

Biography and music of johnny cash



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The 1929 crash of the Wall Street stock market caused the most devastating economic depression in U. S. History, and rural America was among the hardest hit. A poor Southern Baptist sharecropping family struggling to raise a family in the midst of this depression gave birth to their fourth child. Ray and Carrie Cash were not prepared to name their new baby boy, so they simply named him J. R. Cash. Born into poverty, in a failed economy, and worse agricultural times, J. R. Cash had a tough road ahead of him. The boy, who was barely given a name, would lead a life hell-bent on making a name for himself.

John R. Cash was born in 1932 in Kingsland, Arkansas before his family moved to Dyess, Arkansas to take advantage of the federally sponsored New Deal farming program.[1]The Cash family managed to survive by farming cotton and other the crops that they grew on the 20 acre farm where Johnny is said to have worked twelve hour days with his family and siblings. During this time Johnny first learned about music from his mother who would strum a guitar and sing to him and his siblings after a long day at work. Johnny soon learned of the power of this music to serve as an escape from the hardships of life. Johnny's older brother, Jack, died in a wood cutting accident when Johnny was only twelve years old.[2]This same year Johnny would pick up a guitar for the first time, and write his first song. Johnny's mother and his family's religion would prove to be a powerful driving force in Johnny's music. [3].

In 1950, Johnny graduated high school and left Arkansas for Pontiac, Michigan where he went to work in an automobile plant.[4]A month later Johnny joined the Air Force, and while stationed in Germany he learned to

play the guitar along with the songs that he had learned to sing. Johnny again used music as an escape from hardship, this time from the loneliness that he felt in the Air Force. He formed a small honky-tonk band to play in local bars where booze laden nights of playing often resulted in drunken brawls. This likely led to Johnny writing ' Folsom Prison Blues' while he was stationed in Germany in 1953.[5]Johnny once remarked of his loneliness " I spent twenty years in the Air Force, from 1950 to 1954".[6]After returning home Johnny married his wartime pen pal, Vivian Liberto, and settled in Memphis, Tennessee. Johnny worked selling appliances and pursued his love of music on the side, with Marshall Grant and Luther Perkins. They formed the trio ' Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Two' and played gospel on a local radio station. Later, the trio grew into a quartet and recorded their first two singles " Hey Porter" and " Cry, Cry, Cry", which helped to launch Cash's career in music. While touring in support of Elvis Presley, Cash and his band mates lacked the glitzy costumes typical of other performers at that time, and decided to wear black shirts and jeans, thus creating the legend of the " Man in Black". Anthony DeCurtis, writer at Rolling Stone magazine, described Johnny as " Part rural preacher, part Outlaw Robin Hood". Many saw Cash's black attire as a refusal to conform and he was quickly associated with the poor and unfortunate. Jill Smolowe, People magazine, quotes Kris Kristofferson as saying of Cash " He stood up for the underdogs, the downtrodden, the prisoners, the poor, and he was their champion". His career truly exploded following his 1956 release of " Walk the Line" which hit number 1 and sold 2 million copies.[7]With his new found fame, Johnny moved his family to Ventura, California in 1958, and began a nine year long season of drug addiction. Known to have wrecked every car he ever owned,

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trashing hotel rooms, and spending numerous nights in jail, Johnny's wild behavior became legendary and helped to fuel his fame. Despite the many legends of Johnny's jail time, he actually only spent one night in jail on three separate occasions.[8]DeCurtis quotes Kris Kristofferson saying " He's a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction". Johnny began touring with June Carter and while still married to other people June wrote the song " Ring of Fire" in 1963, a song about her forbidden love for Johnny. During this time Johnny and June were performing nearly three hundred shows a year, and Johnny's drug use was at an all-time high to keep up with his touring schedule. In 1965 Johnny was banned from the Grand Ole Opry for smashing all of the footlights with his mic-stand, and fined \$82, 000 for accidentally starting a fire in a wildlife reserve that required 450 men and four helicopters to extinguish.[9]Smolowe quotes Cash as saying " I was scraping the filthy bottom of the barrel of life". The wild and raucous touring schedule, and possibly suspicion about his involvement with June, started to strain on Johnny's marriage and Vivian filed for divorce in 1966. Following the divorce, in 1967, Johnny locked himself in a room to sweat out the drugs and quit cold turkey.[10]

Johnny married June in 1968, and the following year Johnny was asked to host his own television show, The Johnny Cash Show. Also in 1968, Johnny recorded one of his most popular albums, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* , and took home two Grammy Awards for the album.[11]The Folsom Prison album was a tremendous success in all arenas, and the album would later reach Gold record status in 1969. It seemed that his career was going well. Then in 1970, June gave birth to their only child, John Carter Cash. Johnny's marriage

and family were doing well, but his music career was beginning to show signs of struggle. After only two years of airing, the Johnny Cash Show was canceled in 1971.[12]Despite the show being canceled, Johnny went on to work in movies, accepting acting roles and writing scores for various television shows. He also published a best-selling autobiography, *Man in Black*, in 1975. Johnny was accepted as the youngest member of the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1980, but he later re-lapsed into drug use and entered the Betty Ford Clinic in California for drug rehabilitation in 1984. [13]Cash's career struggled for the latter half of the 1970's and continued to wane for much of the 1980's, resulting in Cash being dropped from his record label in 1986. Johnny occasionally toured with a group of musicians known as the Highwaymen whose members included Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, and of course Johnny Cash. By the 1990's Johnny Cash had all but faded into obscurity.[14]

In 1992 Johnny was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of fame, making him the only performer ever to be inducted into both the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.[15]Later that year Johnny teamed up with hip-hop producer Rick Rubin to strategize a comeback for Johnnys music career. DeCurtis quotes Rubin saying “ From the beginning of rock & roll, there's always been this dark figure who never really fit.” crediting Johnny as the “ quintessential outsider” and being the originator of the bad-boy persona of the present day hip-hop music industry.[16]Cash and Rubin worked together recording a four album series with American recordings from 1994 to 2002. Despite being diagnosed with an incurable disease in 1997, Cash continued to record and perform his music, and in 1998 his

album *Unchained* won a Grammy for best country album. Cash celebrated his Grammy in true Johnny Cash fashion by taking out a full page ad in Billboard magazine showing Johnny making a rude gesture to thank country music radio stations, which he felt had turned their backs on him in previous years.[17]The 2002 release of *American IV: The Man Comes Around* was the culmination of his success working with Rick Rubin. The album's success was largely credited to Johnny's exploration into the music of the younger generations. The idea paid off in full, and successfully exposed Johnny Cash to a younger audience and gained him numerous accolades. One song in particular from the album would garner a lot of attention for its "soul-ravaging" rendition of Trent Reznor's song about drug addiction, "Hurt". [18]DeCurtis quoted Johnny describing his experience with the song "There's more heart, soul and pain in that song than any I've heard in a long time. I love it." The song was nominated for six nominations at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards, but won only one. Justin Timberlake described his own Grammy win over Cash in category where they were both nominated as a "travesty".[19]Unfortunately Johnny was unable to attend the VMA's due to the condition of his health.

The year of 2003 would be the final chapter in the tumultuous life of Johnny Cash. After 35 years of marriage, June Carter Cash died in May of that year. Johnny continued to record his music with Rick Rubin to escape the pain of his loss. The final album produced by this collaboration, *American V: A Hundred Highways*, was completed just one week before Johnny's death on September 12, 2003.[20]In rural Arkansas, amidst an economic depression, Johnny Cash rose from humble beginnings to realize his dream of making

music. The price for his success and fame was perhaps more than he had expected. Johnny rose, and fell, only to rise again to new found fame before his final bow. He was bigger than life, and he never quit doing what he loved. Steve Pond of Rolling Stone Magazine writes “ Whatever he wears and wherever he goes, Johnny Cash is always the coolest man in the room”.^[21]It seems that in the end, J. R. Cash made a name for himself that will never be forgotten. The legacy of the “ Man in Black” can be revived with the mention of just one word, Cash.

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