

JOHNNY CASH

THE TRUTH SEEKER

In 1970, Johnny Cash scored a hit with a protest song called “What Is Truth.” The question in the song’s title is a theme that runs through all of the legendary singer-songwriter’s music. During a remarkable career that lasted 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 U.S. Air Force, a time when he became serious about music, learning the guitar, writing songs, and forming a country band.

Shortly after he left the military in 1954, 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 songs “Cry! Cry! Cry!” and “I Walk the Line.”

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,” wrote Cash expert Don Cusic.

SOURCES

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



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.

Cash was known as “the Man in Black,” because he regularly wore black clothing when he performed. He explained his reasons for doing so in “The Man in Black,” a song he wrote in the early 1970s:

“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”

He died on September 12, 2003, in Nashville, Tennessee, of complications from diabetes. He is a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He also received the National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal.