

**Walk the Line.** Directed by James Mangold (who?). Starring Joaquin Phoenix, Reese Witherspoon. Dunno why they deleted the “I” from the song title (“I Walk the Line”) any more than I can figure out why they deleted “The” from *Hulk*, the film. Public couldn’t handle the extra syllable?

Johnny, we hardly knew ye... actually, Johnny, we knew ye only too well: gonna be tough to bring you back to life when so many of us can still hear that “Orange Blossom Special” rumbling through our heads, can still see in mind’s eye you and June howling at each other over that mike through the blue mist, white halo on stage. Johnny Ford (Seamus Feeney), who made Johnny Wayne (Marion Morrison) a star, never figured out how it happened. Finally, he could only snarl in exasperation: “Big summich just *looks* like a man.” The way it is with Johnny Cash, whose real name, we find out in the early frames of the flick, is Blanche Dubois, scion of French aristocrats who settled the Arkanzas pronounced “Ar-can-saw” on account of French unlike “Can-zass” (Kansas) colonized by Gringos and though Johnny tried to conceal his French ancestry (who’d be French?), he nonetheless allowed the odd francophone intrusion into his lyrics: “A Bois Named Sioux,” for instance ): “Big summich just *sounds* like a man.” Got that whiskey over broken glass voice growling in that raspicating basso forgets the words half the time but all about mostly doing dumb stuff and then feeling bad about it and then prostrate before Jeezus and then goes and do the dumb stuff again then on his knees again but *knows* he’s gonna do dumb stuff yet *again* still somehow snags the gorgeous high cheekbones pouty lips tight sundress (dunno as June was a jeans kinda girl but if she was it’d be *tight* jeans no doubt about that) wailing sigh-reen of his dream (and ours) to cling to him on account of all that dumb stuff is what you get with a *man* take it or leave it. And *that’s* the dream too good to wake up from. And *that’s* the story too good not to write down: John Cusack’s favorite book (if you gotta read a—ptui!—*book*) from *High Fidelity*: “...the autobiography of Johnny Cash *Cash* by Johnny Cash.” And *that’s* the movie too good not to make. And the movie too good not to make *good*.

And I think they did make the movie...*good*.

Don’t care much for Reese Witherspoon, Dresden-china doll without much flame that I can see... she certainly doesn’t ignite *mine*. Nor Joaquin Phoenix, either, for about the same reason. Howsoever, the two of them *do* ignite this flick (“Ring of Fire”), mostly at the moments when they ululate into that mike, backlit, frontlit, ill-lit, unlit... singing to one another the hand clapping knee whacking soul stirring songs of The People, Yes, that she and Johnny wrote together apart as they spent much of their lives and ain’t that the way?: “Jackson,” “I Walk the Line,” “Folsom Prison Blues...” and it’s those songs that save a not terribly agile script and pretty bare walls story from nonagility and barewallsitude. I think June was a doll, only... you know, a tough cookie. Those high cheekbones look to me hard as two lumps of West Virginia bituminous. Reese Witherspoon can’t fetch up with the hard, seems kinda goody goody here: won’t let Johnny smooch her, takes him to church, doesn’t hang with the band... C’mon. She was married what? ...four times and once to a stock car racer! No matter. Whoever, whatever the actual June was, when she pulls up that “...make a \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ big foooooool

yerself' from waaaaaaaay down in the rootcellar, you gotta be a hunk of bituminous if your heart doesn't go potato-potato-potato.

Story is inspiring. True? I dunno. Sounds a little Hollywood by way of the DSM III to me, but... Little Johnny Cash can't do nothing right, though his older brother can. When the bro dies (sorry to ruin it for you) in a table-saw accident (lesson there, kids) you can see coming a mile off, a traumatized Johnny—his youth and later his adulthood darkened by the shadow of a fierce but apparently decent dirtfarmer dad, Ray, played by Robert Patrick (Whoa! What happened to him? He was the liquid metal bad guy in *Terminator II!*)—determines to make it. A tour in the Air Force evidently supplies the leisure (...urf! urf!) to write songs, which a canny Sun Records exec flushes out of the young gee-tawr picker failed encyclopedee salesman in Memphis. They cut a record, and we're off... in vintage Buicks and Oldses and wearing those two-toned jacket-shirts along the barn dance and sock hop circuit where we meet Jerry Lee Lewis (who's weird, turns out), Elvis (who's not nice, turns out) and the Carters (who got a daughter, turns out). We get famouser and famouser, weaving in and out of June Carter's (troubled) life as fame (and flame) begin to wedge us out of our own (troubled) life. We pop pills, like Elvis, first to go up, then to get back down... but lucky for us, it's down where we finally snag June (*and* Mother Maybelle toting a shotgun!). The movie starts off as Johnny's about to take the stage at Folsom for that live concert, then closes as he does, the story told through flashback in between.

The director wisely keeps the talking short and the singing long. Looks, sounds as if Phoenix and Witherspoon do their own... and it's good, faithful even to that stiffbacked, hunchshouldered strut of Johnny's with his gee-tawr. So are the images faithful, even to a spooky recreation of the cover of the Folsom album, with Johnny and June, their backs turned to us, bathed from in front by smoky white light and eternal sky blue, howling at each other as though weren't another living soul on earth. If it didn't happen thisaway, shoulda.