

## american trio

Over the last few years, American music fans have suffered a hall-of-fame lineup of losses — country bad boy Johnny Cash and his wonderful wife, June Carter Cash; R&B luminary Ray Charles; punk pioneer Joey Ramone; guitar wizards Buck Owens and Link Wray; singer Lou Rawls; “fifth Beatle” Billy Preston; clarinetist Artie Shaw; smooth baritone Luther Vandross; “In the Midnight Hour” soul singer Wilson Pickett; and undervalued blues greats R.L. Burnside and Clarence Gatemouth Brown.

Fortunately for us, their music lives on, but all those deaths in such a short amount of time made me consider the state of music today. While it’s easy to bemoan the pap that passes for pop today, it’s also not too difficult to think of a trio of truly American originals still working into their AARP years.

This triumvirate consists of Bob Dylan, Merle Haggard and Tom Waits, with a special adviser nod to Willie Nelson. With thousands of songs, millions of records sold and untold praise from critics and fans, these fellows keep cranking it out.

I recently had the chance to see Dylan for the fifth time (Haggard opened for him), and I’m amazed at the man’s staying power and the tightness of his band. Bobby Z. could simply sit at home, count his money and chuckle

LET’S HOPE THERE’S NO END IN SIGHT TO THE TALENTS OF DYLAN, HAGGARD AND WAITS

BY MARK LUCE

at all of the scholarly articles written about him. Instead he works it, playing around 100 dates a year for more than the last decade in venues from minor-league baseball parks to casinos.

At heart, Dylan’s a troubadour, a contemporary, musical analogue to 19th century poet-of-the-people Walt Whitman. Instead of readings, Dylan provides his crowds with 14-song journeys from the early 1960s to the present, and while he’s not the most talkative chap in concert, he continues to leave audiences in awe.

As rough and tumble as his name, Haggard, primarily known as a country outlaw (Merle did time back in the 1950s), has been busy for a 69-year-old, touring with Dylan and heading back to the studio with legend George Jones. On stage Merle directs his band, The Strangers, like a true showman, leading them through songs you already know, such as “I Think I’ll Just Stay Here and Drink” and “Working Man’s Blues.” The night I saw him, Merle had a jazz ace up his sleeve, turning in a stunning rendition

of the standard, “As Time Goes By.” He’s still outspoken, still champions the underdog and can sing like nobody’s business.

Most folks wouldn’t accuse Waits of exactly singing, but his trademark gravel-laced voice has spawned an insanely loyal following who will do anything to espy the notoriously reclusive songwriter. Raconteur Waits would’ve thrived in the Tin Pan Alley days, his early songs of heartache and barroom braggadocio a perfect blend of wit and rough-edged charm. Today his compositions resist easy classification — unless the categories of Clangtastic Lament or Vaudevillian Industrial Naughtiness show up on your iTunes.

This trio of roustabouts — thoroughly original, innovative and distinctly American — will bring untold hours of musical pleasure. Search them out, for you never know when they’ll end up in the first paragraph.

*Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he sings Waits’ “Cold Water” to his sons.*

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