

# NOT BLACK AND WHITE

SOUL SINGER BRIAN OWENS DISCUSSES HIS CONNECTION TO COUNTRY MUSIC'S GREATEST ICON

BY BENJAMIN PESETSKY



JARRED GASTREICH

Brian Owens

On May 21, St. Louis soul singer Brian Owens will perform *The Soul of Cash: A Tribute to the Music of Johnny Cash* at Powell Hall. Joined by the St. Louis Symphony, Deacons of Soul, and The Vaughns, Owens will explore soul arrangements of Cash's country classics as well as some of his own original songs.

## What can you tell us about this show and your interest in Cash?

Brian Owens: The way that I am looking at this project is not so much as tribute, but as Americana. It's an Americana soul project that features the music of Johnny Cash. For me, the idea of "the Soul of Cash" is "the heart of Cash." One of the things I've come to know is that the soul of Johnny Cash is very similar to the soul of me, Brian Owens. Soul music, African-American roots music, and gospel music—that's the heart of who we both are. I get the sense from people that they think my connection to Johnny Cash is a strange connection. But when you sit down and think of his pedigree, it makes absolute sense.



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### **Do you think people are surprised by your interest in Cash mostly because he's white?**

I don't know if it's because he's white or because I'm black. When people hear the kind of music I do, my original stuff, it leans more toward Marvin Gaye, and that kind of vibe. But I keep saying, I *really* discovered my voice singing the Johnny Cash stuff. When I sing Marvin Gaye, or some of my other influences, it's me pulling from Marvin, Sam Cooke, and Curtis Mayfield. But when I sing Johnny Cash, you're hearing *me* because there's no reference point for me other than the song.

### **Throughout history, styles developed by African-Americans have been picked up by white musicians. Less often do we think of influence going in the other direction. Was that disparity a motivation for your project?**

I think it's a misconception that I'm taking a white man's music and I'm a black guy. The one place you really don't see this is when you talk about American popular song. Nobody looks at Ella Fitzgerald and says she's taking these white guys' songs. It's because they're part of the American Songbook. That's how I see Marvin Gaye, Sam Cooke, and also Johnny Cash. So when I sing him, I'm not singing a white man's story. I'm singing an American story.

### **How did you first get to know the music of Cash?**

The first time I saw Johnny Cash, I think, was when I was 11 years old and my dad was watching an episode of *Columbo*, the detective show. He was a main character, playing a televangelist, and he was singing "I Saw the Light." And it was over and over in the show, "I Saw the Light," which is a Hank Williams tune. That was the first time. Then it wasn't until my mid-20s that I discovered him again through the movie *Walk the Line*. There's something about his life that resonated with me. From then on, it's just like I got really into Johnny Cash—not only the music but also the person.

### **Can you explain more about what drew you to him and his character?**

What really matters about who we are as human beings is what we cannot see. Too often we judge by the manifestation of things and don't go deeper. There's a reason I watched the movie *Ray*, which was amazing, and at the same time *Walk the Line* came out. But which one did I resonate more with? *Walk the Line*, because of who

I am and where I am in life. But people think I should resonate more with Ray Charles because he was a black musician and I'm a black musician.

**How did this performance come together with the Symphony?**

Chicken and egg. I think the idea went around for a couple years. I've had different shows that I do, and when they found out I had this show—I think I mentioned I was working on a Johnny Cash record with all soul arrangements—I was honored that they made an offer. For them to ask me to do this is artistic respect. They're excited and I'm excited. It's a big deal.

**Is there anything you'd like to add about the project, or say to sum it up?**

In a country now where everything is so divided, and people are forced by the media to look at our differences more than what makes us the same, for me the Cash project is a middle-of-the-road narrative. It says, "here's this guy, a white man born in the South, who's now passed on, and I, a young African-American guy born in the Midwest, raised on soul music, finding much common ground through music." *Man in Black*? I get that. *Ring of Fire*? I get that. *Walk the Line*? I get all that stuff. What we have in common far outweighs the difference that I'm black and he's white. And that's what I want people to get: they walk in thinking this won't make sense, but it will make sense.

*Interview has been condensed and edited.*

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