

Roseanne Cash: Country at its best



By Michele Coppola, Special to The Oregonian

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When it comes to songs about cheatin', country music has more than its share of heartfelt ballads and angry revenge anthems. But for my money, Roseanne Cash's 1987 hit "The Way We Make a Broken Heart" stands the test of time as the one that just might make you go home to your spouse and beg forgiveness.

The first time I heard it, sandwiched between George Strait and the Judds on a playlist at the country radio station where I worked, I knew the song was something special -- as was the singer.

To identify Roseanne Cash simply by her familial associations is like describing a painting based on the type of brushes and oils used to create it. Yes, she's the daughter of Johnny Cash, the stepdaughter of June Carter Cash, and the former wife of Rodney Crowell. But in her 30-plus-year career as a recording artist and writer, she's taken the raw material of her legendary pedigree and woven it into a body of work that draws on the past yet is still her own.

Cash has a Grammy, 11 No. 1 singles, five kids and lots of stories to tell about recovery, resilience and finding a voice that could be heard above the din of her famous parents' legacy. Not only did that make for a best-selling memoir -- 2010's "Composed" -- but it guarantees that her performance

Sunday night at the Oregon Zoo will be rich in emotion and music that appeals to those who prefer their country folksy and cerebral: more Mary Chapin Carpenter, less Reba.

Although Cash has many literary credits to her name, expressing herself through song is something she feels she was born to do. "My life has been circumscribed by music," she writes in her memoir. "I have learned more from songs than I ever did from any teacher in school." Some of those songs, like the 1987 cover of her dad's "Tennessee Flat Top Box," are almost primitive country; others, such as the early '80s lament "Seven Year Ache" are a mix of pop, country and a little jazz.

Then there's "The Way We Make a Broken Heart." John Hiatt may have penned the song, but Cash's vocals -- sultry, dripping with guilt and set to a piano-based bossa nova beat -- turn the heartbreak of cheating into something sublime. If you've ever been unfaithful, consider this a warning: You might want to take your mate for a walk to check out the elephant exhibit when Cash sings it on Sunday.