disparate concepts is evident in their religious stories and

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<sup>1</sup> Witherspoon, p.4

ceremonies, their approach to art, and how tribal decisions are made. One can refine this outlook by describing in the Navajo a love for synthesis. The Navajo are often cited as being able to absorb outside influences without being absorbed by them. Many aspects of Navajo life are relatively recent to them, including agriculture, capitalism, organized sports and rodeos. Nonetheless, these activities have not resulted in assimilation of the culture.<sup>2</sup> The Navajo have been able to keep abreast of the relationship between what they were and what they might become without losing their fundamental qualities. It is worth remembering that when a Navajo band covers a tune like “Folsom Prison Blues,” they will be unlikely to surrender all of their own ideas for the sake of generating a faithful rendition.

The Navajo are very cognizant of the nature of control. Navajo religion expresses the idea that as humans we have enormous influence over our environment, so much so that we should only think good thoughts so that good things will happen.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, then, the Navajo are always cautious in their use of power, to the extent that they mistrust leadership ability in a single person. Witherspoon elaborates: “Because control is something one utilizes only in relating to malevolent or potentially malevolent beings with whom an affective and harmonious relationship is impossible, Navajos abhor the idea or practice of controlling other beings in the normal culture of everyday life.”<sup>4</sup>

This leads to the first real question about the Fenders’ recording: Was there a band-leader? In a culture where everything is done by consensus it seems quite plausible that the typical *modus operandi* of a western music ensemble would not be enacted. Even in jazz combos where equality in ensemble roles is essential for a successful performance, one player will take precedence in the moment and the rest of the band will fall back to support them. In

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<sup>2</sup> Witherspoon and Peterson, p. 18-19. Titon, p. 35

<sup>3</sup> Witherspoon, p. 28

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 82

this recording we have a situation in which the identity of the leader, even in the moment, is not apparent. Rather it seems as though the song is being sung by consensus! The bass player is doing his job, outlining the one and five, and the drummer is keeping time, but if the singer gets away from them, who are they to tell him he's wrong? Conversely, the singer neither insists that the band follow him when he adds beats, nor restricts himself to the beats that are available! Rather, a special kind of improvisation is occurring, one that results in a recording that, to certain ears, might be unacceptable, but to Navajo ears would be a logical and even preferable way of solving a problem.

This group consensus is not generated merely from a sense of fear of control. It is a result of their deepest beliefs about what types of activities are worth doing in life and how they should be done.

In the Western world beauty as a quality of things to be perceived is, in essence, static; that is, it is something to be observed and preserved. To the Navajo, however, beauty is an essential condition of man's life and is dynamic. It is not in things so much as it is in the dynamic relationships among things and between man and things.<sup>5</sup>

The Fenders are not interested even in exercising control over the demands of the tune. What would be the beauty in that? Rather, they are interacting with one another and with the music, and this, in itself, generates beauty.

As Navajo born during the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Fenders were raised either in close vicinity or within earshot of traditional ceremonial songs. The beliefs and attitudes we have so far discussed are embodied in the practice of these ceremonies, and examining the makeup of the music in them gives us more information about the kinds of things that may have been transferred over to a Western Popular idiom.

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<sup>5</sup> Witherspoon, p. 152

Navajo ceremonies are designed to restore a certain balance or harmony to the world. By undertaking complex rituals, of which chanting is a vital part, the Navajo seek to control that over which they have influence in order to keep the dangerous forces of the world in check, or to reverse the damage that is habitually done to the cosmos in the course of living.<sup>6</sup> This idea is not so unique to the Navajo, but their particular way of chanting can be examined for the characteristics which differentiate it from that of other religions or other tribes.

One of the most important elements in a Navajo chant is the *vocable*, a sung text-element whose meaning is unclear. Vocables exist in western music in the guise of “fa la la” and other such sung syllables. All Navajo chants incorporate some vocables in their text, and many consist entirely of vocables.<sup>7</sup> The meaning of these syllables in Navajo chant has been laboriously debated over the last hundred years, with puzzled anthropologists calling them “nonsense,” “untranslatable,” “forgotten” or “secret” words.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately for us, we need not enter into this debate to answer questions about the Fenders’ performance. Our concern with vocables in this context is not what they are, or mean, but how they are used.

If one examines the “meter” of some Navajo chants, one may see something similar to the layout of the “Folsom Prison Blues.” No one meter will suffice to explain the “time” of the chant. The unit beat may be the only consistent rhythmic element in the chant and larger structures, as they would perhaps be described by a Western theorist, are built upon them.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 44; Titon, p. 45

<sup>7</sup> McAllester, p. 434

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of the history of inquiry into the nature of vocables, see Frisbie, Charlotte J. “Vocables in Navajo Ceremonial Music.” *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 347-392.

Transcribed by David P. McAllester

## Song no. 42

Navajo Enemy Way song



Figure 6

On the other hand, certain chants do fall into a regular meter, much in the way that some of the other songs covered by the Fenders do.

Transcribed by David P. McAllester

## Song no. 26

Navajo Enemy Way song



Figure 7

These transcriptions are helpful in that they allow us to see how one performance of a chant came out, but there is no guarantee that a second performance of these same chants would result in the same transcription.

Dr. Frisbie, in her study on vocables, has noted that they function as textural building blocks which help to “fit the words to the music by processes sung in Navajo that include shortening or dropping vowels, increment, syllable insertion, distortion and dropping of syllables.”<sup>9</sup> Vocables can actively change the count in a composition as a means of preserving some higher level of “exactness.” While Dr. Frisbie disputes claims that the vocables are

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<sup>9</sup> Frisbie, p. 352-3

meaningless or haphazard, she does express her suspicion that the concept of “fixed” vocables includes provisions for their variability within a prescribed range.<sup>10</sup>

The Fenders seem to have inherited a tendency to place more importance on the fundamental beat than on the meter. To that end, the lead singer has no problem incrementing the length of certain words



Figure 8

and adding beats before phrase-entry.



Figure 9

The guitar player takes similar liberties on his solos, changing what might have been four phrases into three.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 374, n.18



Figure 10

The only thing steady about this recording is the chugging of the drums. Its steady beat is reminiscent of the unadorned shaking rattle which accompanies Navajo ceremonial songs.

These tendencies which I claim as inheritances for the Fenders are deeply rooted in the Navajo cosmology, what Witherspoon and Peterson refer to as “dynamic symmetry,” that is, a balance between active and static elements in the world. Certain colors and directions, are associated with “male” static elements, while others are associated with the “female,” or active ones.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Navajo ceremonial life falls under the masculine, static arena because the ceremonies are meant to restore universal conditions to prior harmonious states, and the practitioners of the ceremonies are almost exclusively men. Meanwhile, the realm of economic and social life, which generate new conditions, are the purview of the female.<sup>12</sup>

The Navajo give more emphasis to the *active* side than the static side. In fact, they define “static” not on its own terms but as a subset of “active,” the temporary withdrawal of motion.<sup>13</sup> This choice of emphasis appears at many levels of Navajo society, from their matriarchal social order (female=active) to the very structure of Navajo language<sup>14</sup>. We live in a world not of facts

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that the symbolism of the colors is not constant. Colors and gender are determined only from the context and sequence in which they are found. (Witherspoon, p. 145)

<sup>12</sup> Witherspoon, p. 142

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 118, 196-7

<sup>14</sup> In the Navajo tongue, the central verb form is not “to be,” but “to go,” which is so prevalent that Witherspoon estimates that there are at least 356,200 conjugations of it!

and things, but of processes and events, and Western language is very poor in its ability to describe the actions that occur.<sup>15</sup>

One can see the Navajo concept of action in their art as well. It is visible in the designs of their silver jewelry, their patterned blankets, and in their ceremonial songs. But to spend too much time on this surface aspect is to miss an important detail: In fact, the Navajo regard the *creation* of art, and not its reception, as more important. Yes, the famous Navajo blankets are made to be sold for a profit, but the act of creating a unique pattern for the blanket supersedes this practical result. Creating art is an essential activity and not a specialized talent. In fact, nearly all Navajo consider themselves artists because art is a way of living, not a way of life.<sup>16</sup>

In this spirit, Witherspoon claims that “All Navajos are singers.” If so, then this makes for a very different approach to the performance of something like “Folsom Prison Blues.” In Western culture we look for musical experts to sing our songs for us; we expect that these experts will do what we are unable to do. We separate the musicians from the non-musicians and, likewise, we separate the creation of the music from the reception of it. The Fenders are made up of Navajo who presumably do not share such an exclusive view of art. They are performing these songs in an active way, not a static one, not looking to create a consistent “work of art” for Westerners to hang on their wall, but instead experiencing a performance while the tape is running. If the audience is primarily Navajo, then such an approach would not raise their objections.

One wonders if the Fenders themselves were conscious that their recording of a Western song flies in the face of Western listeners’ preferences, and whether this would affect them in any way. Given the idea of a leaderless band of equals who would disclaim any expertise in the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 48-52

<sup>16</sup> Witherspoon and Peterson, p.3, Witherspoon, p. 152-3

matter of singing, one would hope that they would be equipped to generate a recording at all. In fact, the Fenders as Navajo are especially equipped to do just that. The Navajo are known for their ability to improvise solutions to problems that seem unsolvable. This comes from their experience relating and synthesizing disparate elements, both in language and in life.

Witherspoon describes a very practical example of this sort of thinking in *Dynamic Symmetry*.

One night my secretary's husband was on his way home from a trip. The fuel pump on his car become dysfunctional. No shops were nearby, and those faraway were not open...Fuel pumps are rarely if ever repairable...It occurred to him that the windshield wipers on his older car were also made functional by a pump. He took the vacuum pump from the windshield wiper apparatus, attached it to the fuel line, turned on the windshield wiper switch, started the car, and drove home.<sup>17</sup>

When we analyze “Folsom Prison Blues” and examine it as a footprint of a particular performance of this song by the Fenders on this given day, we can see evidence of myriad attempts to improvise solutions to unsolvable musical problems. The lengthening of phrases to which we have referred, the adaptation of the bass to the present downbeat, even the alteration of the lyrics, all are results of the Fenders’ approach to recording a piece of music which seems to have generated some difficulty for them. Rather than patching, editing, re-recording, or even omitting the track, the Fenders let it stand, confident that they have done the appropriate thing with this song, given the circumstances, and that their audience will surely approve.

“Folsom Prison Blues” serves as only one example of many in which Navajo musicians have recorded unorthodox interpretations of Western-style tunes. The Fenders show similar tendencies on songs such as “I’m Walking The Dog” and “Good Deal Lucille.”<sup>18</sup> The Chinele Galileans, a Navajo Gospel group, can be heard adding beats in the songs “Why Me, Lord,” and

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<sup>17</sup> Witherspoon and Peterson, p. 21-2

<sup>18</sup> The Fenders, “I’m Walking The Dog”, *Second Time ‘Round*; “Good Deal Lucille”, *Once More Around*

“God Walks the Dark Hills.”<sup>19</sup> The alterations to the fundamental meter of these songs are reminiscent of the style of singing heard in recorded Peyote music and Navajo ceremonial chant.

And yet there are many more songs on these very same albums which have not resulted in unorthodox performance practice, in which the meter is steady and most if not all performance “rules” are observed. This is not inconsistency or contradictory as it might seem. These artists are neither incompetent nor striving to shock the audience. They respond to the music in the moment and their work is captured on the recording. If certain songs confuse them, they generate solutions, confident in the knowledge that such an approach will be acceptable to their audience.

The inquiry generated by the recording of “Folsom Prison Blues” is of less use to us as a description of “The Navajo” than it is a documentation of a particular process of improvisation generated from a set of cultural birthrights. Deborah House has written about the decline of the use of the Navajo language within the community. The idea of Navajo, she states, is changing dramatically and many attempts to cement aspects of a culture, both from without by anthropologists, and from within by cultural watchdogs, end up creating a subtle kind of damage that is hard to see.<sup>20</sup> It is not my intention to further any stereotypes of the Navajo or even to suggest that observations of such scholars as Witherspoon and McAllester define the nature of a people. Rather, it is my hope that the extraordinary nature of the Fender’s recording of “Folsom Prison Blues” can be understood for what it really is and that the gifts it offers us in terms of rethinking a Western concept of art can be received and appreciated.

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<sup>19</sup> The Chinele Galileans, “Why Me, Lord,” and “God Walks the Dark Hills,” *Navajo Country Gospel*

<sup>20</sup> House, xxvi-xxvii

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Transcription by Adam Cole

# Folsom Prison Blues

Johnny Cash

(Modified 12-bar blues)

Intro Guitar

8<sup>vb</sup>

5 F

hear the train a - com - in', it's roll - in' round the bend. And

7 F<sup>7</sup>

I ain't seen the sun shine since I don't know when, I'm

9 B<sup>b</sup> F F

stuck in\_ Fol som Pri-son and time keeps dra - a-gin on\_ But that

13 C<sup>7</sup> F F

train keeps a- rol- lin' On down to San. An\_ Tone. When I was just a ba- by, my

17 F<sup>7</sup>

Ma-ma told me, "Son, al-ways be a good boy. Don't e-ver play with guns." But I

20 B<sup>b</sup> F F

shot a man in Re-no just to wa-tch him - die. When I

24 C<sup>7</sup> F Guitar solo 1 F

hear that whi-stle blow - in'\_ I hang my he-ad and - cry.

28 B<sup>b</sup>

## Folsom Prison Blues - Cash Version

32  $B^b$   $F$  "Suey!"  $F$   $C^7$

36  $F$  I bet there's rich folks eat-in' from a

39  $F^7$  fan-cy di-ning car. They're prob-ly drin-kin' cof-fee, and smo-kin' big ci-gars. Well, I know

42  $B^b$   $F$   $F$  — I had it com-in'. I know I ca-n't be free. But those

46  $C^7$   $F$  Guitar solo  $F$  peo-ple keep a-mo-vin' and that's what tor-tures me.

50 "Hidey-ho!"  $B^b$

54  $B^b$   $F$   $F$   $C^7$

58  $C^7$   $F$   $F$   $8^{vb}$   $sim.$  Well if they freed me from this pri-son, if — that rail

# Folsom Prison Blues - Cash Version

3

61  $\text{F}^7$

road train was mine, I bet I'd move it on a lit-tle far-ther down the line, far

64  $\text{B}^b$   $\text{F}$   $\text{F}$

from Fol - som Pri- son, that's where I wa-nt to - stay.

68  $\text{C}^7$  3 And I'd

let that lone - some whi - stle blow my blues - a -

70  $\text{F}$  Guitar  $\text{C}^7$   $\text{F}$

way -

Transcription by Adam Cole

# Folsom Prison Blues

(Extremely Modified 12-bar blues)

Cash, arr. Fenders

Intro *Guitar*

8<sup>vb</sup> *loco* I

5 *F*  
hear the train a - com - in', it's rol - in' round the bend.

7 *F<sup>7</sup>*  
I ain't seen the sun shine since I don't know when, But I'm

9 *B<sup>b</sup>*  
stuck in Fol - som Pri son That's where I long to stay. When I

12 *C<sup>7</sup>* *F*  
hear that whi - stle blow I hang my head and I cry. When I

15 *F*  
was just a ba - by, my ma - ma told me "Son, al - ways be a good boy. Don't

18 *F<sup>7</sup>* *B<sup>b</sup>* *F*  
e - ver play with guns." But I shot a man in Re - no Just to wa - tch him

21 *C<sup>7</sup>* *F* *Guitar solo 1*  
die. When I hear that whi - stle blow I hang my head and I cry.

25 *F*

# Folsom Prison Blues - Fenders Version

2

29  $B^b$   $F$

31  $C^7$   $F$   $F$

33  $F$   $I$

bet there's rich folks ea-ting in a fan-cy di-ning car. I bet they're drin-king cof-fee,

36  $F^7$   $B^b$   $I$  - just ca-n't be

smo-king bi-g ci-gars, but I know I had it com in'

39  $F$   $C^7$   $F$  *Guitar solo 2*

wrong. When I hear that whis-tle blow, I hang my head and I cry.

43  $F$

47  $B^b$   $F$

49  $C^7$   $F$

$8^{vb}$  *loco*  $8^{vb}$  *sim. loco* Well,

51  $F$   $F$

if they free me from this pri-son, if this rail-road train was mine, I'd

53  $F$   $F/B^b$  *(bass changes chords but guitar does not.)*

move it a lit-tle fur-ther down the line, far a-way from Fol-som Pri-son

# Folsom Prison Blues - Fenders Version

3

55 F/B<sup>b</sup> B<sup>b</sup> F C<sup>7</sup>

That's where I lo - ng to stay. When I hear that whis-tle blow,

Figure 2

(Bass moves on to F, but guitar begins a C7 phrase)

58

I hang my head and I cry.