

FILM REVIEWS

INTO THE BLACK

Walk the Line. Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon star in a film written by Gill Dennis and James Mangold, based on books by Johnny Cash and Patrick Carr, and directed by Mangold.

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

Among its many virtues, the compelling Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line* is a film that reflects the message-and even the structure-of its title song with an almost spooky allegiance. Cash's classic tune about fidelity and its opposite is one of the stranger examples of modulation: its chord progression shifts about in the "wrong" direction, plunging down, down, down, in contrast to the usual uplift of modulations. Reportedly, Cash heard the odd progression while in the Air Force, when a malfunctioning tape recorder played a song in reverse, and drew on that lingering memory to capture a sinking emotionality in his song.

So goes the film's structure, following Cash's dizzy path and downward spirals. Yet he always retained enough faith and pluck to keep him aspiring toward deliverance-and the arms of his life mate, June Carter. "I Walk the Line" is, to this day, a scary and inspirational song, like this film.

Inevitably, *Walk the Line* will be compared to last year's Ray Charles saga, *Ray*, as both deal with mythic American musical legends who broke rules and crossed boundaries of genre and race, and who have recently died. As luck and art would have it, both films are passionate tributes, and both transcend the biopic blues. In another peculiar connection, both Cash and Charles were haunted by tragic accidents involving young brothers, tragedies used as dramatic leitmotifs nagging at our heroes.

What gives *Walk the Line* its strong through-line is its tight, almost obsessive focus on the syncopated, slow-brew love affair between Cash and Carter. Love keeps the film together, like some hypnotic, subsonic theme. Still, the script, drawn from Cash's books, manages to incorporate many key incidents in Cash's rise to fame, falls from grace, and redemption yet again. From Dyess, Arkansas to his triumphant live recording at Folsom Prison and career rebirth in the late '60s, Cash's story is ripe for this kind of sensitive cinematic treatment.

As Cash, Joaquin Phoenix gives his finest performance to date-the mixture of vulnerability, pain, and bravura he gives Cash is mighty to behold. Reese Witherspoon, as June, closets her perkiness and delivers a powerful performance. Unfortunately, they also sing. Going the way of Kevin Spacey, who sang as Bobby Darrin in *Beyond the Sea*, Phoenix does Cash-a game effort, but an impossible dream. Phoenix captures some of the timbre and phrasing, but not the subtle vibrato or hymn-induced gravitas of the genuine Man in Black. Otherwise, the musical element is conspicuously righteous, thanks to T-Bone Burnett, composer and music supervisor.

As a whole, *Walk the Line* is a sweeping yet intimate wonder, fanning the flame of Cash's mystique and bringing us closer to his humanity. It keeps a close watch on that heart of his-no easy feat.

