

Cash teams up to record with Petty

By **BILL DeYOUNG**

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Johnny Cash is on a roll. After four decades of stratospheric highs, offset by lows as low as hell's root cellar, his career hit a nice stretch of road with the 1994 album *American Recordings*. Produced by Rick Rubin, famous for his work with rappers and rock stars, its 13 songs featured Mr. Cash alone with his guitar, that rumbling baritone voice unencumbered by drums, pedal steel or a string section.

American Recordings got great reviews, went gold and earned a Grammy nomination.

Hoping that lightning will strike twice, Mr. Cash has enlisted Mr. Rubin to oversee the followup. This time, however, they're not making an unplugged album - playing reverentially behind the living legend are none other than Tom Petty and his Heartbreakers.

"I'm probably going to do four more songs this week," a plainly happy Mr. Cash says in a telephone



Cash



Petty

interview from Los Angeles, where he, Mr. Rubin and Mr. Petty are hard at work. "We've done about 20, and we'll pick 15."

He and Mr. Rubin have spent the last month sifting through material, including originals and some unlikely covers. "We've always got a pile of songs for each other to listen to when we get together, choosing songs," Mr. Cash explains. "A day like today, I've got four or five new songs I'm bringin' to the session, that we've all listened to and we thought we might take a shot at doing. Maybe two Tom Petty songs, a Bob Dylan song, a Carl Perkins song and a Merle Haggard song."

Mr. Petty, whose *Wildflowers* album was a Rubin production, called and asked to play bass on the Cash sessions. Mr. Cash, who'd never met the Florida-born rocker, suggested Mr. Rubin "tell him to bring 'em all down with him."

Mr. Cash, 64, says that making the all-solo *American Recordings* was a dream realized. "Everything I've ever done has been produced, you know, and other instruments put on it," he explains.

"*American Recordings* was closer to the way I started, with very sparse instrumentation. That's one thing that felt good about it. I always wanted to do an album with just me and my guitar, and I finally did it."

Besides, he adds, "What did I have to lose?"

The new, as-yet-untitled project is simply an evolutionary step, Mr. Cash believes. "I've done that now, and I'm ready to go onto something else."

Bill DeYoung is Arts & Entertainment Editor of The Gainesville (Fla.) Sun.