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"Hello. I'm Mark Collie."

And the crowd goes wild. It's not often a big-name country singer performs at Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary, a maximum-security prison in Tennessee. But on October 17, 2001, Collie and his band the Reckless Companions are there to entertain the inmates with a set tailored specifically to them. There's "On The Day I Die," about meeting the Maker in the afterlife; "Dead Man Runs Before He Walks," a song Collie wrote with Shawn Camp that tells the story of a jailbreak; and of course, "Folsom Prison Blues." After all, it was Johnny Cash who pioneered the prison concert and inspired an inmate named Merle Haggard.

Collie, who played Harry Heck in *The Punisher* and Frankie Gray in *Nashville*, also portrayed his friend Johnny Cash in the short film *I Still Miss Someone*. The Brushy Mountain show is an homage to Cash, bringing a bit of hope and a touch of redemption to the captive audience.

Originally released as a digital download in 2012, *Alive At Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary* is now available on CD and vinyl as well. We spoke with Mark about the project and also discussed his hit "Even the Man in the Moon Is Cryin'" and his song Garth Brooks covered, "Something with a Ring to It."

**Carl Wiser (Songfacts):** I was listening to *Alive at Brushy Mountain* last night, and one thing that struck me was the Johnny Cash songwriting influence. I would like to get your thoughts on that.

**Mark Collie:** I think they certainly are influenced by John's storytelling and the way he presented characters, and some of the characters could be taken right out of the pages of



his songbook. But I think it's as much of his influence as well as Kristofferson and [Billy Joe Shaver](#). And I'd like to think that the satirical approaches toward criminal behavior lifestyles may come somewhat from [Shel Silverstein](#).

But I in no way place myself even in the shadow of their work. It's just that it's obvious that whatever I've become as a songsmith or craftsman came rooted in listening to their early works.

**Songfacts:** Are there some specific elements of songwriting that you picked up from listening to these guys?

**Mark:** Well, I think the element of trying to have an original point of view on subjects that have been historically written about since the first guy with a guitar. And that's a challenge. But you can really get to know a songwriter by listening to his songs, because whatever's in his songs is what's in his heart.

I try to write from an honest point. I try not to write about anything I don't know anything about, even though we learn to embellish, to dress up our stories to keep them interesting or to give them maybe a different twist. But just the fact that you made mention that the songs have an element of John's writing is flattering to me. Thank you for that.

**Songfacts:** Well, he's in the Songwriters Hall of Fame. He's certainly very accomplished in that regard, even though a lot of his other accomplishments overshadow that.

**Mark:** I was there the night that he was inducted. In fact, he asked me to go out and accept it for him, and I went out and did four or five of his songs.

**Songfacts:** Wow. I didn't know that. What an incredible honor.

**Mark:** Yeah, it was a great honor. He called me and said he didn't feel well enough to go and asked if I'd go out there. So I got out to LA, and I'm sitting in the hotel and getting ready to go on. I had a short song list and I thought, "Well, I'll call him and see what songs he wants me to do." And we had the same list. That was kind of cool.

Johnny Cash obviously had a lot to do with my desire to try to make a difference with a guitar and a song. I had conversations with him and then later with Haggard, and I knew other guys who had been in jail and did hard time. They talked about how Johnny, just the fact that he would go into the prisons made a difference. But it certainly inspired Merle Haggard to turn his rage to muse. And without that moment that happened at San Quentin, the first time John went to San Quentin and Haggard was in that captive audience, we would lose about a third of the country format of the last 40 years from everything that Haggard made different and better.

So I felt like if I could make a difference in one young man's life or even a lifer's life, that would turn his life in a better direction, then everybody around him would be better for it. And that's all I was trying to do, really. I didn't realize it was going to be a 15-year journey. I wanted to document the whole thing, and I felt like it would be important to do that, but I didn't know that it would be a 15-year journey to get the documentary and the record all pulled together and finally available. But praise the Lord, it has.

**Songfacts:** Well, just staging a show like that seems like a huge logistical challenge.



**Mark:** Well, yeah.

Getting the access is the first thing you have to have. And then you have to gain the trust of everybody involved. I was fortunate to have some friends that worked in the government, a guy named Merlin Littlefield was working in the prisons and he'd been in the music business most of his career.

Ultimately we get the access, and then we have to make the plans. When Tony Brown [head of MCA Nashville] decided he wanted to do this project with me, he was willing to take it to MCA and do it.

We had to first think about who to get to record a live record, and one of my favorite live records is *Purple Rain* with David Z. I called David and I told him what I wanted to do, and he said, "Well, it sounds crazy, but I'll do it."

Tony Brown was able to help me put a band together, and the State of Tennessee was able to help me get the security and the access to build a stage in the middle of a prison yard.

But yeah, going in the day of... I mean, I'd been going in and out of there for the last year or so visiting and sharing music with inmates and stuff, and I was somewhat prepared for what it was going to feel like, but there's no way you could prepare for what it feels like the first time you hear

those doors close behind you. And I'm sure the band had a little more adrenaline that day than usual.

But the performances from the band and Kelly Willis and Gatemouth and everybody involved were just outstanding.

**Songfacts:** And you clearly weren't censored at all. It kind of took me aback when I heard the song "Dead Man Runs Before He Walks."



**Mark:** Well, Sean Camp and I wrote that song. He said to me that day, "Are you going to do the song?" And some of the songs I did weren't necessarily on the list that Tony and I talked about. I turned to Sean and I said, "You want to bet we can pull this off?" Because he'd really never done it live. We recorded on one mic, myself, Tommy Burroughs, and Sean. And aside from the power of the message of the song, and of the audience listening, I didn't have any idea how they were going to receive that.

I asked Sean, "You think we ought to do it?" He says, "Well, if we don't do it today, nobody will ever do this song. It's just not ever going to happen." So I turned around and I

said, "Okay, let's do it." And we did it.

**Songfacts:** One of the things I was thinking about when that was going on is your song "In Time" that you did for *The Punisher*, which is kind of a similar idea, where you're writing the song to this character. Can you talk about putting that song together?

**Mark:** Jonathan Hensleigh, who wrote and directed that, and I became friends a few years prior when we met in Los Angeles over a cigarette and a cocktail. Turns out he was a country music fan, and he wanted to put me in something. So one day he called me. He says, "I have a Marvel comic book I'm doing, *The Punisher*, and there's a character who is like a rockabilly hitman from Memphis," and he wanted me to play it.

Jonathan had seen my documentary in progress. There was a earlier edit, but we never actually got it right. I had done a screening of it, and he had seen it. He had heard the recordings that I did at Brushy, and he wanted to use "On The Day I Die" for the film, *The Punisher*.



When we got there, the record was already getting wrapped up in politics, the changing of the guard at MCA Universal. So the record and the whole project was in limbo, and I had to tell him that the song wasn't going to work. He said,

"Well, do you have anything else?" And I said, "Yes," and I started working on "In Time" on the set. I came back a few minutes later and sang a piece of it, and he had everyone on the set stop and listen to it. They approved it, and we shot it the next day.

The character I played is Harry Heck, and he certainly carried some of the influence from my reckless companions who I came to know during my interviews at Brushy Mountain State prison. You'll see a little Harry Heck in some of the guys when you watch it.

Anyway, I learned a lot during the making of that record. I grew a lot in all the years that I've taken to try to get the story told. I'm stronger for it. I hope I'm a little wiser from it. I know I'm stronger spiritually and I'm still challenged to understand and forgive. But I'm learning to do that, too.

**Songfacts:** The whole acting thing is really interesting, because a lot of these guys you mentioned - Kristofferson really jumps out - have a way of being able to show up on screen and project this kind of power, and also do it in songs, which is another talent that you have. Can you talk about how those play together?

**Mark:** Well, the film thing is basically interpreting an emotion or a moment. It's part of a collaboration, working within a band or a studio, making a record. I don't believe you make records, I think you capture moments of music. That's the only good stuff you'll want to listen to.

You can hear a lot of people who made a record, but you might not want to listen to it again. But when you hear a moment that's captured, that's got that thing about it, that's what we do, and that's the same way with film, I believe. You capture moments of performances.

And I try not to think too much about what I'm doing. I try

to just know who my character is and be that guy and be honest with it, to never let them catch me acting.

**Songfacts:** Garth Brooks did your song "Something With A Ring To It." Can you talk about writing that song and the whole mindset?

**Mark:** Aaron Tippin and I were struggling writers kicking around Nashville trying to get a door to open. I remember we got a whim. We wrote quite a few tunes in those days, and one day he said, "We need to write something with a ring to it." And I said, "Okay."

So flippantly he said that, and it became that song.

The song started getting a lot of traction, started getting some attention around town, and I was beginning to get a little heat as a writer and getting a few cuts. I was talking around town trying to get a record deal, and I was trying to get a George Strait cut with that song. I got Tony Brown and some guys over at Universal on MCA at the time were interested in the song, and my publisher was trying to get me to let the guy next door record it, because he wanted to record it. She told me, "I don't know if George Strait's going to cut it or not, but you should let this guy do it, because he's going to be the next George Strait."

I told her, "Look, I've heard him sing, he's no George Strait." And then Tony Brown called and said, "Look, I want to cut this on Mark and sign him to MCA," and it became my first single. And I was absolutely correct about the guy next door. He was no George Strait. He was Garth Brooks.

But blessedly later on he cut it, too. And so thank you, Garth. You're no George Strait, but you are Garth Brooks.

**Songfacts:** That song has a tremendous opening line, "My baby's playing hard to please." Is that how you started the



song?

**Mark:** Yep. It's sort of got a Carl Perkins kick to it. Somewhere between Carl Perkins and Merle Travis. It happened in a matter of a short period of time - sometimes songs do that. You just know where they're going and you just go ahead and write your path to it.

When we made the record, James Burton played that guitar, and that guitar riff had as much to do with what made that song as anything that we did.

But it was just really something to make Aaron and me laugh. It's a fun song. It's got joy in it.

**Songfacts:** It's almost like that Shel Silverstein vibe you were talking about before. It's got a little levity to it.

**Mark:** But underneath it is actually a ballad thing. I remember one time when I was doing this interview, and that first record that I had had a lot of heartbreaking songs that possibly was the feeling to where I had come from in my life at the time, and she said, "That song is very sexist."

This was, like, 1990, and I'm being called a sexist. And I'm going, "So what's wrong with being sexy?"

"It's *sexist*."

So I just played the hillbilly.

But I never got that from it, and it was never intended that way, but it certainly has been a great copyright for Aaron and me.

**Songfacts:** Another song that has a tremendous opening line is "Even the Man In The Moon is Crying." I mean, it sets the story: Okay, what happens next after you walk her to

the plane in Phoenix? Can you tell me about writing that song and if there was any kind of personal inspiration behind it?



**Mark:** I was traveling on my first tours in those days and I was seeing the parts of America that I'd never seen up close and personal. And the west, Arizona and the desert at night, is magnificent the first time you get out and see it. Don Cook and I were working on the record and it was during the time when the country was dealing with the Gulf War. Don said, "The world's in such a terrible place. It's like even the man in the moon is crying."

I had just come from the desert at night. I was flying back home and I saw this guy putting his little girl on a plane. I watched that, and that's where that scene came from. But it was part of where I was and where Don and I were. And somewhere between where he was coming from and the heartache he was seeing and the beauty of the desert and the moon at night and the mystery of it became a song, a great song to my ears.

**Songfacts:** In listening to *Brushy*, you make some allusions to some unlawful things you've done, and that's kind of a typical outlaw songwriter thing, like you've got to go through some stuff if you're going to write about it. Did you ever

have one of these crazy, off-the-rails moments like Kris Kristofferson flying the plane into Johnny's backyard?

**Mark:** Well, I've done some crazy, crazy things. And if you ask around, there's probably plenty of people down at Music Row that will be more colorful or honest than I might be. I made some mistakes. I've done things, poor choices. I've been arrested, and I don't like being in that position, but I've been very lucky and blessed not to have been in the wrong place too long.



But I've had friends who made the choice to go out the other way. It has not served them well, and it breaks my heart to see it. But I finally got my act together, and I don't plan on making those choices again. There are some funny stories, but I think I'd better save them for the book, because I'm not sure you could print them in this article.

**Songfacts:** You certainly have to do it in moderation. You can't do anything that's going to end up ruining your life.

But time and again you find that what are mistakes at the time end up being positives. I'm thinking of a guy like Jerry Jeff Walker who comes across [Mr. Bojangles](#) in jail and this is the life that it leads you.

**Mark:** Well, I think that it's not really about the last step you took to get you in a bad place, it's about the next step you take to get away, to get beyond it, and what you do with what you've learned. I had to learn some sense lessons a number of times. Rather stubborn in that regard. And trying to just not to repeat the same foolish behavior.

But I learned a lot. I remember a few occasions when I've been locked up, and I learned right quick that I didn't like being locked up. Fortunately, I'm completely beyond that now.

**Songfacts:** You mentioned that "On The Day I Die" almost ended up in *The Punisher*. That's kind of an interesting song. Did you write that specifically for *Brushy*?

**Mark:** Yeah. It's as much about my demons and my confessions and missteps as it is some of the guys who shared with me. I was absorbing what they're saying, their confessions.

Then I couldn't really get it finished, and a buddy of mine said, "You have to finish that." And I'm so glad he did, because the song has a great message. There is always one true way. That's what that song's about.

**Songfacts:** And you could tell by the reaction that it gets when you play it that it clearly connected.

**Mark:** That was the one I was most nervous about. The warden had sent a message back to me after "Dead Man Runs" asking if we could stop doing break-out songs.

**Songfacts:** Well, that was a polite way to do it instead of, say, pulling the plug.

**Mark:** That's right. He could have done that. But back to "The Day I Die," I played it for a couple of guys in cells, and asked them about it. That was probably the most frightening time I had when I was just sitting inside with them. And they said, "You've got to do that song."

I'm glad I did it. I wanted to make something that would matter beyond all the things that seem to matter in our commercial world of art and commerce, and I wanted to write some songs that could matter.

**Songfacts:** Well, it does what you said, it captures a moment.

**Mark:** Yeah.

**Songfacts:** Just one last thing I wanted to ask you, Mark. Are you going to be back on *Nashville*?

**Mark:** I don't know. We're planning on it, but I cannot say for sure I'm coming back for the season. I don't know what the plans for Frankie and Deacon may be, but I do know that I left Season 4 the most hated man on the show, and I would like an opportunity to redeem Frankie. We'll see if we can get that to happen.

Charles Esten and I are friends - we write together a lot when we're both available, and I do have another film project that I'm waiting on, and I'm starting a new record this month. Those are all part of the answer to that question. But ultimately, I hope that we can do another run. It was kind of nice finally playing a nice guy for the first six episodes, and then suddenly I took a turn. All of a sudden I'm the asshole I've always been off screen.

**Songfacts:** Hey, as long as you're getting some heat.

**Mark:** That's true. It's all good.