

## 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 could easily serve as the theme running through the legendary singer-songwriter’s music. In a monumental career that spanned six decades, Cash used his lyrics to explore life’s complexities and to help set America’s moral compass.

“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 explained.

Cash was born February 26, 1932, in Kingsland, Arkansas. 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 was killed in a horrific sawmill accident—a tragedy that haunted Cash and turned him to writing poetry, stories, and song lyrics. After high school, he spent four years in the Air Force and, while in the service, began to pursue music seriously. He learned to play the guitar, wrote songs, and even formed a country band.

After his military discharge, Cash moved to Memphis, where he made a living as an appliance salesman while attracting the attention of Sun Records, the label that launched Elvis Presley’s career. At first, Cash wanted to record gospel, but Sun producer Sam Phillips turned the young singer toward “rockabilly”—a country-rock hybrid—and Cash began to make waves on country charts with his self-written songs.

As Cash developed his career 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 social issues. Cash soon set himself apart from



other country artists with his lyrics that focused on the plight of Native Americans and incarcerated persons.

Often, Cash relied on the melodies of old folksongs, “rewriting the lyrics or taking the basic idea and creating a new song,” writes scholar Don Cusic. “This is part of the folk tradition of songwriting. . . . Every song written is influenced by songs the songwriter has heard before.”

Deeply religious, Cash wrote about both saints and sinners as he struggled to overcome his own personal demons. Likewise, he praised America’s virtues while also pointing out its flaws. The liner notes to his *Unchained* album quotes a lengthy list of his “obsessions,” including family, hard times, horses, railroads, war, patriotism, humor, prison, salvation, death, pride, heartbreak, and God.

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### LISTEN

“Don’t Take Your Guns to Town,” “Folsom Prison Blues,” “I Walk the Line,” “The Man in Black,” “What Is Truth”

## JOHNNY CASH: THE TRUTH SEEKER (CONTINUED)

After a career decline in the 1980s, Cash sealed his stature as an American music icon in the 1990s with a series of raw recordings, many of which reworked his earlier songs. Recording almost up to his final days, he died September 12, 2003, in Nashville, Tennessee, of complications due to diabetes. Cash is a member of both the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and he is also the recipient of the National Medal of Arts as well as the National Humanities Medal.

“In the end, as in the beginning,” author Graeme Thomson writes, “Johnny Cash proved a master at articulating not just his own dark, sweet, complicated heart, but something profound about us all.”



### CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In the first paragraph, what does the phrase “moral compass” mean in this context? Circle the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning, and on the lines below, define the phrase in your own words.

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2. Highlight three influences that had a significant impact on Cash as a songwriter. Which of them had the greatest impact? Explain your answer in at least three sentences.

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3. In your own words, explain the following quotation: “In the end, as in the beginning, Johnny Cash proved a master at articulating not just his own dark, sweet, complicated heart, but something profound about us all.”

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