

**The Music of *American Man***  
*Performance Piece for Edinburgh Fringe Festival*  
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By Bryan Staggers

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Thesis Directors: Dr. Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt & Dr. Tony Grace, May 2023

Center for Appalachian Studies and Communities Shepherd University

[https://soundcloud.com/bryanstaggers-1/sets/american-man?si=0d78047e541e47218c63f2e30081032c&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/bryanstaggers-1/sets/american-man?si=0d78047e541e47218c63f2e30081032c&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)

## **Introduction**

The project is a collection of songs from *American Man*, an original piece of gig theatre centered on a struggling country musician. Gig theatre is a relatively new form of performance that combines traditional dramatic practices (such as monologues, scenes, and other scripted material) with live music performance. In this instance, the narrative progresses through a series of monologues, songs, and audience interaction which focus on themes related to contemporary masculinity as it is embodied in an Appalachian man named Sebastian. Each song, monologue, and scene incorporates unique aspects of American masculinity such as substance abuse, emotional restriction, tendencies toward violence, and sexual recklessness to craft a portrait of the central character and build the foundation of his relationship with the audience. By performance's end, audience members will understand the links between the character's struggles and their connection to rigid upholding on masculine norms.

The musical composition, style, and lyrics of the songs reference several Appalachian musicians including Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash, as well as more broadly American artists like John Prine, Marty Robbins, and Bruce Springsteen. Each of these artists made contributions to American country music and the zeitgeist of American masculinity. Presley, for example, "displayed a precocious and quite apolitical commitment to doing [their] own thing no matter what" (Oppenheim 22), while Johnny Cash cultivated "the inescapable impression" of the "cowboy—the ultimate American representative of a carefree, outdoorsy, untrammled lifestyle" (Smith 152-153). Reference to these iconic Appalachian musicians creates a sonic symbolism of male Americana and reveals the depth of influence that masculinity has on the protagonist as a singer-songwriter and as a man. Using components such scale structure, strum patterns, melodic movement, and rhyme, the music cements these themes and references.

The study of masculinity, though a relatively new discipline within anthropological and sociological fields of study, has generated a wealth of research and critical insight into human behavior. Born from the feminist movements of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, research into masculinity has given rise to a multitude of studies which examine masculine gender norms and the patterns of behavior which emerge from adherence to

or departure from them. Several of these studies reveal how “traditional gender roles...undergird power differences between men and women by defining masculinity as dominance and aggression and femininity as submissiveness and nurturance” (Levant and Powell 16). To maintain this social order, there are four cardinal rules that men must follow:

1. avoid anything seen as even vaguely feminine,
2. strive to be respected and admired
3. remain calm in the most hectic and frightening situations...[and] handle difficult problems on their own.
4. Take risks, seek adventure, and use violence. (qtd. in Thompson Bennett 51).

However, strict adherence to such rigid demands can result in what scholar Pleck describes as “dysfunction-strain” which results in “the behaviors and characteristics these standards prescribe” leading to “negative outcomes either for the male himself or others” (Pleck 17). More recent studies have revealed that this so-called “dysfunction strain” manifests as “sexual aggression, overt hostility, fear of emotions, and high levels of engagement in risky health behaviors” (Liang 347). Moreover, adherence to traditional masculinity ideology is correlated to a litany of concerning behaviors including substance abuse, anger issues, sexism, and homophobia as noted by O’Neil (375-408). Taken together, these studies demonstrate a trend toward disruption and destruction, indicating a masculinity crisis that has continued in contemporary society. *American Man* examines how these critical underpinnings manifest in a contemporary Appalachian musician. What follows is a selection of songs from the production and contextualization of the aforementioned themes and references included in their composition, all part of the gig theater piece scheduled for production at the Edinburgh Festival, **August 4-12, 2023, 6:15-7:25 p.m., Clover Studio in Greenside Venues Riddles Court.**

### **“American Man”**

The lead single of the production, “American Man” takes inspiration from Marty Robbins, Johnny Cash, and Bruce Springsteen. Cash’s life as a man and musician was

riddled with instances of substance abuse and domestic violence. As biographer Leigh H. Edwards writes, “Cash embodied the tensions in the American character without resolving them” (Edwards 9). Similarly, Robbins embodied unique aspects of American masculinity. Biographer Diane Dieckman states that “deep insecurities, both personal and financial, plagued Marty his entire life. He never outgrew his father’s rejection or his poverty-stricken childhood” (Dieckman 9). Notably, Robbins was a fierce conservative and American nationalist, with songs like “My Own Native Land” and “Ain’t I Right” demonstrating racially-charged lyrics that were rejected by his record company at the time.

The central character in “American Man” echoes the experiences of Cash and Robbins while also borrowing from their musical stylings. Using Robbins’s proclivity for narrative songs such as “El Paso” and “Big Iron” and Cash’s trademark railroad-style strumming pattern found in “I Walk the Line” and “Ring of Fire,” “American Man” strongly reflects these icons of Americana. The thumping bass line is also a reference to classic Cash music. By emphasizing the melancholic resonances of the minor tones, “American Man” establishes a correlating sadness in the narrative. References to Bruce Springsteen are found in the vocal performance, particularly in the third verse, in which a rough and ragged style of delivery counters the smoothness demonstrated in the beginning of the song. This style is reminiscent of Bruce Springsteen’s *Born in the U.S.A.*

*Verse 1:*

*Red, White, and Blue balling, sitting in a church pew  
Sending up a prayer, calling, hoping someone will answer you  
Cause you’re getting tired of brawling, waiting on a breakthrough  
When you look around, it’s appalling—what this world is coming to.*

*Chorus:*

*And your heroes are on heroin, so they can learn to fly again.  
But now they’ve gone and left you behind.  
And the cowboys and the Indians have blown through all their ammunition.  
Now they’ve gone and left you dumb and blind.  
Well, goddam. You’re an American man.  
Well, goddam. You’re an American man.*

*Verse 2:*

*White, blue, and red-blooded, half-drunk and corn-fed.  
You're just a boy, interrupted by what some angry strangers said.  
An open mind, corrupted with thoughts that you'd be better off dead.  
Chorus*

*Verse 3:  
Blue, red, and white power, telling you to join the fight.  
They're coming for your rights, you coward, so stand up for the Stars and Stripes.  
Now that mother's milk has soured, the opportunity is ripe.  
Chorus*

### **“All My Sins”**

“All My Sins” borrows from several Appalachian artists and traditions. First, the song is composed in similar fashion to traditional Appalachian ballads, narratives conveyed through songs that were popular among the Appalachian frontier. Ballads were typically sung in a pentatonic (or 5 pitch) scale and used repetition in the lyrics to make the songs more accessible to an audience. “All My Sins” incorporates both of these characteristics, using the pentatonic D major scale and an ABCAB structure in each of its verses. Additionally, “All My Sins” is performed from an “everyman” perspective, appealing to struggles of a common perspective (finances, sex, and spirituality).

*Verse 1:  
I don't have much of an appetite.  
I traded it in for some drinks last night.  
You may call me a drunkard, and you may be right.  
Cause I don't have much of an appetite.  
I traded it in for some drinks last night.*

*Verse 2:  
I thought I met a lover but forgot their name.  
After six or seven, they're all the same.  
You could call me a loser in the dating game.  
I thought I met a lover but forgot their name.  
After six or seven, they're all the same.*

*Verse 3:  
Landlord says my rent is due  
But I haven't been paid in a week or two  
Don't know what I'm gonna do*

*Landlord says my rent is due  
But I haven't been paid in a week or two.*

*Verse 4:  
Preacher man tells me to straighten out  
Says the way I been living puts salvation in doubt  
I don't know what he's talkin about  
Preacher man tells me to straighten out  
Says the way I been living puts salvation in doubt*

*Verse 5:  
When I get to Heaven will they let me in?  
Or will they laugh and tell me that ain't happenin?  
Will they send me to the Devil for all my sins?  
When I get to Heaven will they let me in?  
Or will they laugh and tell me that ain't happenin?*

### **“Heavy Impressions”**

“Heavy Impressions” is a song about a romance that went wrong. The protagonist laments the dissolution of a relationship and ponders what might have been while being interrupted with reminders of the anxieties faced during the course of the courtship. Thematically, this song reflects the tendency toward restrictive communication in romantic relationships among American men. The song is arranged as a short reverie, interrupting the thoughts of the protagonist before fading away in the recesses of his mind.

*Verse 1:  
You want apologies for me never answering your calls.  
I want a remedy for dancing with enemies under waterfalls.  
When I think of you and me, I feel like a refugee—  
Brave for braving the storms on the sea,  
Where did it get me?*

*Chorus  
You treated me no less than horse hooves on my chest,  
Heavy impressions.*

*Verse 2:  
If we could go again, make snow angels in Brooklyn,  
Leave our demons in the summer sun,*

*Wouldn't that be fun?  
These revelations take me to heavenly pieces  
now that we're done.*

*Chorus Repeats*

### **New Stanzas for “Amazing Grace”**

This song is a recording of the eponymous poem by Allen Ginsberg set to music of the Christian Hymn “Amazing Grace.” The original lyrics of the hymn, penned by John Newton in 1772, describes “the joy and peace of a soul uplifted from despair to salvation through the gift of grace” (Library of Congress). The lyrics of “New Stanzas” shares a parable about human generosity, specifically in regards to those experiencing homelessness. Inspired by artists such as Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash—both of whom recorded several hymns—this song is performed in the style of a church hymn with rich, open vowels sung in a two-part harmony in the G major pentatonic scale.

*Verse 1:*

*I dreamed I dwelled in a homeless place  
Where I was lost alone  
Folk looked right through me into space  
And passed with eyes of stone*

*Verse 2:*

*O homeless hand on many a street  
Accept this change from me  
A friendly smile or word is sweet  
As fearless charity*

*Verse 3:*

*Woe workingman who hears the cry  
And cannot spare a dime  
Nor look into a homeless eye  
Afraid to give the time*

*Verse 4:*

*So rich or poor no gold to talk  
A smile on your face  
The homeless ones where you may walk  
Receive amazing grace*

Verse 5:  
*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost but now am found  
Was blind but now I see*

### **“So It Goes”**

This song echoes Johnny Cash and John Prine in both the lyrical content and musical structure. Taking cues from Cash’s speak-sing style of “A Boy Named Sue” and Prine’s “Angel from Montgomery,” “So It Goes” blends the forms of music, narrative, and poetry into a singular auditory output. The verses serve as chapters in the protagonist’s story while the chorus builds familiarity and affinity with the listening audience. The simple chorus cements these chapters together into an autobiographical recounting of the protagonist’s family life up to present-day.

Verse 1:  
*I came around in a railroad town  
That ran by the river til it was run down  
A few miles off the mountain and fifty years from any consequence.  
I grew up with nothing but  
a weak heartbeat and two left feet  
a couple hand me down sweaters and the air inside my lungs.*

Chorus:  
*That’s all I know, lord.  
That’s all I know.  
That’s all I know, lord.  
So it goes.*

Verse 2:  
*We were poor. I slept on the floor.  
With a sleeping bag made outta rags  
And one lumpy old pillow, but I didn’t know any better.  
See I had hopes and wishes and dreams  
That grew as I grew until they ripped at the seams  
Of my sleeping bag and bundle of hand-me-down sweaters.*



*Chorus*

*Verse 3:*

*Daddy had a job but he was also a slob  
who preferred snortin pills to payin the bills  
and drinking down whiskey faster than he could swallow.  
But my Mama was sweet and she stayed upbeat  
And she sang real pretty which was always a treat  
And her voice was the reason that I didn't never wallow.*

*Chorus*

*Verse 4:*

*Well Daddy left when the money was spent  
Didn't leave more than a couple of cents  
That was just about when I was turning seven.  
And mama she wept and then she slept  
Til she found a bottle and went full throttle  
And she kept that cycle going til I was eleven.*

*Chorus*

*Verse 5:*

*We didn't have much of anything,  
But my mama still tried to sing.  
And she kept on singing until she drank herself into a grave.  
Well before she died, she said son stay alive,  
Keep your head up high and try not to die  
Show the world your many talents and be brave.  
She gave me one final look in the eye, and it took all I had not to cry.  
We put her in the ground that following Tuesday.*

*Chorus*

*Verse 6:*

*And now I'm here, a ramblin' queer,  
With everything to gain and nothing to fear,  
With a cheap guitar, a few dollars, and something to say.  
And when I hear the train whistle from the great beyond,  
I suppose I'll greet it with this little song.  
I just pray that old whistle ain't planning on whistlin' today.*

*Chorus*

**'Half of a Man'**

This song is from the perspective of Mothman, the celebrated Appalachian cryptid. Mothman emerged as a supernatural phenomenon in the 1960s. The creature came to be regarded as an omen after an alleged sighting just before the disastrous collapse of the Silver Bridge in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, which resulted in 46 deaths. This song examines Mothman as a social outcast, pleading for compassion and understanding. In this way, Mothman echoes someone who feels stigmatized by not fulfilling the masculine ideal. This idea is exemplified in the line “I wish I could understand why I had to be half of a man.”

*Verse 1:*

*I have learned to scorn the sun,  
Hide away from everyone.  
But I can come alive at night.  
In the darkness, spread my wings and take flight.*

*Chorus:*

*I am just another soul,  
Lost and lonely,  
Far from home.  
I wish I could understand,  
Why I had to be half of a man.  
Half of a man.*

*Verse 2:*

*I've never hurt anyone.  
Still they scream. Still they run.  
And though I've tried not to care.  
It's hard to do when they stare.  
And they stare, and it's not fair.*

*Chorus*

*Bridge:*

*They say bridges shouldn't burn.  
Easy to say until it's your turn.  
Red eyes shine so bright,  
Illuminating the scarlet night.  
Underneath the iron sings,  
Keeping time with the rhythm, with the rhythm, with the rhythm of my wings.*

*Chorus*

## Conclusions and Moving Forward

*American Man* will have its world premiere in the 2023 Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Edinburgh, Scotland. This festival was established in 1947 “to celebrate and enrich European cultural life in the wake of the Second World War” (Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2023). In the years subsequent to its founding, it has emerged as one of the preeminent creative festivals in the world. In 2022, the festival celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary and renewed its vision with an aim “to give anyone a stage, and everyone a seat,” providing “a platform to anyone with a story to tell and a stage to host them” (Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2023). Many performances advance from the festival to become successful theatrical productions, feature films, television series, music tours, and more. One recent notable example is Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s solo performance *Fleabag*, which became critically and commercially popular stage production and limited series (Waller-Bridge and Bennett, 2017). With such a significant history, this festival will be an exceptional location for *American Man*.

The show will have an initial run of nine performances at the Clover Studio housed by Greenside Venues in Edinburgh, **Aug. 4-12, 6:15-7:25 p.m., Riddles Court**. Clover Studio is an intimate 22-seat theatre that allows for, and compels, a performer to cultivate a relationship with his or her audience. Additionally, Greenside Venues provides its performers with built-in press, marketing, and networking opportunities, thereby increasing the visibility of the performance. After successful completion of the run in Edinburgh, the show will embark on a tour of select venues in the United States, and potentially abroad. Plans are to perform in Shepherdstown, West Virginia; Morgantown, West Virginia; and Los Angeles, California (2023-24). These are places which have an established audience base of friends, family, and acquaintances on which to build and refine the performance before embarking to other locations. Likewise, the performance will eventually be developed into a feature film as a means of both preserving the performance and opening it up to an additional medium and audience base.

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