

## Mp3 Bastard Sons Of Johnny Cash - Walk Alone



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Rolling Stone -- "Almost as bad-ass as the black-clad man for whom they're named -- pure Americana heart and soul. 14 MP3 Songs COUNTRY: Country Rock, ROCK: Americana Details: Anybody worth a damn has a different road. And everybody who takes their own road has to find their own set of Mile Markers. Waylon Jennings spent most of the Sixties singing other people's Nashville hits in a nightclub stuck next to a bone-dry river bottom on the outskirts of Phoenix. More nights than not, Waylon had to wade through the cowboys and fratboys busting each other up out in the parking lot so he and the Waylors could drive home and watch the sun come up. Meanwhile, at daybreak, Marty Robbins was a few miles away out in the desert shooting his own black-and-white western tv show, just as the networks were ready to switch to color. Johnny Cash only ever really spent a night or two in jail, but it was an El Paso jail, and he'd been caught smuggling pills across the border from Juarez inside his guitar. One sock was stuffed full of uppers and the other packed with downers, so it wasn't likely he got much sleep inside the slammer. But that tangled road he took eventually led to a live album at San Quentin. And that record made him more famous than anybody in country music had ever been, more famous than Hank Williams, more famous than Jimmie Rodgers, too famous to play San Quentin without a crowd of fans clamoring to get in too. He was pretty much done with the inside of jails, unless you count being too famous. Merle Haggard turned 21 in prison. -- matter of fact, he was actually in San Quentin the first time Johnny Cash played there. When he got out of jail, he got a gig in Las Vegas playing bass with Wynn Stewart and the West Coast Playboys. He cut one of Wynn's tunes called "Sing A Sad Song," and got his first taste of what a hit might be like. Fifty or so Top 10 country hits later, he received his first royalty check after he signed with a punk rock label early in the 21st Century. No further Top 10 country hits were forthcoming. For Mark Stuart and the Bastard Sons of Johnny Cash, it's been a long road as well, a twisting trail, a

two-lane highway, a road full of ruts, and it all led to Texacali. Texacali is a mythical place maybe, but it's real enough all the same. It's a borderland, la frontera, somewhere right near where San Diego meets Juarez, where Ensenada and El Paso cross paths. And like all the rest of these tales, like every story that happens in life instead of on a page, sometimes you don't notice the Mile Markers until you look up into the rear-view mirror. A quick look in the rear view mirror: Mark Stuart formed the Bastard Sons of Johnny Cash on a whim, by accident, by chance. He'd been in a punk rock band but that was done, over, finished, and it had nearly finished him. He had a dream one night, and out of the dream came a band name: the Bastard Sons of Johnny Cash. The new name was a joke, sort of. And yet, soon enough, it wasn't a joke anymore. Soon enough, it was a band, and soon enough, it was enough of a band that Johnny Cash himself gave them his personal seal of approval, and Johnny Cash's own legitimate son helped produce their first album. It was a little like waking up alone and naked in a strange new country next to another man's clothes, and discovering that they weren't anybody else's clothes -- they were your own. That they fit you like nothing else ever had, and that it was more than just a new suit of clothes, that it was a new life. And it was yours. For keeps. "I kinda got the calling like one of those Pentecostal preachers gets the calling," Stuart says now. "It came like lightning out of the sky. And Johnny Cash coming to me in my dreams wasn't weird. It was just that I had these dreams, and the dreams led to a body of work, to a bunch of songs, and they led to all of this." For Mark Stuart and the Bastard Sons, the last ten years has been a blur of miles and markers. BSOJC has played more shows most years than most bands do in their entire careers, and they've done it the hard way, piling their own gear into their own van, and then heading off into a dark night that's just a couple of hours away from day. A lot of indie bands have done a lot of this, but not many have made the long haul across an entire decade. And amidst that grueling schedule, Stewart has managed to keep writing, delivering two previous records, *Walk Alone* and *Distance Between*, that built a hardcore fanbase for the band and yet achieved a critical recognition that most singer-songwriters would slit their left wrist to gain. It was an enviable position, as long as you didn't have to do all the work that went with it. As a songwriter, Stuart is doing something very different than writing the songs that make country music whatever it is today. These are landscapes, portraits, silhouettes. "This is just me trying to be a picture painter with words. Finding a way to turn a phrase in a song that is meaningful and unpredictable. My dad wanted to be a writer. He didn't get to be a writer but he had a bunch of books in the house. I still don't watch television. I read books.exclusively."

Stuart heard about his dad's death before a show in Madison, Wisconsin. A year later, just about the same day, just before a show in Madison, Wisconsin, he heard about Johnny Cash's death. Just one of those things, maybe. Mile Markers is pretty much what the name says: a set of signs posted to guide the way home, or maybe point out the direction that has home in the rear view mirror. Set in the West, it rambles and wanders and aims the steering wheel out at the endless horizon. A halfways unfolded road map, it passes through Austin and Tucson and San Ysidro and Los Angeles, through the badlands of both South Dakota and New Mexico, from Oklahoma and the windy Panhandle country around Abilene all the way to Bakersfield and the San Joaquin Valley. But Mile Markers is a spiritual voyage as much as a mere travelogue, a set of tales that turns into a single song of journeying forth. It's like a Western, in a way. It's "The Searchers," or "Ride the High Country," or "High Plains Drifter." Or even "Two-Lane Blacktop" or "The Getaway," because it's set in a contemporary West divided by white lines and asphalt, and settled by truckstops and parking lots. It's a landscape of big skies and long roads and endless Mile Markers flying by at the edge of your vision. And like every true Western ever, contemporary or not, it's a story of drifting and settling, of setting down roots and then having them torn up again, of learning that you don't dare settle down when you're just going to be forced to hit the road again. And these are definitely road songs. These are songs that will turn up on ten thousand roadtrip mixes alongside "Lost Highway" and "Lonesome Fugitive," and "Six Days On The Road" and "Anybody Goin' To San Antonio"; segueing into "Willin'" and "Waiting For A Train," and "500 Miles From My Home" and "Amarillo By Morning" and "Wreck On The Highway" and "Lodi" and "Lookin' At The World Through A Windshield." "I didn't really start out to write a road cycle. Some of 'em I had written not that long before I went into the studio and others I'd been carrying around with me for a long time. I was driving along the 99, sleeping in the back seat, and when I woke up, I had 'The Road To Bakersfield.' It was on one trip to the Sequoia Mountains: 'California Sky,' 'Radio Girl' and 'The Road To Bakersfield' -- I wrote those in three day period." And later, another dream, a dream in which the sequence of the songs of Mile Markers came to him in order, all laid out the way they wanted to be. What Mile Markers is, what Mark Stuart's Bastard Sons are, above and beyond it all, is nothing like an imitation. There are rockabilly rebels and Alt-Country bands and New Outlaw Country stylists and far too many "An Amazing Tribute To..." acts, but what Mark Stuart has managed to do, over and over and now once again on Mile Markers, is come up with something that manages to be fresh and deep-rooted both, to be old-fashioned and brand new at the same time. There

are bands out there that dress more authentically than the Bastard Sons, bands that have more (or less) tattoos or use vintage amps and guitars that pointedly predate Leo Fender and Semie Mosrite and Paul Bigsby. Maybe that's their version of a time machine that will magically transport them through time to a land they never will really ever manage to live in. Mark Stuart pays his tribute to the giants who have gone before by writing the finest, fiercest songs he can about the moment we're all stuck with. That's the present and the past, with the future looming up just ahead on the horizon, just down the road.

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