



The Man in Black:
Johnny Cash

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“He is what the land and country is all about, the heart and soul of it personified and what it means to be here; and he said it all in plain English. Listen to him, and he will always bring you to your senses.”, said Bob Dylan on October 16th, 2003 in Rolling Stones Magazine.

February 26th, 1932 in Kingsland Arkansas, a poor family of sharecroppers gave birth to a man who would later go on to win a lifetime achievement award at the 1999 Grammys. From his simple beginnings, Johnny Cash grew up working in cotton fields in the south during the Great Depression. The Cash family struggled with poverty and grief...their eldest son, Jack (Johnny's big brother), was killed in a tablesaw accident as a kid and Johnny and his siblings nearly starved to death when finances and crops were at their worst. During his rough childhood, Cash learned to play guitar and even played on the local Arkansas radio station as a teenager. His music career not yet taking off, Cash moved from Arkansas to Detroit to work in an auto plant, then to Germany with the Air Force, and finally to Memphis where he was an appliance salesman. In Memphis he attended radio announcer's school and got married to Vivian Liberto in 1954. Johnny Cash wore many hats before he became a full time musician: farmer, salesman, soldier, husband, and even dad...Cash and Liberto had four daughters together. Finally, by 1955 he had signed with Sam Phillip's Sun Records in Memphis. He wore a black shirt and black jeans to his audition with the label and from thence forward never performed without wearing black as a goodluck charm. That first audition led to Cash becoming “The Man in Black” and having a wild career.

Signing with Sun Records was just the beginning of a lifetime of success for Johnny Cash. Luther Perkins, guitarist, and Marshall Grant, bassist, made up *Johnny Cash and the*



Tennessee Two. The label also threw him together with Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis, the four became known as “The Million Dollar Quartet”. Three years with Sun Records and Cash had become a full-time musician and his sound had introduced the earliest roots of rockabilly. The song “Folsom Prison Blues” was his first to appear on the National Pop Singles Chart and by 1956 he had a spot on the Billboard Hits Chart at #4 with “So Doggone Lonesome”. In the same year he had his first million selling hit with “I Walk the Line”. In 1958 he made the move to California where he signed with Columbia Records.

As The 60’s rolled around Cash’s career was a huge success. However, the dark side of “The Man in Black ” started to reveal itself. Cash had entered into a 9 year period of havoc, unpredictability, and drug and alcohol abuse. In Nashville, he formed a friendship with country legend Waylon Jennings. Jennings describes the time the two spent together in the 60’s to Rolling Stone’s magazine as a “drug-crazed year and a half”. Cash was even banned from the esteemed Grand Ole Opry in 1965 after an outrageous and violent outburst. That same year Cash was famously arrested trying to smuggle amphetamines over the Mexican border in his guitar case. After a nearly fatal overdose, Liberto had enough and the couple divorced. Many thought that his drug problem would be his demise, then entered June Carter...

Johnny Cash came to his senses not long after meeting June Carter. June was a singer and songwriter and performed with her (also musical) family. They started writing songs together in the early 60’s, started dating after the divorce in 1967, and were married by 1968. Johnny and June turned over a new leaf together. June got Johnny clean and the two sang



duets and started touring together. In later years their family even toured and performed together.

Thank goodness for June's intervention because Cash kept recording hits up until his last days.

Cash had a full and vivacious career. After his career kicked off, he famously recorded live albums during concerts for prisoners at two prisons, San Quentin and Folsom. His 1969 single, "A Boy Named Sue" was recorded live at San Quentin and held its place at number one on the charts for four weeks. By 1969 Cash had his own television show, "The Johnny Cash Show", featuring the musical stylings of him and June, as well of some of his musically inclined friends like Bob Dylan. Cash continued touring through the 70's and started some great collaborative work in the 80's. In 1982 Cash recorded an album with his old gang, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis (after Presley's passing), titled "The Survivors". Throughout the 80's and the 90's Cash made music with Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and Kris Kristofferson; they were known as "The Highwaymen". The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation inducted Cash into the hall in 1992. In 1993, at age 61, Cash released another award winning album, "American Recordings" and another album in 1996, titled "Unchained" featuring Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers. Still not slowing down, his album "American III: Solitary Man" in 2000 won a Grammy for Best Country Album and another for Best Country Folk Recording. Two years later and Cash was still winning awards with his 2002 hit, "Hurt". By the end of his career he had written over 400 songs.



In Cash's later years he experienced some tribulations with his health. After undergoing heart surgery he struggled with an addiction to painkillers, and in 1997 he was diagnosed with Shy-Drager Syndrome, a nerve condition similar to Parkinson's. Still, he wrote and performed, with as much fire as ever. On May 15th, 2003 Cash was grief stricken as June Carter passed away due to complications during a heart valve replacement surgery. Less than a year later, on September 12th, 2003, Johnny Cash passed away as well due to complications with his diabetes leading to respiratory failure, or from what some like to believe, a broken heart. Even without his soul on this earth, Cash's music and legacy live on. Rolling Stone Magazine describes Cash as a "minimalist with a booming Old testament baritone" and it's that sound that told stories, conveyed raw emotion, invented rockabilly, and forever influenced rock and roll and it's legendary musicians.

Television programs, movies, theatre shows, books, and museums are still around to honor and commemorate Cash. In 2005 a movie about his life and legacy was released called *Walk the Line* starring Reese Witherspoon and Joaquin Phoenix. In 2006 the Broadway production *Ring of Fire* was produced, telling Cash's story. One can find "The Man in Black" in the Nashville songwriters' Hall of Fame, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. This October the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is even celebrating Cash for the week of the 18th for the Annual Music Masters. Johnny Cash will forever be remembered for his impact on the Country and Rock and Roll music industry as well as his unforgettable life and career.

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