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## Mailer sings Gilmore

Gary Cohen

**The Executioner's Song** by Nor-  
man Mailer. Little, Brown.

In his latest tome, **The Executioner's Song**, author Norman Mailer brilliantly recreates the compelling, true life story of two-time murdered Gary Gilmore. In so doing, he meshes art and reality to give birth to a landmark work of imaginative history.

Mailer, detail by pithy detail, charts for his reader the events of the nine-month interval between Gilmore's release from an Illinois penitentiary and his subsequent death before a firing squad at Utah State Prison on January 17, 1977. But what emerges is no simple, journalistic account. Instead the novel exudes a visceral, soulful quality through its attempts to tell not only what happened, but who it happened to and why.

The people we meet and get to know are actually more fantastic than those we encounter in fiction, and often one must be reminded that these are real people leading real lives. Yet, as the story unfolds, we are drawn into the world of drama, a world of passion, love, violence and jealousy, a world in which

By carefully and precisely gathering information from

dozens of sources Mailer not only tells us what Gary Gilmore did, but who and what he was, all the while maintaining his artistic control, never intruding into his work, but objectively standing



outside of it. The reader is implicitly called upon to draw his own conclusions and make his own judgments. And what could have been a story of senseless, cold-blooded murder, crime and punishment, if left to a less skillful hand, is delicately balanced with love, pity and compassion. We are left to decide about Gilmore not only on the basis of what he did, but also what he was.

Mailer has dug deep into his subject. He animates a side of life we rarely view—the seedy,

patchwork, poverty-stricken, small-town setting and the people who inhabit it. We not only get a glimpse of Gary Gilmore the brute, but of Gary Gilmore the son, the lover and the artist. By his actions, and most powerfully through his letters from prison, Gilmore blossoms into a complex personality, someone we come to know deeply and personally, more than just a headline or a statistic.

The book's narrative is relaxed and matter-of-fact, once again causing a balance to be struck between the often hectic, bizarre action and the way in which it is retold. Mailer's research, though voluminous, is astutely edited and organized so as to bring forth the complete tragedy without being tedious. No one is spared, no one is damned, and seemingly no stone is unturned. A total involvement takes place, powerfully drawing the reader to the heartland eddies and currents of the lives that are exposed.

More than any piece of non-fiction in recent memory, **The Executioner's Song** merges the talents of its author with his explosive, thought-evoking material to create a tremendously resounding, enthralling literary work.

## Born to cry

Hugh Westrup

**Stand By Your Man** by Tammy  
Wynette with Joan Dew. Simon  
and Schuster, 349 pages. \$15.95.

"Sometimes it's hard to be a woman" goes the lyric from Tammy Wynette's country ode **Stand By Your Man**. And she should know. By her thirty-fifth birthday, Miss Wynette, who now reigns as the Queen of Country Music in those fabulous gowns and cumulus, platinum wigs, had married five times; lived in poverty in a tarpaper shack; endured the violent, alcoholic rages of third husband and singing partner George Jones; survived a plane crash; suffered a nervous breakdown; undergone electric shock therapy and numerous operations; rescued boyfriend Burt Reynolds from drowning in her bathtub; and narrowly escaped death in a gas explosion. Whew!

There was a time when only washed-up movie stars spilled the miseries of their lives onto the printed page. Remember Hedy Lamarr's **Ecstasy and Me** or Errol Flynn's **My Wicked, Wicked Ways**? But as American middle-class life turned comfier than a therapist's couch, it became fashionable—nay, compulsory—for everyone to tell all—on talk shows, in singles bars, at born-again revivals, in est marathons and gestalt workshops. So we

have Betty Ford's revelations about drug addiction and her mastectomy in **The Times of My Life**, Margaret Trudeau freaking out atop a tree in **Beyond Reason**, and Doris Day greasing herself from head to toe with Vaseline in **Doris Day: Her Own Story**.



In keeping with this great outpouring, Tammy Wynette's story was ripe for publication. And in a page by page tally of trauma and tragedy it certainly outstrips the rest. On one level Wynette is astonishingly frank; in tone her autobiography matches precisely the manner in which Lily Tomlin describes the gruesome particulars of a car wreck in **Nashville**. Here's Wynette's observation of her baby daughter's treatment for spinal meningitis: "There were

needles stuck in her stomach, her feet, the back of her head, even the soft spot in her brain. Except for her mouth, which had remained a rosy pink, her entire body was a blackish colour. She lay as still as death."

As startling as descriptions like this are, readers will find themselves frustrated because **Stand By Your Man** remains a scrapbook sketch. Wynette sees herself as an innocent throughout; there's no clue as to how much she collaborated in her own destiny, no admission of any destructive impulses. Admirers of her music will search in vain for the soulful side that is so evident in Wynette's classic recordings of "DIVORCE", "I Don't Wanna Play House" and "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad." Where is the loneliness that Wynette expresses so purely and that is so central to the feeling of Country and Western Music? Listen to a piece like "Almost Persuaded" in which she confesses the temptation to yield to the barroom advances of a stranger with a "smile that a girl understands." Tammy Wynette can sound like the last survivor on earth.

**Stand By Your Man**, bursting with incident and upset, is fuller than a year's subscription to *People*. But for a portrait of the singer, check out the songs.

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