

Rosanne Cash, the first-born daughter of country icon Johnny Cash, will discuss her memoir, "Composed" at Hubley Hall in Madison, Friday, Oct. 29. The book a love story - for the American song.

She walks the line



Meet Rosanne Cash - her own woman - here in Madison

By Lisa Resiman
Special to the Times

A slim 6 percent.

That's the ratio of the audience that is singer-songwriter Rosanne Cash's focus whenever she performs. The six percent who aren't "yawning, glazed over, distracted, unsettled" and who aren't just there to "look through me to see my dad," writes Cash in her arresting new memoir "Composed," which she'll discuss at Hubley Hall in Madison on Oct. 29.

Yes, that Rosanne Cash. The firstborn daughter of one-man Mount Rushmore and American legend Johnny Cash. Who learned her guitar chops from no less than Elvis Presley's sidekick, rockabilly pioneer Carl Perkins. And listened, as a wide-eyed teen, to George Jones and Tammy Wynette, the reigning king and queen of country music, crooning to each other in her living room. And, later on, jammed with Waylon Jennings and George Harrison, among other music luminaries.

Rosanne Cash, the Grammy Award winner who, over her career, has charted 11 #1 singles; performed for hundreds of thousands from Anchorage to Oslo to Carnegie Hall; chatted with David Letterman and Craig Ferguson and at the 92nd Street Y; and most recently, taken home Album of the Year for "The List" at the AMA awards, selections from which she'll be singing at Hubley Hall in the R.J. Julia Booksellers-sponsored event.

Still, just 6 percent of the audience?

Sure, she's developed herself into a critically acclaimed artist in her own right. But there's no escaping her name and the celebrity that attaches to it.

Just don't call her a celebrity. It's a word that makes Rosanne



Rosanne Cash doesn't like being called a celebrity. She aims for an honest voice in her song writing.

Cash squirm.

"It reduces an artist to a figure to be mercilessly dissected," said the 56-year-old in a recent phone interview from her home in Manhattan. "It's dehumanizing." No surprise that she found the film "Walk the Line," the 2005 biopic of her father's life and his love affair with June Carter, "an egregious oversimplification of our family's private pain, writ large and Hollywood-style," as she writes in "Composed."

And don't assume "Composed" is a smarmy tell-all - or even a tell-a lot. If you want gossip, you won't find it here. Likewise, detailed accounts of scandalous incidents in the families Cash and Carter. Rarely, indeed, does she have a bad word to say about anyone. If anything, the memoir glows with love: for her father, mother and stepmother, June Carter Cash; for her husband and five children; and, not least, for

the soul-lifting power of American song.

Rosanne Cash, it's clear, is first and foremost an artist—one who, it seems, is on a mission. "The more exploitative, numbing, and assaulting popular culture becomes," she writes, "the more we need the truth of a beautifully phrased song, dredged from a real person's depth of experience, delivered in an honest voice."

Not to say that's easy. "A lot of people are under the assumption that songwriting only comes from this ecstatic flood of feeling, these bursts of inspiration," she said in a voice that carries traces of her father's soul-deep burnished tones. Early on, she believed that too, she allowed. Thirty years later, she sees it demands "a real dedication to craft," somewhat akin to "the watchmaker's concentration required for the detail work of refining, editing, and polishing."

As with every artist, even one

as seemingly plugged into the music business as Cash, there were bumps along the way from the beginning, as she recounts in "Composed." "The pudgy, withdrawn girl," as she describes herself, dreamed of writing songs for others to sing and nursed a terrific stage fright until she quite unwittingly found herself, at 23, in the center ring of a circus somewhere in Bavaria. It was a promotional event; her record company had ordered to appear. At the moment she was introduced, a crowd of people swarmed the ring. "Ninety people had come to see me," she writes. "Here, on the German country circus circuit ... I was a rock star." From then on, she kept performing "until the stage felt like home."

Then there was her voice. She considered it "not enough, not right," nowhere near such country music touchstones as Patsy Cline,

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Tammy Wynette, and Emmylou Harris. It was only when polyps on her vocal cords threatened to silence her that Cash began to view it an instrument to be exercised and developed.

And just three years ago, after a long struggle with crippling migraines, it was discovered her cerebellum was too low and was crushing her brain. Life-threaten-

ing brain surgery followed, then the long, tortuous process of relearning to walk and put words together. Her stunning recovery from that health crisis, as much as her father's 2003 death, not only released her from the compulsion to establish an identity separate from his. It also charged her with an urgency to honor his legacy, a testament to which is "The List," the celebrated album culled from a broad swath of American songs that

her father shared with her while she was in her late teens.

"Out of various forms of personal catastrophe comes art, if you're lucky," she writes.

"And I have been lucky." Not to say sheer doggedness and resolve haven't factored in as well. "Don't stop working, just stop worrying," is one of her credos. "Now, even when I worry, I keep working. Work, I remind myself, is redemption."

Another one of her credos? "Just show up," she said. "That's what an old friend once told me. Even if you feel like nothing and you think you're terrible and you'll never get better and it will never go anywhere, just show up and do it. And, eventually, something happens."

Which was no more evident than at a recent event when she spotted a guy wearing a T-shirt. It read SIX PERCENT. "That made my night," she said, a smile in her voice.