

Johnny Cash

by *Eric A. Smith*

“My name is John R. Cash. I was born on February 26, 1932, in Kingsland, Arkansas. I’m one of seven children.... We all grew up working the cotton fields.

I married Vivian Liberto of San Antonio, Texas, when I was twenty-two.... In 1968 I married June Carter, who is still my wife....

My work life has been simple: cotton as a youth and music as an adult....

My first records were on the Sun label, run by Mr. Sam Phillips in Memphis and featuring Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Charlie Rich, and others as well as myself.... I left Sun Records for Columbia in 1958, and shortly after that I left Memphis for California.

My affair with pills had already begun. It quickly became all-consuming, eating me up for the next decade or so. Amazingly, it didn’t completely ruin my career. During those years I made music I’m still proud of,... and I had commercial success.... By that time I’d destroyed my family and was working hard on doing the same to myself.

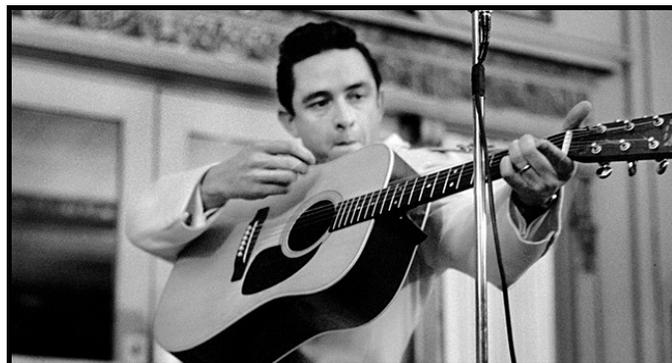
I survived, though. I moved to Nashville, kicked my habit, and married June. My career accelerated.... Between the early ‘70s and the early ‘90s I didn’t sell huge numbers of records, but... those years weren’t dull... I got elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame. I got addicted to pain pills, got treated at the Betty Ford Clinic, recovered, got addicted again, and recovered again. I just about died... I worked hundreds and hundreds of shows. I kept my operation together... until the wheel of fortune rolled around to me again.

This happened in 1994, when I formed an alliance with Rick Rubin... and made my *American Recordings* album. According to the media at the time, that caused an overnight change in my status from “Nashville has-been” to “hip icon”....

I’m still a Christian, as I have been all my life....

Beyond that I get complicated....”

– Johnny Cash, 1997



The man who would become known as Johnny Cash was born J.R. Cash to Ray and Carrie Cash on Feb. 26, 1932. Ray Cash, the son of a Baptist preacher, was a WWI veteran and farmer who often worked odd jobs to keep his family going. He was a hard, sometimes cruel, very practical man who had little time for music and did not know how to relate to his quiet, talented son. Carrie Cash, on the other hand, was an amateur musician who would often sing along with J.R. the hymns they heard at church and on the radio. From the beginning, J.R. knew he wanted to sing.

Though born in Kingsland, J.R.'s formative years were spent in the town of Dyess, Arkansas, where his family moved when he was three. Dyess was one of the farming communities established by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in an effort to fight the effects of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. In these towns, farmers were given homes, twenty acres of land, and a small stipend. The government would keep the deed to the property until fully repaid out of the money earned from the sale of the crops. Though the land around Dyess was swampy and hard to farm, the Cash family viewed the U.S. government, and President Roosevelt in particular, as saviors, and J.R.'s memories of his boyhood would inspire the fervent patriotism which would stay with him his entire life.

Besides his parents, the most formative influence in young J.R.'s life was his brother Jack, two years his senior. Jack Cash was the golden boy, not only of his family but of the entire town – a young man who displayed a remarkable emotional and spiritual maturity, and whose dream was to become a minister. The entire Cash family were devout Southern Baptists, in church three times a week and brought up to believe in God and the Bible, but Jack in particular had a heart for God and others, and was a loving and positive influence in the life of his younger brother. Jack's story was cut horribly short in when he died in an accident in 1944 while cutting fence posts with a table saw, a tragedy which affected J.R. deeply. The most immediate effect was positive – that next Sunday, J.R. walked the aisle of his family's church to receive Christ. Later, he would see his musical career as a chance to continue his brother's mission to spread the gospel. His brother's death would also lead to misery, however, as their father blamed J.R. for the death (for the irrational reason that J.R. was not able to convince Jack to go fishing with him that afternoon), and told him several times that he wished it had been J.R. who died instead of Jack.

Though highly intelligent, J.R. was more interested in music and troublemaking than in school, deeply disappointing his father, who saw music as a waste of time. He was also a nightmare to teachers, preferring to pull pranks in class than to study, and as a result his grades were middling at best (though he was a good enough writer for other students to pay him to write their assignments, usually earning them top grades).

Like virtually all the young men his age in their town, J.R. desperately wanted to get out of Dyess, and since college was out of the question, he sought more unskilled work, first picking strawberries in Arkansas, then working in an auto plant in Michigan. Neither job lasted very long, but his experiences in Michigan would shape his character. For the first time in his life, J.R. was the despised outsider, owing to the extreme anti-Southern prejudice in the northern town. The experience would leave him with a deep sympathy for the underdog and the outcasts from society, themes he would later express in his songwriting. It also led him down the first steps of overcoming the racism he had grown up with.

As a last-ditch effort, like many other men before him, J.R. enlisted with the Air Force, a fateful decision in more ways than one. As the military would not accept bare initials for a name, he signed his first name as "John" on his enlistment papers, taking the name his father had wanted to give him at his birth (his mother wanted to name him "Robert", and giving their son just the initials was their compromise). After aptitude testing, the newly christened John R. Cash was accepted into radio school, a challenging specialization in which he would be trained to intercept and decode Soviet transmissions, and sent to Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi for training. In Keesler, Cash was a model student, held up as an example to the other trainees. His musical ear gave him a great advantage in detecting even the most subtle codes, and the training further heightened his abilities. On the social side, Cash was intimidated by the big city boys, and turned off by their sexual escapades in nearby New Orleans, preferring to live according to his Christian beliefs (though his success in that resolution was less than perfect, and he did succumb to temptation on a few occasions). Eventually, he was assigned to Landsberg, West Germany, in a top-secret position.

Three weeks before leaving for Germany, John and a friend made a visit to a skating rink in San Antonio, where John met Vivian Liberto. Literally running into her out on the rink, John introduced himself for the first time as "Johnny", the familiar name indicating the depth of his instant infatuation. Vivian was a "good girl," which was very attractive to John, and also a Catholic, which gave her an air of mystery to the small-town boy raised to be suspicious of the exotic and unknown religion. The two began an intense (though chaste) relationship, and he would write her every day during his posting in Germany.

In Germany, John quickly met other soldiers with an interest in music, and they would regularly get together to sing and play. John learned to play the guitar (though he never played all that well), and even began to jot down song ideas. At this stage, however, most of his compositions were simple parodies or take-offs of popular radio hits. He also socialized with his fellow airmen in other ways, joining them in their trips

to local bars, indulging in alcohol and women. His struggles with temptation and guilt were detailed in his letters to Vivian, in which he would often confess his sins and reassure her of his devotion.

After returning home from Germany and leaving the Air Force, he quickly married Vivian and sought out a job he could use to support her and a family. On his brother Roy's suggestion, he took a job in Memphis as a salesman for a home equipment company, work for which he had little aptitude and even less interest. However, Roy also introduced John to Marshall Grant and Luther Perkins, two car mechanics who liked to get together and play music. The three quickly formed a group they called the Tennessee Three, with Cash on rhythm guitar, Perkins on electric lead, and Grant on upright bass. None of them could play very well, and to compensate they developed a simple, unadorned style, characterized by a strong rhythmic pattern and Cash's distinctive, resonant baritone. This would evolve into the distinctive "Johnny Cash" sound, dubbed "boom-chicka-boom" by the music press. In keeping with Cash's resolution in his brother's memory, the group mostly played gospel, though they also covered some of the country songs popular at the time. They worked on a few of Cash's compositions as well.

Of the three members, Cash was the only one serious about a musical career, but he had no idea of how to pursue it until meeting Elvis Presley, whose first single, "That's Alright, Mama," had just been released on Sun Records, at a local drug store opening. Elvis encouraged him to audition for Sam Phillips, the head of Sun, and after putting in a few more months of practicing, the Tennessee Three appeared before Phillips in

October of 1954, playing a mix of country and gospel songs. Phillips didn't care for the gospel, but he told Cash he would take them if they could find the right song. That song turned out to be the Cash composition "Hey, Porter", for which Phillips signed them as Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Two.

Cash quickly developed his songwriting philosophy. He knew he wanted to write and perform "authentic" songs, songs that meant something to him, songs that said something, not just songs that would be hits on the radio. Throughout the rest of his career Cash would hold to this, not being particularly concerned with sales or chart position so long as he believed in the music he was writing and performing.

Signing with Sun Records was a critical step for Cash. John had always seen himself as a country singer, but Sun was the home of Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, and Jerry Lee Lewis – many of the fathers of rock and roll. As such, rock and roll audiences were exposed early on to Cash and viewed him as one of their own, which not only gave him much more market

exposure but, more importantly, a greater cultural impact. It also distanced him from the Nashville establishment, adding to his air as a rebel. Indeed, it is questionable if he could have ever gotten a recording deal in Nashville, as his sound was quite different from the country music norm. Over the next fifty years, Cash would straddle the lines of country, rockabilly, folk, and rock and roll.

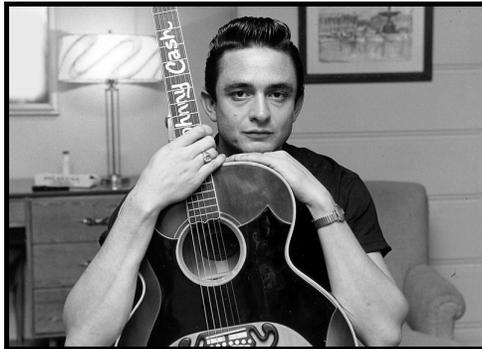
Shortly after recording his first few songs, Cash and his band was on the road with Elvis and country star Webb Pierce. The reaction from the crowds was electric, particularly from the girls. John had taken Vivian on the road with him, and she was worried by the screaming girls at the shows – an early sign of what would become a major stress on their marriage. Shortly afterwards, Elvis left Sun for RCA, leaving Cash the biggest star on the label. This required even more touring, and resulted in even more temptations out on the road. Vivian, now at home with their first daughter, couldn't escape the mental image of her husband besieged by adoring female fans. At this point, however, Cash was still faithful to his wife, and wrote the song "I Walk the Line" to reassure her. Vivian, however, was feeling more and more isolated as the demands on her husband's time grew. Bolstered by his

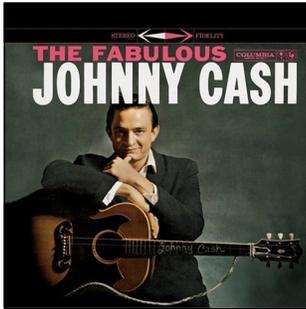
tourmate and fellow Christian Carl Perkins, Cash was reading his Bible and praying every day, but he eventually weakened. He began sleeping with women on the road, rationalizing that it was OK because they meant nothing to him. Furthermore, he still talked to Vivian on the phone for hours each day.

For all the benefits it had to his career, the touring life posed yet another danger to Cash. In

the country world, the use of amphetamines (marketed as "diet pills") was common to combat exhaustion from the rigors of touring. During these early tours, Cash was first introduced to their use, and his consumption escalated quickly. At first he was able to keep his use secret from Vivian and his band, staying clean during his times at home in his efforts to be a good husband and father. But behind the scenes, his dependency was growing.

Cash's growing fame attracted the attention of bigger labels, and in 1958, when Columbia approached him with an offer of complete artistic freedom and higher royalty payments, he quickly signed on. The deciding factor was Columbia's promise that he could record gospel songs, something Phillips had forbidden out of concern that they would not sell. No longer tied to Memphis, the Cash family moved to Hollywood. Now with complete creative control of his music, Cash quickly began to work on ideas he had been nurturing for years. His first album for Columbia, *The Fabulous Johnny Cash*, released in 1958, was one of the best of his





career. The second LP, released in 1959, was an album of traditional and original gospel music, entitled *Hymns by Johnny Cash*. The *Hymns* album did not sell as well as his other material, but Cash didn't care – he was making the music that meant something to him.

His next album, *Songs of our Soil*, also released in 1959, was a more folk-influenced collection that included “Old Apache Squaw,” the first popular song to examine the plight of the American Indian (a theme that he would explore more thoroughly in some of his later albums). Even as his creativity was exploding, however, his drug use was growing. His weight loss and nervous energy were becoming impossible to hide, his behavior on- and off-stage was becoming more erratic, and – possibly worst of all for his career – the drying element in amphetamines was starting to wreck havoc on his voice. To his adoring fans, however, all of this was unknown.

On Oct. 4, 1959 Cash played at an annual prison rodeo in Huntsville, TX. This was his first time playing for inmates, and the experience was eye-opening. The outpouring of emotion and gratitude from the crowd affected him deeply, and he had never felt as much affection from any audience as he did from the inmates. He quickly signed up for another prison show, playing at San Quentin prison the following New Year's Day. In the audience was a twenty-two-year-old inmate named Merle Haggard, who later reminisced about the concert:

He was hung over from the night before, and his voice was almost gone, but he came out on that stage and just blew everybody away. He ripped down the walls with his music and he touched us with his songs. For a little while, he accomplished the impossible. He had replaced our misery with music. He'd made us forget where we were.

The experience was a turning point for Haggard. After his release, he cleaned up his life and pursued his own music career, eventually becoming a country music icon in his own right.

The time had come in Cash's career for his next artistic leap in the form of a concept album he had been shaping in his mind for some time. The album *Ride This Train* told the stories of working-class heroes and underdogs throughout American history, all tied together by spoken-work dialogues backed only by the *clickety-clack* of train wheels and the occasional lonely whistle. The album showed Cash's love of Americana and history, and though the individual songs were not impressive, the album nonetheless was an ambitious work that pointed the way to greater artistic endeavors in the future. Like *Hymns*, the album was not a big seller, but Cash viewed it as one of his best works, and

the benchmark against which he judged his future efforts for years.

Even as his artistic star was rising, Cash's personal life was quickly falling into shambles. His marriage was becoming increasingly troubled, affected by life on the road and his increasing use of pills. This only drove him deeper into drug use, degrading his voice and physique and resulting in inconsistent concert performances and poor recordings. He continued to sleep around, eventually having an affair with Billie Jean Horton, the widow of a friend. The affair ended when Cash proposed marriage and was rejected, leaving him bitter. A disastrous attempt at a movie career in the flop *Five Minutes to Life* further added to his stress, continuing the downward spiral. Soon, Cash was being arrested for public drunkenness and was even involved in a police chase after being flagged down for speeding.

It was at this point in 1962 that June Carter came into Johnny Cash's life. As a member of the legendary Carter Family, June's mother, Maybelle, helped to define traditional Appalachian country music in the 1920s and '30s, and she continued to lead her daughters in the family tradition. Cash had grown up listening to the Carter Family on the radio, and was therefore delighted to have June join his tour even though she was not a particularly great singer. He was immediately infatuated with the lively, strong-willed woman, and though they both resisted temptation for a period, knowing as Christians that their urges were sinful, they eventually began sleeping together. But unlike the other women he had slept with on the road, June was not a one-night stand. The two had a genuine, if tempestuous, relationship. The rest of the Cash coterie was not so enamored of June, though, as they saw her as a “hustler” with ambitions to be one-half of a country music power couple. Meanwhile, Cash's wife, Vivian, was devastated and humiliated when she discovered the situation, and their already troubled marriage was strained nearly to the breaking point.

Though the affair between June and John was undoubtedly sinful, it is impossible to deny that June and her family had a positive influence on Cash in many ways. At this point, Cash's abuse of pills was obvious to everyone, and after the drugs ruined a critical performance at Carnegie Hall, June determined to break Cash of the habit. She confronted him over his irresponsible behavior, going so far as to search his hotel rooms for hidden drug stashes. Also, June's father Ezra “Eck” Carter became Cash's spiritual mentor, and encouraged him to return to a closer walk with God. In the end, the affair proved to be an example of God working good out of evil.

Despite all this, Cash's career was going well. Though his record sales had declined due to drug use and less commercial albums, his recording of the song June wrote about their affair, “Ring of Fire,” shot to the top of the charts just before he was about to be

dropped from his Columbia contract. Then in 1964 an invitation to play the prestigious Newport Folk Festival alongside such stars such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Pete Seeger gave him credibility with the cultural elite. Though he was a no show for his scheduled Friday performance, his rescheduled Saturday show was such a success that it won him wild acclaim from the music press and the acceptance of the rather insular folk community.

The festival also sparked an ongoing friendship with Dylan. Cash had been impressed by the young phenom ever since a record executive sent him a copy of Dylan's first album, and Dylan had been listening to Cash ever since "I Walk the Line." After meeting at Newport, Cash and Dylan formed a close friendship based around their mutual love of traditional American and English folk music, and continued to inspire each other for the remainder of their careers. Cash would also record several of Dylan's songs on his 1965 album, *Orange Blossom Special*.

At Newport, Cash debuted a song which would become the centerpiece of his next concept album. "The Ballad of Ira Hayes," written by folk singer Peter LaFarge, was the story of the Pima Indian who was one of the soldiers to raise the flag over Iwo Jima, but who later died of alcoholism in an abandoned shack on a reservation, dejected and deserted. Inspired by this song, Cash recorded *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian*, an album which, like his earlier song "Old Apache Squaw," examined the mistreatment of Native Indians. Though the conservative country radio stations initially refused to play "Ira Hayes" due to its controversial subject matter, they relented after an open letter from Cash asked, "Where are your guts?" Though not promoted by Columbia and ignored by much of the music industry, the album went to #3 on the Country & Western charts and just missed the Top 40 on the pop charts, indicating that the country audience was ready for Cash's more socially-conscious and political material. He followed this up with *Johnny Cash Sings the Ballads of the True West*, a concept album examining the history and mythology of the Old West and now regarded as a high mark of his career.

Success was not enough to shield Cash from the consequences of poor decisions. In 1965, after buying pills in Juarez, Mexico, he was arrested for drug possession in El Paso. Though the arresting officer suspected that he would find heroin, the pills were enough to get Cash escorted to jail. Now, for the first time, his drug addiction was revealed to the public and, worst of all, his family. The episode left Cash feeling like a hypocrite, recording and singing gospel songs while taking drugs, and he swore to his wife and parents that he would get clean. But his resolve lasted only a few days. This was the final straw for Vivian, who decided to divorce him in 1966, even though her Catholic faith forbade it. The battle over the divorce settlement lasted for months, finally ending with Vivian being awarded alimony, child support payments, and

custody of their four daughters. Ignoring these warning signs, Cash's pill consumption only increased, leading to several near-overdoses. Professionally, he continued to miss shows, play stoned, and once went on a "wild escapade" with Dylan – "filled with paranoia and anger", according to his brother Tommy Cash. Cash was also having a hard time coming up with quality new material, and often was he in no shape to even show up in the studio. (Oddly enough, even in the midst of all this, Cash was still capable of impressive live performances, but a concert attendee could never know which Johnny Cash was going to show up.) At this point Ezra Carter confronted him, warning him he had a choice: either turn to drugs, or turn to God. But Cash was in no condition to listen to anyone tell him of the danger he was in. Finally, June broke up with him in October, 1967, unable to take the drugged-out Cash any longer.

From this lowest point, Cash slowly began to pull himself back from the brink. His recovery was jump-started by three events in particular. The first was in October, when, depressed and suicidal, Cash decided to commit suicide by losing himself in the Nikajack Cave north of Chattanooga. As he recounted in his 1997 autobiography:

I parked my Jeep and started crawling, and I crawled and crawled and crawled until, after two or three hours, the batteries in my flashlight wore out and I lay down to die in total darkness. The absolute dark was appropriate, for at that moment I was as far from God as I have ever been. My separation from Him, the deepest and most ravaging of the various kinds of loneliness I'd felt over the years, seemed finally complete.

It wasn't. I thought I'd left Him, but He hadn't left me. I felt something very powerful start to happen to me, a sensation of utter peace, clarity, and sobriety. I didn't believe it at first. I couldn't understand it. How, after being awake for so long and driving my body so hard and taking so many pills – dozens of them, scores, even hundreds – could I possibly feel *all right*? The feeling persisted, though, and then my mind started focusing on God. He didn't speak to me – He never has, and I'll be very surprised if He ever does – but I do believe that at times He has put feelings in my heart and perhaps even ideas in my head. There in Nikajack Cave I became conscious of a very clear, simple idea: I was not in charge of my own destiny. I was not in charge of my own death. I was going to die at God's time, not mine. I hadn't prayed over my decision to seek death in the cave, but that hadn't stopped God from intervening.

According to Cash, God led him out of the cave, only to be met by June and his mother, who brought him food and drink. On the way home he told his mother he was ready to commit himself to coming off the drugs.

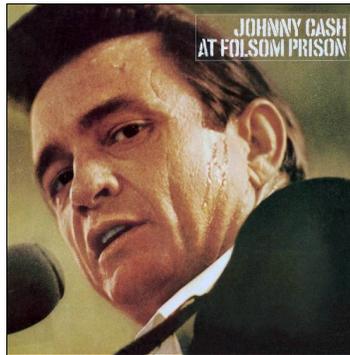
(Some people have questioned the story, pointing out that Nikajack Cave should have been underwater at the time Cash said his epiphany happened, and it

certainly is true that Cash, by his own admission, never let the truth get in the way of a good story. Whatever the truth of the matter, though, it is obvious that God was not yet finished with Johnny Cash.)

Cash would quickly find that drugs were not so easy to quit. The next month, Cash was once again arrested for public drunkenness in LaFayette, Georgia, but was released the next day after a heart-to-heart talk with the sheriff. The next day, Cash drove his tractor into a lake on his property, nearly killing himself. This was the final straw, and he contacted a psychiatrist to help him quit the pills. Over the next month Cash would work hard to detox, and though he would always struggle with addiction to pills – especially amphetamines and painkillers – he would never again fall to the same depths.

His triumphant return would be confirmed early the next year, on January 13, 1968, at a concert in Folsom Prison in California. Cash had wanted for a long time to record a live album at a prison, and this concert had been in the works for over a year. Cash knew how to tailor a setlist to his audience, and for this show, he chose songs deliberately designed to identify with and show empathy for the prisoners. After his recent travails, Cash understood more than ever the depths to which the human soul can sink and the need for society's outcasts to feel loved despite their crimes. The concert was a success, and the resulting live album would not only be a commercial smash but an enduring classic, believed by many to be the greatest country album of all time. Years later *Rolling Stone* magazine would list it as one of the hundred greatest albums in any genre. It was shortly followed by another live album recorded at San Quentin prison, which met with sales and critical acclaim matching that of *At Folsom Prison*.

With his life back on track, Cash proposed to June, and the two were married on March 1, 1968. Their marriage would prove to be often tempestuous, as might be expected from two strong personalities, and Cash strayed on a couple of occasions. However, their marriage was generally a happy one, and they would remain together until her death over thirty years later. Now back on the top of the musical world, the Cashes next move flew in the face of conventional wisdom when they recorded a live album from various Biblical sites in Israel. John and June visited locations such as Nazareth and Jerusalem and recorded their thoughts and observations, then used those recordings to tie together songs John recorded back in the studio. The resulting album, *The Holy Land*, was another artistic triumph, and the firstfruits of Cash's re-energized faith. For the previous few years Cash had written himself a letter on New Year's Day, reflecting back on the past



twelve months. On January 1, 1969, he would look back at the previous year as a turning point in his life. Later, however, in 1972, he would look back at that letter as distressingly shallow, focusing more on his worldly success instead of God, and would rewrite it the way he believed it should have read:

Yes, congratulations John Cash on your superstardom. Big deal.

True you must be grateful for God's showers of blessings, but regardless of all you have been quoted as saying to the contrary, you are too excited over your personal wealth, career successes and other vain, fleeting things.

OK.

I hereby resolve, asking God's help, that I shall court wisdom more and more in this my 41st year. Especially heavenly wisdom.

Under the mentorship of Ezra Carter, Cash was focusing more and more on God, reading his Bible and wanting to live like a true Christian. He also began to integrate his faith with his social beliefs, and though he would continue to write socially-conscious songs, the reasons behind them would be different. Now his concern for the poor and disenfranchised would be motivated by his intention to follow the example of Jesus. He was also free from pills for the first time in over a decade.

At Folsom Prison had catapulted Cash to superstardom, and in 1969 he was asked to host a variety show for ABC-TV. Celebrity-hosted variety shows – often incorporating musical acts, comedy sketches, and cheesy skits – were all the rage at the time, and ABC saw an opportunity to jump on the Johnny Cash bandwagon. Cash saw a different opportunity. He wanted to use the show to showcase the best in country music, to fill the stage with artists he respected, and also to give voice to his faith. He did manage some of this, featuring artists like Bob Dylan and Gordon Lightfoot, and introducing his audience to his love of American history with the "Ride This Train" segment, but he never had the creative control he wanted. Over time, the network forced more and more acts on the show that Cash did not feel comfortable with.

Regardless of his misgivings, the exposure turned Cash into an even bigger star than before. Eventually he was contacted by Billy Graham, who asked the Cashes to sing in one of his Crusades. This began a close friendship that would last the rest of Cash's life, and he and June would eventually perform in more than three dozen Crusades. In the words of John and June's son, John Carter Cash:

Billy and my father maintained their friendship all through their lives. When my father fell short, he could always reach out to Billy. Billy didn't judge my father; he was there as his friend unconditionally. Billy would lift him up, support him, and say, "You can do this. Stand back up. You know who you are." From that point on, Dad

would tell you his purpose in life was to spread the word of Jesus Christ.

Cash's newfound zeal did not go over well with all segments of the public, and he began to receive complaints about the religious content in his show and his songs. His 1971 album *The Man in Black* contained several explicitly Christian songs that his detractors decried as overly "preachy." The album even included a spoken-word section by Billy Graham. The title track declared Cash's iconic black clothing to be a protest over the injustices of the world, summed up in its final line: "Till things are brighter / I'm the man in black". Critics attacked the song, pointing out that his clothing choice had originally been more out of personal taste. In response, Cash stated, "I'm a

songwriter. I use my imagination. The important thing is the message of the song, not the imagery." The song was a hit, and it became a signature song for Cash, but the album as a whole was seen as a step down, with too much attention paid to the "preachy" messages and not enough to the music.

Even with the limitations imposed by ABC and the production company, Cash still managed a few bold statements on *The Johnny Cash Show*. One particularly notable episode was filmed on Vanderbilt campus as Cash talked with students about topics ranging from drugs to Vietnam. The most controversial moment occurred on Nov. 18, 1970, when Cash threw down the gauntlet to his critics on the air:

All my life I have believed that there are two powerful forces: the force of good and the force of evil, the force of right and the force of wrong, or, if you will, the force of God and the force of the devil. Well now, the force of God is naturally the Number One most powerful force, although the Number Two force most powerful force, the devil, takes over every once and a while. And he can make it pretty rough on you when he tries to take over. I know.

In my time, I fought him, I fought back, I clawed, I kicked him. When I didn't have the strength, I gnawed him. Well, here lately I think we've made the devil pretty mad because on our show we've been mentioning God's name. We've been talking about Jesus, Moses, Elijah the prophet, even Paul and Silas and John the Baptist. Well, this probably made the devil pretty mad alright, and he may be coming after me again, but I'll be ready for him. In the meantime, while he's coming, I'd like to get in more licks for Number One.

The ratings dropped fairly quickly after that, though whether due to this statement or the declining popularity of variety shows in general is debatable. Either way, the show was cancelled after three seasons,

but Cash had already decided on an even more ambitious endeavor – a movie about the life of Christ, filmed on location in Israel, to be accompanied by a double album of spoken word and music. In preparation, he rededicated his life to Christ at Evangel Temple in Nashville, then took his company to Israel to film the movie, which would be released as *The Gospel Road*. Once it was finished, the movie had



trouble finding a distributor, most of whom were afraid that audiences would not be interested in a movie about the life of Christ, despite Cash's appearance. The film was eventually picked up by Billy Graham and shown hundreds of times at his Crusades. The accompanying album,

though artistically impressive and ambitious, also failed to find an audience, and sold little. It was a sign of what was to come.

Another sign of trouble to come went unnoticed at the time. The Dripping Springs Reunion music festival, spearheaded by Willie Nelson and Cash's former roommate Waylon Jennings, was a financial flop. Nonetheless, it was the first stirrings of the "outlaw country" movement, which would dominate country music in the '70s and consign Cash to the sidelines, even though he was in large part its inspiration with his "outsider and rebel" image.

For the rest of the '70s, Cash would go through a commercial and artistic decline. His music became safer and more generic – in essence, more "Nashville" – and sales would reflect that fact, though concert attendance remained strong. There were several reasons for this. For one, Cash was now "protected from editors", and it showed. No one around Cash had the guts to tell him when an idea was no good, or to try to pull a more spirited, committed performance from him, and as a result, his albums became lifeless. Though almost all of his '70s albums had at least a few good tracks, and even some great ones, there was also a great deal of filler. Even the good songs were hamstrung by lazy, uninspired production. Almost nothing caught the attention of radio programmers or listeners, certainly not enough to compete with the likes of Nelson or Jennings. Another reason for the decline was that Cash's first priority was no longer his music, but God. Both John and June took correspondence courses on the Bible, and he dug into biblical history and theology. He even considered leaving music completely and becoming a minister, but abandoned it when he realized he didn't want to be a celebrity preacher. Cash was more concerned with being a man of God, a good husband and father, than with producing great records. Though the low sales did

bother him, it wasn't enough to rouse the old passion to write great songs and create great music. Cash was also spending a good deal of time fighting for social causes such as prison reform and the cause of American POWs in Vietnam. In the end, he only had two hits in the '70s after "Man in Black," the novelty song "One Piece at a Time" and a cover version of the '50s classic "Ghost Riders in the Sky," but neither was enough to jumpstart his career.

Flagging sales obviously led to a smaller income, and he had to boost his concert schedule to hectic levels to support all the people on his payroll. The stress, added to his commercial failure, drove him back to pills, which once again began to affect his voice. They also led once more to personal problems, including allegations of another affair that once again nearly lost him his marriage. He also fired Marshall Grant, the final living member of his original band, in an acrimonious split, and was sued in return for unpaid royalties. Though Cash's faith never flagged and he continued his Bible study, his life was once again falling apart from the drugs.

When the '80s dawned, Cash was in dire straits. The "outlaw country" trend had been replaced by the "urban cowboy" trend, propelled by the movie of the same name; the new style met with nothing but disdain from Cash. Market testing by his own record label showed that Cash was now viewed as "old and traditional" by the hot young demographic. By this point, even Cash was feeling as though he had lost the muse, and he had no idea how to connect with younger listeners. The drug use got worse, and his breathing would sometimes stop for long periods as he slept. Eventually, the drugs caught up to him, leading to a bleeding ulcer and an operation to remove his spleen and several feet of intestine. Regardless, Cash found a way to even drugs into the hospital. Eventually, his concerned family and friends staged an intervention at his hospital bedside and convinced him to enter the Betty Ford clinic for treatment.

At the Betty Ford Center, Cash once again managed to kick his drug habit, and came out of the clinic ready to reclaim his former star status. He was soon signed by Mercury Records at a price that would have been an embarrassment in his prime, but nothing else changed. Recording with the same producers, songwriters, and musicians, the albums continued the trend of commercial flops. Cash was now terminally uncool. No radio station would play him, and Mercury had little interest in promoting him. Cash would later claim that Mercury only printed 500 copies of his final album for the label, *The Mystery of Life*.

Cash's health was now in serious decline, exacerbated by years of drug use. Heart problems led to surgery and pneumonia and continuing battles with bronchitis and respiratory infections. His jaw, broken in another surgery, never properly healed, which led to chronic jaw pain. For the rest of his life he would never be free of pain. The issue would lead to recurring

problems with painkiller addiction, though never as bad as his former amphetamine dependency.

For all intents and purposes, Cash's career as a viable music force was over. By now he was receiving lots of "lifetime achievement"-type of awards along with inductions into the Country Music, Songwriter's, and Rock and Roll Halls of Fame, but no one was expecting any more greatness out of him. No one would have expected what God still had in store for Johnny Cash.

The beginning of the Johnny Cash renaissance came from an unlikely source – the "biggest band in the world" U2. The band members were long-time fans of Cash, and while he was performing a show in Dublin they asked him to sing on a track for their newest album, *Zooropa*. The song was called "The Wanderer", and in Cash's words was about a man searching for "God, that woman, and myself." The lyrics resonated with Cash, and he gave an impassioned, emotional performance that was a highlight of the album. Speaking later about Cash, U2's vocalist, Bono, remarked:

To me, Johnny Cash – with all his contradictions – was a quintessential character of the scriptures, or at least the characters in the Bible that interested me. I remember at Trinity College when someone put out a pamphlet pointing out how flawed all the people in the Bible were.... David was an adulterer, Moses was a murderer, Jacob was a cheater. These were some wild blokes. Well, one day someone put out the same pamphlet, but wrote on it something like, "That's why I'm a believer. If God had time for those flawed characters, then God has time for me." And I think Johnny and I shared that view.

Shortly after this, Cash received a surprising request. Rick Rubin, a producer best known for his work in rap and heavy metal, wanted to make an album with him. Unknown to Cash, Rubin's success had led him to set himself a new mission; he wanted to find a worn-out artist, and help him "make great work again". Though Cash was initially wary, after meeting with Rubin he agreed to get together and see what they could come up with, thinking that there was no harm in trying. Rubin bought out Cash's contract from Mercury and signed him to Rubin's own American Records.

Rubin's instructions to Cash at their first recording session were simple: "I'd love to hear some of your favorite songs." With just his guitar and his aging voice, Cash sang old spiritual songs, cowboy songs, folk songs, and whatever entered his head, and Rubin waited for something to "catch". The first song that really made Rubin sit up and take notice was "Delia's Gone," an old folk song about sin and regret that Cash had rewritten to highlight the emotional struggle of the narrator. They continued, making unadorned but emotional recordings of old favorites and new compositions that Cash had kept back from his Mercury sessions. Rubin was pleasantly surprised by

the quality of Cash's new material, and knew they were capturing something special. Eventually, Rubin began suggesting songs by newer artists that Cash would record if he felt a connection to the lyrics. Rubin described his intentions thusly:

I'm talking about the original Johnny Cash who loomed large and was surrounded by all this darkness, yet who still had vulnerability. I wanted, if you will, to take him back to the "I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die" Man in Black, and "Delia's Gone" did it perfectly. He kills the girl, and then is remorseful. I loved how the brutal act was followed by this haunted life. I was trying to get him to go from all these years of thinking his best stuff was behind him and just phoning in records to thinking we could make his best albums ever. I don't know if he really believed that, but he was willing to give it a try.

The album, entitled *American Recordings*, was released May, 1994, to massive critical raves, and became Cash's biggest-selling album since the early '70s. But the album had a cultural impact that went far beyond its sales figures. It positioned Cash once more as a rock and roll rebel, this time to the new "alternative music" generation. Cash was once again not only relevant but cool, and the album eventually won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk album. The next two albums with Rubin, *Unchained* and *American III: Solitary Man*, received similar receptions. They were not as sparse as the first, but they captured the same emotional space and were equally powerful, and both won Grammys as well. The albums once again consisted of a mixture of traditional material, covers of contemporary artists, and Cash originals, both new songs and re-recordings of older Cash compositions (usually from his '70s albums, now given more powerful, effective readings, showing the strengths that were hidden before under bad production).

Throughout this period Cash's health continued to decline, with worsening asthma making it more and more difficult to record. Diagnosed initially with Parkinson's disease, which was later changed to autonomic neuralgia due to diabetes, he was forced to retire from touring. Recording had to be moved to a small cabin on Cash's Tennessee property, as he no longer had the strength to travel out to L.A. His relationship with June, however, was stronger than it had ever been and became the fairy-tale romance he had always dreamed of. To Cash, this was a sign of his redemption.

For the fourth album, Cash wanted to write his masterpiece, his ultimate statement. The result was "The Man Comes Around," a powerful epic song about the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. At the same time, Rubin brought him the song "Hurt" by Trent Reznor (originally recorded under his pseudonym "Nine Inch Nails"). Reznor wrote the song about his heroin addiction, but to Cash, it was a personal

reflection over the struggles of his life, and his performance – with his aged, shaky, asthmatic voice – only emphasized the undercurrent of Cash's own looming mortality. The two songs back-to-back created a powerful one-two punch to open up the new album, *American IV: The Man Comes Around*.

When *American IV* was first released, almost all the critical attention was focused on the title song, which was hailed as the song Cash would be remembered for. However, all the attention paid to "The Man Comes Around" was matched, if not doubled, when the music video for "Hurt" was released. The video, a visual mediation on Cash's life of loss and regret, was a massive hit, considered by many the best music video of all time, and it propelled the album sales into the stratosphere where it achieved platinum status – the first Cash album to do so since *At San Quentin*. It would eventually sell two million copies over the course of its first decade. In Reznor's own words:

I pop the video in, and wow.... Tears welling, silence, goose-bumps Wow. [I felt like] I just lost my girlfriend, because that song isn't mine anymore.... It really made me think about how powerful music is as a medium and art form. I wrote some words and music in my bedroom as a way of staying sane, about a bleak and desperate place I was in, totally isolated and alone. [Somehow] that winds up reinterpreted by a music legend from a radically different era/genre and still retains sincerity and meaning – different, but every bit as pure.

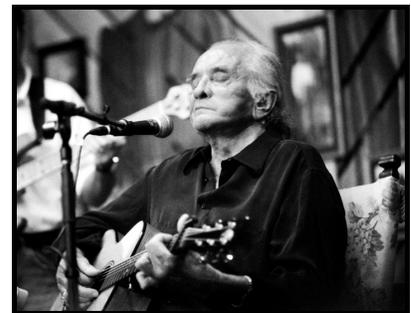
The album, and "Hurt" in particular, cemented Cash's reputation as a musical icon to multiple generations. It even gained the attention of the country music establishment, which had long ago abandoned Cash, leading to Cash being named by Country Music Television as the #1 most important artist in country music history.

As Cash's health declined even further, he turned more and more to God for comfort. Even though Rubin was a non-practicing Jew, he and Cash would share Communion over the phone every day. They continued to

record when they could, though Cash's health made it an uncertain process as he struggled for the breath to sing, sometimes pausing at every line. Nonetheless, he continued to

write, and his performances displayed great power and weight, wringing every drop of emotion out of his failing voice.

Unexpectedly, June died of cardiac arrest on May 15, 2003. The loss nearly destroyed Cash, but his faith in God kept him going, even as his sight was failing



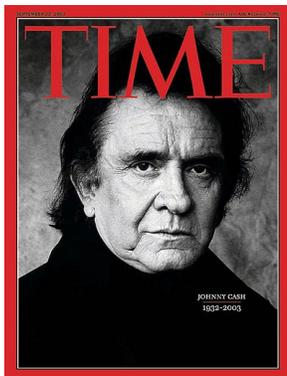
and he was largely confined to a wheelchair. He recorded his final song for Rick Rubin on Aug. 21, a new composition entitled "Like the 309", a meditation on his own mortality. Later that day he would make his final recording, "Engine 143," a traditional folk song, intended for a Carter Family tribute album. The song had the appropriate final line, "Nearer, my God, to Thee."

On September 11, 2003, Cash was admitted to the hospital as his stomach shut down due to diabetes. He died, surrounded by his children, at 1 A.M. on September 12.

The death of Johnny Cash did nothing to diminish his popularity. On the contrary, his legendary status has only grown. His albums continue to sell, including two more *American* albums released after his death, composed of the songs he recorded right up to the end. *American V* debuted at #1 on the charts and included the hit, "God's Gonna Cut You Down". A movie about his early career and courtship of June Carter, *Walk the Line*, was released in 2005, and was nominated for five Academy Awards. *Out Among the Stars*, a shelved album recorded in the early '80s, was finally released in 2014, reaching #1 on the country charts and #3 on the pop charts.

But the true impact of Johnny Cash cannot be measured by sales. Cash's story is one of sin and redemption, of the power of God to raise up even the worst of sinners to stand for Him, and the power of music to touch hearts and minds and inspire generations to come. Cash's life can perhaps best be summarized in the words of his son, John Carter Cash:

Everyone carries burdens around with them. I believe the thing about Dad that people find so easy to relate to is that he was willing to expose his most cumbersome burdens, his most consuming darknesses. He wasn't afraid to go through the fire and say, "I fell down. I've made mistakes. I'm weak. I *hurt*." But in doing so, he gained some sort of defining strength. Every moment of darkness enabled him to better see the light. Perhaps, at the end of each life, there is a balance of this darkness and light. To me, as far as my father's life, the light wins – hands down. His most enduring legacy is that this message continues to spread.



The Essential Johnny Cash A Selected Discography

Johnny Cash with His Hot and Blue Guitar (1957)

- Cry! Cry! Cry!
- I Was There When It Happened
- I Walk the Line
- Folsom Prison Blues

Sings the Songs that Made Him Famous (1958)

- I Walk the Line
- Guess Things Happen That Way
- Big River

The Fabulous Johnny Cash (1959)

- I Still Miss Someone
- Don't Take Your Guns to Town

Songs of Our Soil (1959)

- Five Feet High and Rising
- Old Apache Squaw
- It Could Be You (Instead of Him)

Ride This Train (1960)

- Loading Coal
- Dorraine of Ponchartrain
- Boss Jack

The Sound of Johnny Cash (1962)

- Sing It Pretty Sue

Blood, Sweat and Tears (1963)

- The Legend of John Henry's Hammer
- Another Man Done Gone
- Busted
- Chain Gang

Ring of Fire: The Best of Johnny Cash (1963)

- Ring of Fire
- Forty Shades of Green
- The Big Battle

I Walk the Line (1964)

- Understand Your Man
- Give My Love to Rose

Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian (1964)

- As Long as the Grass Shall Grow
- Custer
- The Ballad of Ira Hayes
- Drums

Orange Blossom Special (1965)

- Orange Blossom Special
- It Ain't Me Babe (w/June Carter)
- Don't Think Twice, It's Alright
- All of God's Children Ain't Free
- Wildwood Flower

Sings the Ballads of the True West (1965)

- Mr. Garfield
- The Streets of Laredo
- Johnny Reb
- Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie
- Mean as Hell

Everybody Loves a Nut (1966)

- The One on the Right is on the Left

Happiness is You (1966)

- Wabash Cannonball

Carryin' On with Johnny Cash and June Carter (1967)

- It Ain't Me Babe

- Jackson
- From Sea to Shining Sea*** (1968)
 - The Whirl and the Suck
 - The Flint Arrowhead
- At Folsom Prison*** (live) (1968)
 - Folsom Prison Blues
 - Cocaine Blues
 - 25 Minutes to Go
 - Greystone Chapel
- The Holy Land*** (1969)
 - Land of Israel
 - He Turned the Water into Wine
 - Daddy Sang Bass
 - The Fourth Man
 - God is Not Dead
- At San Quentin*** (1969)
 - San Quentin
 - A Boy Named Sue
- Hello, I'm Johnny Cash*** (1970)
 - See Ruby Fall
 - Route No. 1, Box 144
 - If I Were a Carpenter (w/June Carter Cash)
 - To Beat the Devil
- The Johnny Cash Show*** (1970)
 - Sunday Morning Coming Down
 - I'm Gonna Try to Be That Way
- Man in Black*** (1971)
 - Man in Black
 - Singin' in Vietnam Talkin' Blues
- A Thing Called Love*** (1972)
 - A Thing Called Love
 - Mississippi Sand
 - The Miracle Man
- America: A 200-Year Salute in Story and Song*** (1972)
 - Big Foot
 - These Are My People
- Any Old Wind that Blows*** (1973)
 - Any Old Wind that Blows
 - Oney
 - The Ballad of Annie Palmer
 - If I Had a Hammer (w/June Carter Cash)
- The Gospel Road*** (1973)
 - Gospel Road
 - I See Men as Trees Walking
 - Follow Me
 - Help
 - Children
- Johnny Cash and His Woman*** (1973)
 - The Color of Love
 - Matthew 24 (Is Knocking at the Door)
 - Godshine
- Ragged Old Flag*** (1974)
 - Ragged Old Flag
 - Don't Go Near the Water
 - Please Don't Let Me Out
 - What on Earth Will You Do (for Heaven's Sake)
- Junkie and the Juicehead Minus Me*** (1974)
 - The Junkie and the Juicehead (Minus Me)
- Billy & Rex & Oral & Bob
- Jesus
- John R. Cash*** (1975)
 - My Old Kentucky Home (Turpentine and Dandelion Wine)
 - Jesus Was Our Savior (Cotton Was Our King)
- Look at Them Beans*** (1975)
 - Texas – 1947
 - Down at Drippin' Springs
- One Piece at a Time*** (1976)
 - One Piece at a Time
 - Committed to Parkview
- The Last Gunfighter Ballad*** (1977)
 - The Last Gunfighter Ballad
 - Far Side Banks of Jordan (w/June Carter Cash)
 - Cindy, I Love You
- The Rambler*** (1977)
 - After the Ball
 - No Earthly Good
- I Would Like to See You Again*** (1978)
 - I Would Like to See You Again
 - Lately
 - Abner Brown
 - There Ain't No Good Chain Gang (w/Waylon Jennings)
- Gone Girl*** (1978)
 - I Will Rock and Roll With You
 - It Comes and Goes
- Silver*** (1979)
 - The L & N Don't Stop Here Anymore
 - I'll Say It's True (w/George Jones)
 - (Ghost) Riders in the Sky
- Rockabilly Blues*** (1980)
 - The Cowboy who Started the Fight
 - The Twentieth Century is Almost Over
- The Baron*** (1980)
 - The Baron
 - Mobile Bay
- The Adventures of Johnny Cash*** (1982)
 - Georgia on a Fast Train
 - John's
 - Good Ol' American Guest
- Johnny 99*** (1983)
 - Highway Patrolman
 - God Bless Robert E. Lee
 - Johnny 99
 - Joshua Gone Barbados
- Rainbow*** (1985)
 - They're All the Same
 - Unwed Fathers
- Johnny Cash is Coming to Town*** (1987)
 - The Big Light
 - Let Him Roll
 - The Night Hank Williams Came to Town (w/Waylon Jennings)
 - Sixteen Tons

***Water from the Wells of Home* (1988)**

- That Old Wheel (w/Hank Williams, Jr.)

***The Mystery of Life* (1991)**

- Goin' by the Book
- The Wanderer (added track on re-release)

***American Recordings* (1994)**

- Delia's Gone
- The Beast in Me
- Drive On
- Why Me, Lord
- Redemption
- Like a Soldier

***Unchained* (1996)**

- Country Boy
- Spiritual
- Kneeling Drunkard's Plea
- Mean Eyed Cat
- Meet Me in Heaven
- Unchained
- I've Been Everywhere

***American III: Solitary Man* (2000)**

- I Won't Back Down
- Solitary Man
- One
- I See a Darkness
- The Mercy Seat
- Before My Time
- I'm Leavin' Now
- Wayfaring Stranger

***American IV: The Man Comes Around* (2002)**

- The Man Comes Around
- Hurt
- Give My Love to Rose
- I Hung My Head
- Personal Jesus
- In My Life
- Sam Hall
- Tear Stained Letter
- We'll Meet Again

***American V: A Hundred Highways* (2006)**

- Help Me
- God's Gonna Cut You Down
- Like the 309
- I Came to Believe
- I'm Free from the Chain Gang Now

***American VI: Ain't No Grave* (2010)**

- Ain't No Grave (Gonna Hold This Body Down)
- I Corinthians 15:55
- Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream

***Out Among the Stars* (2014)**

- Out Among the Stars
- Baby Ride Easy (w/June Carter Cash)
- She Used to Love Me a Lot
- I'm Movin' On
- I Came to Believe

Singles:

- Hey, Porter
- Get Rhythm
- Come In, Stranger
- I Got Stripes
- Dark as a Dungeon
- Rosanna's Going Wild
- The Folk Singer
- What is Truth?
- Song of the Patriot
- Battle of Nashville