



Johnny Cash

He's the man in black, "a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction." His six foot-plus, ebon-draped frame has worked itself deep into the American psyche to become as familiar to some as Woody Guthrie or Billy the Kid, Geronimo or Luke the Drifter.

Johnny Cash is a little bit of all those American legends. During a career that spans five distinct decades, he has created more than 1,000 compositions that describe a folk hero in transition, singing in his distinctive baritoned-bass voice of coal miners and sharecroppers, cowboys and Native Americans, families and lovers. Invariably, he returns to his early years for strength and inspiration.

At the height of the Great Depression, on February 26, 1932, in the town of Kingsland, Arkansas, Ray Cash and Carrie Rivers Cash bore a son named J.R. ("John" evolved some years later, and "Johnny" came from Sam Phillips.) When J.R. was three years old, the family moved to 20 acres of fertile bottom land and a five-room house in Dyess County. There was music in the services of the Pentecostal Church and the work songs of the field hands, but most important of all was the country music of Ernest Tubb, Roy Acuff and Hank Williams.

At age twelve John accepted Christ; four years later, his mother credited God with the overnight deepening of his voice and predicted a career in song for him. He graduated from Dyess High School in 1950 and headed north to work at the Fisher plant in Pontiac, Michigan. He was soon back in Dyess, enlisting in the Air Force. During basic training in Texas, he dated Vivian Leberto, a San Antonio high school senior.

Cash began strumming guitar and writing the occasional lyric while stationed in Germany. Back home in July 1954, he married Vivian and they moved to Memphis. The city was a melting pot of jazz, blues and country-western fusions, but for John R. Cash it meant a job as a door-to-door appliance salesman. His older brother Roy introduced him to a trio of aspiring musicians: Luther Perkins, Marshall Grant and A. W. "Red" Kernodle, known as the Tennessee Three.

The four began working on songs, mostly gospel numbers, and landed a 15-minute weekly spot on KWEM. Meanwhile, John's persistent presence at the Sun Recording Studio on Union Avenue was paying off. Sam Phillips had

granted him a solo audition in late 1954, and invited him back with his group.

On the first day of spring, 1955, the cards were on the table at Sun. Red Kernodle succumbed to the pressure and disappeared. But Cash rose to the occasion with a song he'd just finished writing. Luther's unadorned lead guitar picked a sparsely melodic pattern, and Marshall came up with a bedrock rhythm as characteristic of the Sun Sound as that of Elvis, Scotty and Bill. The five masters cut at that session resulted in one serviceable B-side, "Hey Porter." Phillips sent John home to write him a hit.

The result was "Cry! Cry! Cry," recorded in May by the newly-christened Johnny Cash & the Tennessee Two and issued as Sun 221 b/w "Hey Porter." The single took the Memphis country charts by storm that summer, even reaching #14 in *Billboard* — Sun's first country record to make the national list. The record earned Johnny his first royalty check, for \$2.41, and a support gig with Elvis on Sun package tours. Another Sun session in July brought forth "So Doggone Lonesome" b/w "Folsom Prison Blues," released as Sun 232 in December. By February 1956, this two-sided hit was #4 on the *Billboard* country chart, and Johnny had received his second royalty check, for \$6,000. He quit selling vacuum cleaners.

April saw the creation of one of his signature songs, the two million-selling "I walk the Line" — the first of more than a dozen #1 country hits. In July he was offered a Grand Ole Opry spot; Red Foley's Ozark Jubilee, American Bandstand, the Jackie Gleason Show, and Ed Sullivan were all on the horizon. For the next two years, Johnny Cash was a fixture of country music's Top Ten. He signed a lucrative new recording contract with Columbia in the summer of 1958, one that would make him a mainstay of the Columbia roster for the next 28 years.

But in many ways, his persona was already carved in bronze. Wherever his travels and his records took him in the years to follow — from the Carter Family and wife June, to Bob Dylan, to Dave Edmunds and Rockpile, and back full-circle to Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis — the music of Johnny Cash would always reflect his Arkansas childhood, his coming of age in the service and his three-year hitch at Sun Records. To see and hear Johnny Cash perform today is to experience rock & roll survival at the hands of a true caretaker.

— Arthur Levy