

Johnny Cash: The Truth Seeker

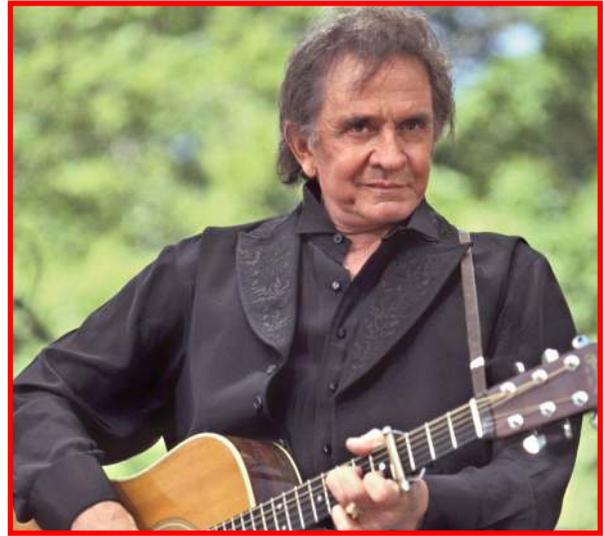
In 1970, Johnny Cash scored a hit with a protest song called “What Is Truth,” but the question in the title is just as much the theme running through all of the legendary singer-songwriter’s music. In a remarkable career that spanned six decades, Cash used his lyrics to explore life’s important questions.

“I want to write a song that has something to say—a song that will have a meaning not only for me, but for everybody who hears it,” he said.

Cash was born in Kingsland, Arkansas, on February 26, 1932. One of seven children in a farming family, he absorbed gospel music in church, country music from the radio, and old-time folk music in porch sing-alongs. When he was twelve, his beloved older brother Jack died in an accident—a tragedy that haunted Cash’s life and turned him to writing poetry, stories, and song lyrics. After high school, he spent four years in the air force, a time when he became serious about music, learning the guitar, writing songs, and forming an off-hours country band.

Out of the air force, Cash moved to Memphis and caught the attention of Sun Records, the label that launched Elvis Presley’s career. Soon Cash was making waves on country charts with his self-penned songs.

As Cash’s career took off in the 1960s, he drew on gospel, country, and folk traditions to write songs, and he was especially influenced by a new wave of folk music that addressed current events. Often he relied on the melodies of old folk songs, “rewriting the lyrics or taking the basic idea and creating a new song,” Cash expert Don Cusic writes.



Deeply religious, Cash wrote about both saints and sinners, and he balanced his protest songs about America’s shortcomings with songs praising America’s virtues. In the liner notes of his album *Unchained*, he cites a long list of “obsessions,” including family, hard times, horses, railroads, war, patriotism, humor, prison, death, pride, heartbreak, and God.

After a career decline in the 1980s, Cash cemented his reputation as an American music original with a series of raw recordings, including some reworkings of his earlier songs. Recording almost up to his final days, Cash died on September 12, 2003, in Nashville, Tennessee, of complications from diabetes. He is a member of both the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and he also received the National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal.

Sources: *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *Johnny Cash: The Songs*, edited by Don Cusic; *The Resurrection of Johnny Cash* by Graeme Thomson; *Rolling Stone*

LISTEN:

“Don’t Take Your Guns to Town”
“I Still Miss Someone”
“I Walk the Line”
“The Man in Black”
“Tennessee Flat Top Box”
“What Is Truth”

READ:

Hello, I’m Johnny Cash by G. Neri (Candlewick, 2014):
This biography, written for grades 4-7, tells in free verse how poverty, religion, family, and music influenced Cash’s life.
Johnny Cash: The Songs, edited by Don Cusic (Da Capo Press, 2004):
This collection of lyrics from Cash’s best-known songs is organized by subject.