



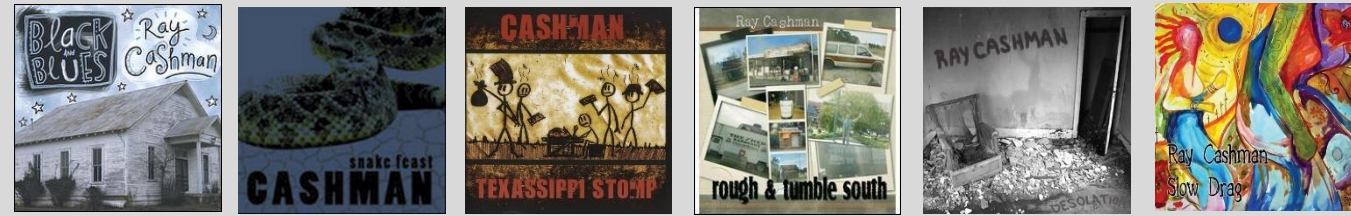
Tennessee singer-songwriter Ray Cashman: The Experience of the South Through the Framework of the Gothic

Victor Bouvéron, Master's in the Folklore Program, American Studies Department



The South Through the Lens of the Gothic

My research explores how **Tennessee singer-songwriter Ray Cashman experiences the South through the lens of Gothic aesthetics**. The ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted led me to reflect on the relationship between the blues style, Southern Gothic genre and working-class culture. Through the conversations we had and through the lyrics of Cashman's songs, I found that the Gothic was a powerful way to convey Cashman's experience of the South, and a compelling aesthetics to express his identity as a Southern working-class white male.



A project that traveled from France to America

I first met Cashman in **Lille, France**, in 2015. At that time, I was the radio producer of a weekly blues program called "Bluesland".

Cashman was on tour to present his new album *Desolation*. He graciously accepted my invitation to come on my radio show

where he performed a full range of his songs. During the broadcast, he explained that his songs are inspired by both his travels on the road and inspired by **Southern Gothic literature**. The convergence between blues music and the American Gothic genre appealed to me. I brought this project with me



when I came to UNC-Chapel Hill to pursue a Master's in Folklore. I met with Cashman at his home in **Nolensville**, Tennessee, about fifteen miles from Nashville, where he graciously hosted me in 2015 and 2016.



Ray Cashman and the Craftsmanship of Songs

Ray Cashman creates his songs the way he crafts wood. Both a musician and a carpenter, he believes that these two forms of art are connected. The process of songwriting, like the craftsmanship of wood, demands skills, patience, and creativity. Each piece is unique, and the end result has to be the best possible outcome. By his own admission, Cashman does not follow a formal songwriting process. When he plucks his guitar strings, a driving rhythm or a haunting melody may resonate, from which he will build his new song. As he remembers a personal experience or a story he read in a Gothic novel, he is inspired to write memorable lyrics, from which he creates the music component. Since his teenage years, Cashman has written hundreds of songs that are inspired by his life in the South and by Southern Gothic writers such as Harry Crews, Larry Brown and Tom Franklin. He defines his music as **"a blues gumbo repertoire than can conjure up the ghosts of the Mississippi"**.



Going Down to Nolensville, Tennessee (May 12-15)

These photographs were taken during my visit on May 12-15, in Nolensville, Tennessee, a town of about 5,800 residents. On **Friday**, after our recording session, Cashman showed me around. *"There's a lot of antique stores here"*, he said, as we were driving along the main road. I found that these **antique stores** - inherently old and discarded - brought a Gothic atmosphere to the town.



He continued: *"I wrote a song about this place"*, pointing out a place called **Nana's Diner**. Nana's Diner was a one-story brick rectangular building with six windows and a glass door that overlooks the road (picture on the left). Further up the road, I was impressed by the **Methodist Episcopal Church** and its soaring seventy-five-foot-high white steeple that ends with an elegant red pointed tip (picture on the right):



On **Saturday** night, we built a campfire outside of Cashman's house and shared some wine. He improvised a blues song, singing cheerfully: *"playing in front the fire, gettin' smoke in my face!"*



Examples of Gothic Themes in Cashman's songs

Sinister, grotesque, supernatural, feeling of decay... These Gothic motifs imbue Cashman's songwriting and music. Written in the first-person narrative, his song **"Desolation"** expresses a feeling of loneliness and despair with its tragic tone. Cashman composed this song one day in October, while he was driving through the Appalachian Mountains. I found his emotional response to a beautiful landscape intriguing. His opening lines describe the striking contrast between the appealing colors of the mountains and an eerie atmosphere:

*Drizzling fog undress the hills of gold and red
Image etched into my head
Cold wind cuts straight to the bone
Memories toiled in stone*

The fog is a *"classical Gothic trope"* (Van Elferen). It obscures the vision, hides things from view, and accentuates the sense of mystery and ambiguity. **"The Day After Hells Burn Out"** depicts a post-apocalyptic scene that is reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*:

*You can holler and scream till your face turns blue
You can rant and rave till your lungs burst through
When all said and done and the end without a doubt
It's looking like the day after hell has burned out*

Cashman's repertoire includes songs that retell a work of literature. In so doing, he specifically addresses the Southern Gothic genre. **"Snake Feast"** is adapted from Harry Crews' *A Feast of Snakes*, while **"Evangeline"** focuses on the tragic story of Evavangeline, as told by Tom Franklin in his Gothic novel *Smonk*. Evavangeline is an innocent underage prostitute who is chased by a posse after being accused of murder and sodomy. The novel is a twist toward the dark and the perverse at its peak.

The sense of nostalgia for a bygone time is another hallmark of Gothic literature. Cashman expresses this feeling through the ghostly appearances of musicians Townes Van Zandt in **"Desolation"**, and of Mississippi Fred McDowell in **"The Ghost of Fred"**.

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