Johnny Cash

Born in 1932 in Kingsland, Arkansas John R. (Johnny) Cash was one of six children. His father, Ray Cash followed an opportunity to work a farm in the Dyess Colony in the Northeastern part of the state. His family farmed the land, picking cotton and other seasonal crops. As a child he was known as J.R. He worked alongside his mother, father and siblings.

Cash was very close to his older brother, Jack, who in 1944 was pulled into a whirling table saw in the mill where he worked, and cut almost in two. He suffered for over a week before he died. Cash often spoke of the horrible guilt he felt over this incident. His father was away that morning, but he and his mother, and Jack himself, all had premonitions or a sense of foreboding about that day, causing his mother to urge Jack to skip work. Jack insisted on working, as the family needed the money. Decades later, Cash spoke of looking forward to meeting his brother in heaven.

Music was an integral part of his upbringing, whether it was his mother’s favorite gospel hymns, field hand folk songs or tunes he learned from the nearby railroad yards. Johnny left home in 1950 after high school to work in Detroit for a brief stint in an automobile factory. These experiences would one day form the basis for many songs he would author and be known for in concerts. One sources said that he absorbed these songs like a sponge absorbs water.

Leaving the auto factory, Johnny joined the US Air Force and was sent to basic training in Texas. There he met the woman who would become his first wife, Vivian Liberto. He was stationed in Landsberg, Germany. There he formed his first singing group, the Landsberg Barbarians. Upon his discharge from the service in 1954 Johnny came home, married Vivian and the couple moved to Memphis, Tennessee. This allowed Johnny to pursue his dream of becoming a recording artist and work day jobs. He served as an appliance salesman while auditioning for studios and producers.

Johnny’s love for gospel music influenced his early attempts to secure a recording contract. However his solo style was turned down by producers. Finally, he auditioned for Sun Records (the company that first signed Elvis Presley and many other early rock and roll giants) with his band, the Tennessee Three. It was met with success. His first recording, *Hey Porter* came out of this success. He followed with *Cry, Cry, Cry* and *Folsom Prison Blues* which made the Billboard charts. But *I Walk the Line* became his breakout hit and propelled him to stardom. The song went to Number one on Billboard and stayed at the top for 43 weeks.

In 1956, he realized a lifelong dream when he was invited to perform on the Grand Ole Opry. By 1957 Cash had racked up an impressive string of hits and was working more than 200 dates a year. The following year he switched to Columbia Records in search of more artistic freedom. He still had aspirations of making gospel records and felt he had a better chance of accomplishing this goal at another label.
Cash continued to produce remarkable records and charted consistently throughout the remainder of the 1950's and into the next decade. *Don't Take Your Guns to Town*, *I Got Stripes*, *Ring of Fire*, *Understand Your Man* and *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* all hit the upper positions of the record charts. Appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Tonight Show* and other top-rated network programs followed. In the early 1960s, concept albums such as *Bitter Tears* and *Ballads of the True West* made him a favorite among the folk music crowd, culminating in an appearance at the Newport Folk Festival.

But success was taking its toll on Johnny’s life. He became addicted to narcotics. His marriage to Vivian ended in divorce and his career was beginning to suffer. Cash was spinning out of control. He was performing over 300 dates each year and couldn’t cope with the grueling schedule. He hit the wall in his personal and professional life. He needed a resurrection and reinvention in his life.

His reinvention came. By 1967 Cash managed to overcome his addiction with the help of his singing partner June Carter and her family. In 1968, he and Carter were married and his career experienced a renaissance. Throughout the remainder of the decade and into the 1970s, Cash was at the top of his game. He began reading his mail. Prisoners in penitentiaries were writing to him and telling him how his music and soul had impacted their lives. This gave Johnny an idea: he would perform and record live concerts in prisons. At first the idea was met with resistance, but Johnny was certain that he had found his movement in his career. A pair of live recordings made at Folsom Prison and San Quentin both went gold and many awards followed including the Country Music Association's Entertainer of the Year and Male Vocalist awards in 1969.

Then doors opened for Johnny and June in ways they never dreamed. They were accepted a network television spot. Premiering in 1969, *The Johnny Cash Show* aired on ABC. Taped at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium, the show featured an eclectic mix of guests ranging from Bob Dylan and Neil Young to Louis Armstrong and Merle Haggard (who had been inspired by Johnny's music while in prison himself). Through his selection of guests, Cash helped bridge the generation gap and break down musical barriers. He also used the show as a forum to discuss and raise the country's collective consciousness about social issues of the day such as the plight of the Native Americans, prison reform and the conflict in Vietnam. The show ceased production in 1971, but Cash continued to host numerous specials for several years.

Johnny Cash became known for his trademark sound, style and his distinctive introduction – he opened concerts with the greeting: “Hello, I’m Johnny Cash” and would go into *Folsom Prison Blues*. By the early 1970s, he had crystallized his public image as "The Man in Black". He regularly performed dressed all in black, wearing a long black knee-length coat. This outfit stood in contrast to the costumes worn by most of the major country acts in his day: rhinestone suits and western boots. In 1971, Cash wrote the song *Man in Black*, to help explain his dress code. He wore black on behalf of the poor and hungry, on behalf of "the prisoner who has long paid for his crime", and on behalf of those who have been betrayed by age or drugs.
Many performers were featured outside of the country music scene. It also introduced several to audiences who would have never seen them without the showcase. Among them was Bob Dylan. Cash had met Dylan in the mid 1960s and became closer friends when they were neighbors in the late 1960s in Woodstock, NY. He was enthusiastic about reintroducing the reclusive Dylan to his audience. Cash sang a duet with Dylan on Dylan's country album *Nashville Skyline*. Another artist who received a major career boost from *The Johnny Cash Show* was songwriter Kris Kristofferson, who was beginning to make a name for himself as a singer/songwriter. The two became friends and the relationship would pay off for the two in later years.


In May, 2003 June passed away unexpectedly. Johnny died just four months later from complications from diabetes. In 2005, a film version of his early romance with Carter, titled *Walk the Line*, was Oscar-nominated for best picture. The two had actually met with the stars playing them before their deaths: Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon to prepare them for their roles in the movie. A single-disc compilation titled *The Legend of Johnny Cash* was also released in 2005 and went on to sell more than 2 million copies. The following year, Lost Highway released the final installment of his American recordings, *American V: A Hundred Highways*, featuring his last sessions with Rubin.

Johnny and June were responsible for touching many lives and supporting each others. Together they had nurtured and defended artists on the fringes of what was acceptable in country music even while serving as the country music establishment’s most visible symbol. At an all-star TNT
concert in 1999, a diverse group of artists paid him tribute, including Bob Dylan, Chris Isaak, Wyclef Jean, Norah Jones, Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, and U2. Cash himself appeared at the end and performed for the first time in more than a year. Two tribute albums were released shortly before his death; Kindred Spirits contains works from established artists, while Dressed in Black contains works from many lesser-known artists.

Johnny Cash is one of the original “Outlaw” country music stars. But his reputation goes further than that. As Wikipedia states: “From his early days as a pioneer of rockabilly and rock and roll in the 1950s, to his decades as an international representative of country music, to his resurgence to fame in the 1990s as a living legend and an alternative country icon, Cash influenced countless artists and left a large body of work. Upon his death, Cash was revered by the greatest popular musicians of his time. His rebellious image and often anti-authoritarian stance influenced the punk rock movement.”