

Johnny cash: a legend essay



Johnny Cash (February 26, 1932 – September 12, 2003) was one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century (Streissguth, 2006). He had a deep, bass-baritone voice that gave his Tennessee Three backing band its distinction. His works covers many genres to include rockabilly and rock and roll, as well as blues, folk and gospel. His songs echoed themes of sorrow, moral tribulation and redemption. His most notable compositions include “ I Walk the Line”, “ Folsom Prison Blues”, “ Ring of Fire”, “ Get Rhythm” and “ Man in Black”.

He also wrote and recorded humorous songs such as “ One Piece at a Time” and “ A Boy Named Sue”, a duet with June Carter called “ Jackson”, as well as railroad songs such as “ Hey Porter” and “ Rock Island Line” and various railroad songs, such as “ Rock Island Line” and “ Orange Blossom Special”. Johnny Cash was born in Kingsland, Arkansas to Ray and Carrie Cash but grew up in Dyess, Arkansas (Neimark, 2007). As a young boy, he worked in a cotton field side-by-side with his six siblings.

Indeed his family’s financial struggle during Depression inspired his many songs including “ Five Feet High and Rising” which was written according to an occasion where the family farm was flooded. Gospel music and radio dominated Cash’s childhood music. He was taught by his mother and a childhood friend how to play a guitar and begun writing his own songs as a young boy. While in high school, he was given a slot in a local radio station to air his compositions and a decade after he released his first album of traditional gospel songs entitled “ My Mother’s Hymn Book”.

He was also greatly influenced by Irish music that he heard performed weekly by Dennis Day on the Jack Benny radio program. Later in his life, he learned that he was of Scottish royal descent though he grew up believing that he was mainly Irish and partly Native American. He had a deep compassion to the Native Americans who were his inspirations in several of his songs like “ Apache Tears” and “ The Ballad of Ira Hayes”, and on his album, Bitter Tears. Style Characteristics Common in many Cash’s songs is “ boom-chicka-boom” or “ freight train” rhythm (Miller, 2003).

He was a pioneer of this style as he became an international representative of country music revered by the greatest popular musicians of his time. His rebellious image and often anti-authoritarian stance influenced the punk rock movement. Against the mainstream Nashville sound himself, he supported artists on the fringes of what was acceptable in country music even while serving as the country music establishment’s most visible symbol. Various great artists have substantial influence to Cash’s signature music style.

These included the music created by Hank Williams who was a leading singer and song writer in honky tonk style; the Carter family, the first vocal group to become country music star; Carl Smith, a close friend, among others. When Cash’s music first hit the airwaves, it was like nothing the listeners have heard before. He combined humor, honesty, love, and a bit of preachiness to come up with songs like stories with character and plot, sometimes sung, sometimes spoken. Listening Selection Examined “ I Walk the Line” gave Cash his first number one hit (Campbell, 2005).

Like many of his songs, “ I Walk the Line” is very simple that tells more of a story than the music conveys. “ You’ve got a way to keep me on your sid. /You give me cause for love that I can’t hide/For you I know I’d even try to turn the tide. ” There is a unique chord progression for the song, a style discovered by Cash during an accidental backwards playback on his tape recorder. In the original version of the song, in between each of the five verses there is a key change that Cash hums the new root note before starting each verse.

The final verse, a reprise of the first, is sung a full octave lower than the first verse. It was necessary for Cash to hum the first pitch because of the change in keys several times. According to Cash, he had to placed a piece of paper in his guitar strings to imitate the sound of a snare drum which were not used in country music during those times. “ Man in Black” is a protest song written and sung by and about Johnny Cash, originally released on his 1971 album of the same name (Hogan, 2008). Cash himself was known as “ The Man in Black” for his distinctive style of on-stage costuming.

The lyrics are an after-the-fact explanation of this with the entire song as a protest statement with statements such as: “ I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down, Livin’ in the hopeless, hungry side of town, I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime, But is there because he’s a victim of the times. ” Cash’s first hit, “ Hey Porter,” was recorded at Sun Records in 1955. It has simple, repetitive lyrics about a train ride into Tennessee, with chugging guitar music like the singer is actually on a train.

Its lyrics deliver his message with style, feeling and a bit of humor. For me, “A Boy Named Sue” is, hands-down, Cash’s best. His spoken-word lyrics tell the story of a man who attempts to kill the father who named him Sue. Johnny yells like he’s in a bar fight. “ My name is Sue! How do you do? Now you gonna die! ” The song has an unusual A-A-C B-B-C rhyme scheme, broken only to mark the dramatic midpoint and comic ending, and is full of vivid images (Russell, 2007). The song is mostly recitation rather than conventional singing, an early form of rap.

Its lyrics tell the story of a young man’s quest for revenge on an absent father who did nothing for him but gave him a girl’s name. The boy had a hard time growing up because of the ridicule he got for having a feminine name. The climax of the song is about Sue and his father’s confrontation where they got into a vicious clash. When both were beaten down, Sue’s father confesses that the name was given to him as an act of love to make sure that he grew up strong knowing that a father would not be there for him. The song ended where Sue forgave his father, promising not to name his own son Sue.