

Johnny Cash: a timeless voice of country music

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The death of singer/songwriter Johnny Cash aged 71 on September 12 marks the passing of a significant figure in post-World War II American country music. Cash was a complex man and there was something quintessential about his music and how it reflected the times in which he lived.

While Johnny Cash was not a great musical technician, his sound was unforgettable—unmistakable bass-baritone voice, a flexible blend of country, rock ‘n’ roll and folk music, and a willingness to explore themes that many other popular musicians of his generation were not prepared to touch.

Cash was deeply religious and remained close friends with figures like firebrand preacher Reverend Billy Graham for much of his life. Not a few US presidents, including Richard Nixon, claimed him as their own. At the same time Cash unapologetically identified with the most downtrodden and oppressed, expressing his opposition to US prison policies and the plight of Native Americans, and constantly searching musically for ways to give voice to their hopes and concerns.

While television and much of Hollywood were presenting their sanitised versions of family life and the American dream during the late 1950s and 60s, Cash was exploring divorce, murder and other real-life issues regarded as “taboo” by official opinion makers.

John R. Cash was born the fourth of five children in Kingsland, Arkansas on February 26, 1932. His father Ray was a World War I veteran who worked in the cotton mills and on the railroad during the Great Depression, before moving with his wife Carrie and family to Dyess, a New Deal cotton-farming project in the Mississippi delta. In 1937 the young family had to temporarily abandon their property when major flooding devastated the area.

Cash, who began writing songs at the age of 12, often talked about how these difficult years influenced and shaped his musical approach and social outlook—in particular, the old folk songs and religious tunes sung by his mother, his older brother’s band, the Dixie Rhythm Ramblers, and country music from local radio stations.

On graduating from high school in 1950, John R. Cash, like hundreds of young men from America’s southern states, headed north in search of a job and a better future. He worked in a Michigan auto plant for a short period before deciding to enlist in the US air force. After a four-year stint in Germany, during which he bought his first guitar and began writing songs, Cash returned to the US and left the military. He moved to Memphis, birthplace of rockabilly, an earthy blend of country music, bluegrass, blues, gospel and swing jazz, hoping to break into the local music scene.

Cash took a job as an electrical goods salesman and enrolled in a radio announcer’s course. He met guitarist Luther Perkins and bass player Marshall Grant (later known as the Tennessee Two) and the three began performing gospel music and other songs on the radio and in local bars.

Cash contacted Sam Phillips, the owner and artistic driving force of Sun Records in Memphis, and secured an audition. Sun Records was a musical

melting pot. Its rockabilly sound was characterised by simple hard-driving rhythms and no-holds-barred emotional performances from singers. Although production techniques were minimalist, Phillips used tape-delay echo to give depth and drama to his recordings.

Phillips, who had just discovered Elvis Presley and produced his groundbreaking “That’s Alright Mama”, was not impressed with Cash’s gospel singing efforts. But after hearing the 23-year-old’s “Hey Porter”, a rocking song about a young worker travelling by train back home to the South, he offered Cash a contract. The song was released in June 1955 as the B-side to “Cry, Cry, Cry” and John R. Cash, renamed Johnny Cash by Phillips, began his extraordinary 48-year recording career. Cash’s sound in these years is infused with the confidence of a booming post-WWII America and the emergence of a young and restless working class.

Cash toured as an opening act for Presley during 1955 and performed on the Louisiana Hayride radio show. Over the next 18 months he released a string of hit records, including “Folsom Prison Blues”, “I Walk the Line”, “Get Rhythm” and “Big River”. He appeared at the Grand Ol Opry and participated in the Million Dollar Quartet recording session with Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis.

Cash wanted to follow his first LP—*Johnny Cash With His Hot & Blue Guitar*—with a gospel album. But Phillips disagreed and the two clashed over finance. The young performer moved on to Columbia Records where he recorded numerous top-selling singles, including “Don’t Take Your Guns to Town” and “Ring of Fire”, written by June Carter and Merle Kilgore. With the growing popularity of the American folk music scene, Cash recorded a number of “concept albums”—*Ride this Train* (1960) on the railroads; *Blood Sweat and Tears* (1963) about American workers; *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indians* (1964); and *Ballads of the True West* (1965).

The eight-song *Bitter Tears* album exposed the plight of Native Americans and included five compositions by Indian singer/songwriter Peter Lafarge, including “The Ballad of Ira Hayes”. When radio stations refused to broadcast “Ira Hayes”, which was released as a single, Cash took out a full-page ad in *Billboard* demanding disk jockeys play the record. The song tells the tragic story of a proud Native American who enlists in the US military and is decorated for heroism during WWII. Returning to the US, Hayes’ war medals count for little in the face of anti-Indian racism and he dies a poverty-stricken alcoholic.

From his time at Sun Records to the years spent with Columbia (1958 to 1983), Cash maintained a gruelling work schedule and toured most of the year. This took a heavy personal and psychological toll. He became dependent on amphetamines in the early 60s, was briefly jailed for transporting drugs across the US border from Mexico in October 1965 and a year later his first wife Vivian filed for divorce. However, with the assistance of June Carter, Cash eventually overcame the addiction. He married June in 1968, establishing a direct personal and musical link to the famous Carter family, who, together with Jimmie Rodgers, were America’s first country music stars.

Prison concerts

The height of Cash's fame occurred in the late 1960s, particularly after the release of *At Folsom Prison* (1968) and *At San Quentin* (1969). These legendary live recordings sold millions in the US and internationally.

Cash performed in many prison concerts—his first was in 1957 at Huntsville Texas State Prison and he appeared on four separate occasions at Folsom. But it took him six years before he was able to persuade Columbia to record a live album. The results were astonishing.

Cash has an extraordinary rapport with the 2,000-strong audience and the concert is intense, rebellious and infused with dark gritty humour. The sound is unmistakable: Cash's booming voice, backed by a simple melody line, and the ubiquitous boom-chicka-boom rail engine rhythm. "Folsom Prison Blues", which was released as a single, remained at the top of the country and pop charts for weeks, as did "A Boy Named Sue", which was taken from the San Quentin album.

These concerts were held against the background of the Civil Rights movement, mass anti-Vietnam War protests and growing calls for social reform. While Cash makes no references to these issues, the albums give a flavour of the rebellious social climate.

Cash broadened the base of American country music internationally and his concerts drew capacity audiences. In May 1969, for example, over 26,000 attended a Cash performance in Detroit, at that point the largest-ever number for a country music concert. He hosted his own show on ABC-TV from 1969 to 1971 and had small parts in four feature films and seven television dramas. His television program introduced a wide range of young musicians, including Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Stevie Wonder, Linda Ronstadt and numerous others outside the traditional country music scene. Cash maintained a close relationship with Dylan and appeared on his *Nashville Skyline* (1968), writing the album's liner notes.

It was at this time that Cash decided to visit Vietnam and entertain the US troops. Within days of his arrival in Saigon, he began to realise the horrors and injustices being perpetrated in the small country. On return, he spoke out against the war and wrote and recorded "Singing in Vietnam Talking Blues", which recounts his experiences in the war-ravaged country and the quagmire facing US forces.

"As far as the war in Vietnam is concerned," he later commented, "that war just made me sick. I'm not supporting that war or any other war... Maybe Vietnam has taught us a hard lesson to not be involved in foreign wars. Maybe that's the lesson we've learned. I hope we have."

Cash recorded countless gospel songs and hymns during his long career. These, however, failed to match the emotional intensity of his dark and often sardonic tales of crime and passion. Much of it was dull, forgettable or worse. Cash produced *The Holy Land* in 1969, a collection of religious tunes, following a trip to Israel, and two years later produced and financed a film, *The Gospel Road*, about the life of Christ. He often lapsed into revivalist mode and his *Man in Black* album even included a cameo appearance from Reverend Billy Graham.

Record sales for Cash declined during the late 1970s and for most of the next decade. The political radicalisation that formed the backdrop to his success during the 1960s had waned and a new climate emerged. Disco music dominated the airwaves and Nashville developed its bland country-pop or "crossover" sound. Few of the executives running the industry were interested in Cash's blunt and often dark ballads.

Attempts to gloss up his work with string accompaniments and other techniques were disastrous. Cash, who was writing less, went along with much of this, but was far from happy. "If I hear the word demographics one more time, I'll puke," he told the media.

Cash toured with Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Kris Kristofferson in the mid-1980s. Known as The Highwaymen, they recorded a commercially successful but unexciting album in 1985 and another in 1992. Cash left Columbia records in 1983 and moved to

Mercury, but clashed with producers over the musical direction they wanted him to take.

While Cash's musical influences lay deep within the roots of American country music, he was always open to new musical trends. In the mid-1980s he began to take an interest in heavy metal music, attending concerts by Metallica, Iron Maiden and Ozzy Osbourne, and spoke out against various attempts to censor rock music lyrics.

In 1987 he declared that it was "presumptuous" that people his age thought they could "do something toward raisin' their kids right by censoring three minutes of what they heard in a day's dialogue". "If a parent hasn't been close enough to his kids to let them make their own decisions," he continued, "then it's too late by the time they're ready to rock 'n roll."

Rediscovered

In the early 90s Cash was "discovered" by a new generation of musicians and fans, who admired his defiant early work and iconic image. While his trademark black attire infatuated some, Cash's clothing was neither a fashion statement nor a marketing gimmick, but an expression of his genuine identification with the poor and those on the wrong side of the law. As his "Man in Black" song explained:

*"I wear black for the poor and the beaten down
Living in the hopeless, hungry side of town
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime...
I'd love to wear a rainbow every day
And tell the world that everything's OK
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back
Till things are brighter, I'm the Man In Black."*

In 1993 Cash joined Rick Rubin's American Recordings and began the last phase of his career. Rubin, who founded the Def Jam label and made his name producing punk rock, rap and hip-hop groups, gave Cash the artistic freedom and assistance he needed.

This partnership gave rise to four interesting albums: *American Recordings*; *Unchained*; *American III: Solitary Man*; and *American IV: The Man Comes Around*. These contain a diverse and intelligent range of songs—traditional and contemporary folk, ballads, religious tunes, pop songs, rock, alternative metal and some of Cash's early classics. The sparse instrumentation, in most cases just Cash and a guitar, is effective and on occasions profoundly moving. His versions of Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt", about drug addiction, and Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus" on *American IV* are particularly memorable.

The commercial and artistic success of these albums, however, failed to generate any interest from mainstream country radio in the US. Disk jockeys in these outlets studiously ignored Cash, refusing to play his new material.

While Cash's health began to seriously decline—he suffered from diabetes, Parkinson's disease and various respiratory ailments—he continued to work until the end, collecting music awards and even MTV video prizes. The death of June Carter after heart surgery in May this year hit him hard. But Cash sought solace in the studio, recording scores of songs in the months before his death.

Politically Cash was a contradictory figure—an unabashed patriot, who recorded numerous songs in this vein, but who was acutely sensitive to social inequality. As he admitted to one interviewer in 1969: "I don't know how patriotic I'd be if I was poor and hungry".

While Cash was hailed by various politicians—Republican and Democrat alike—he never forgot his rural working class origins and refused to pull a punch on any social issue close to his heart. Earlier this year, in the lead up to the US-led war against Iraq, he told his singer/songwriter daughter Rosanne to convey his opposition to the impending invasion to audiences at her concerts.

At Cash's funeral, longtime friend Kris Kristofferson described him as a "holy terror... a dark and dangerous force of nature that also stood for

mercy and justice for his fellow human beings”.

In his 1971 song “Pilgrim: Chapter 33”, partly inspired by Cash, Kristofferson wrote: “He’s a poet, he’s a picker... a pilgrim and a preacher, and a problem when he’s stoned. He’s a walkin’ contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction, takin’ ev’ry wrong direction on his lonely way back home.”

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Cash sold more than 50 million records and recorded over 45 albums during his career. For those not familiar with his work, the following list is an introduction to his best recordings.

Johnny Cash: The Sun Years, Rhino Records

Man in Black: Greatest Hits, Columbia

At Folsom Prison, Columbia

At San Quentin Columbia

American Recordings, Sony

American Recordings IV: The Man Comes Around, Sony



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