



Johnny Cash

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Introduction

Johnny Cash is widely recognized as one of the most influential artists of his time. He sold over 90 million records, making him one of the best selling musicians in the world. Our group was interested in Johnny Cash because of his role in synthesizing the Rockabilly genre and for his unique “outlaw” persona.



Johnny Cash

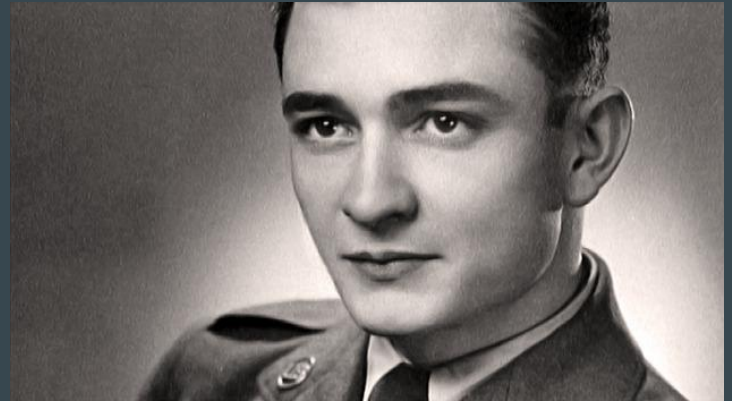
John R. Cash

- B. February 26, 1932 as John R. Cash in Kingsland, Arkansas
- D. September 12, 2003 from diabetes complications

Johnny Cash was born into a poor, Baptist, farming family. He was one of seven children and spent his childhood working on the farm with his siblings. Known by those close to him as J.R., Cash picked up his love for music at a young age. His mother, Carrie, would sing folk ballads and play the guitar while his father, Ray, would write ballads about western cowboys (Streissguth, M.) He also learned working music from the people who worked in the fields with him and his siblings. Cash first picked up a guitar at age 12. His mother enrolled him in singing lessons, but his teacher was so taken with his voice that, after only three lessons, she turned him away and said to keep his natural voice (Biography.com Editors).

Military Experience

In 1950, Cash joined the Air Force. Whilst training in Texas he met his future wife, Vivian Liberto. Cash then spent the next four years based in Landsberg, West Germany working as a radio intercept officer. It was during this time that he formed his first band, Landsberg Barbarians, with his fellow airmen. This was his chance to perform live and practice songwriting. It was in Germany in 1953 that Cash wrote his famous “Folsom Prison Blues” (Biography.com Editors). Upon his discharge, Cash went to Memphis, Tennessee, where he married Vivian and teamed up with Marshall Grant and Luther Perkins to form The Tennessee Two. This was the band that kicked-off his career as a professional musician.



A young Johnny Cash

Drug Addiction

As with many musicians, Cash could not escape the world of drug addiction. As his fame grew, Cash was touring 300 days of the year. He began taking drugs and alcohol in order to cope with the stresses of touring. Vivian filed for divorce in 1966 after years of Cash's absence. From there Cash's addiction spiraled. One Georgia policeman found him in a near death state after a particularly intense drug binge. He also found himself in multiple run-ins with the law, including an arrest for smuggling amphetamine from Mexico (Biography.com Editors).



Johnny Cash

Later Years

Cash began to turn his life around when he met June Carter (pictured with Cash and son John Carter Cash). He married the performer in 1967, cleaned up his life, and

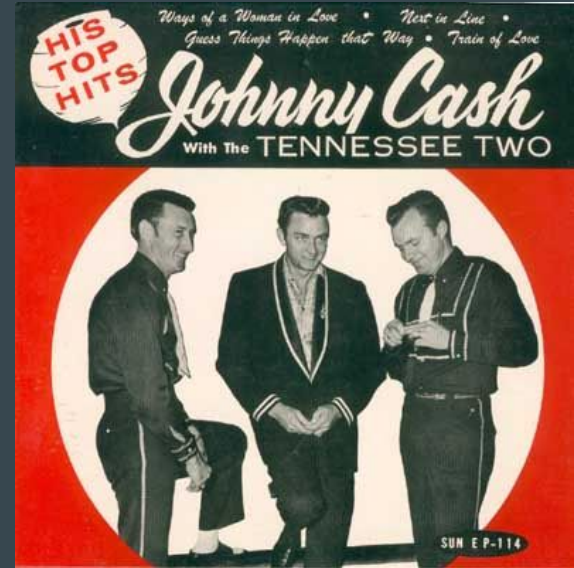


became a devout Christian fundamentalist (Macnie, J.) However, despite the years of drug abuse, Cash had many non-abuse related health problems. He was diagnosed with a rare nervous-system disorder, Shy-Drager Syndrome. He also developed diabetes, which would eventually take his life in 2003.

Music of the Period - Beginnings of Rockabilly

Cash was one of the first artists signed to Sam Phillip's Sun Records in 1955. Here, Cash recorded with his group, the Tennessee Two, which included guitarist Luther Perkins and bassist Marshall Grant (Decurtis, A.). Their sound from the combination of the guitar, bass, and vocals was different than others and is considered to be the beginning of the Rockabilly musical style.

As a refresher, Rockabilly is a style of Rock that developed from the combination of Country & Western (C&W) and Rhythm & Blues (R&B) musical styles.



Johnny Cash (center) pictured with the Tennessee Two.

Music of the Period - Beginnings of Rockabilly

Other artists that signed to Sun Records around the same time as Johnny Cash included Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis (Rock and Roll Hall of Fame). These artists, including Cash, grew up in the Southern United States where they were exposed to R&B and gospel music. As white artists, they were predisposed to create C&W music, but were pioneers in the combination of these styles, forming Rockabilly.

An interesting fact about Cash, Presley, Perkins, and Lewis is that they became known as “the Million Dollar Quartet” after they recorded an impromptu gospel sing-along that was eventually released (Rock and Roll Hall of Fame).

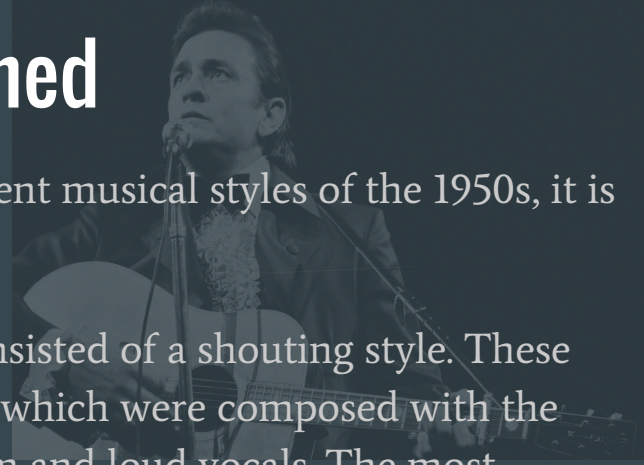


L to R: Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash

Music of the Period - Rockabilly Defined

As Cash was one of the first artists to combine the two prominent musical styles of the 1950s, it is important to take a deeper look at the characteristics of each:

- Rhythm and Blues had blues-style vocals, which often consisted of a shouting style. These songs commonly followed a 12-bar blues macrostructure, which were composed with the intention of being danced to. R&B songs had a fast rhythm and loud vocals. The most prominent instruments heard in these songs were saxophones and pianos.
- Country & Western music was a less prominent musical style during this time, as it had a smaller audience. Some defining characteristics about C&W music is the steel guitar, a nasal-vocal quality, and the potential to yodel at the end of notes. The lyrics of these songs were very simple and uncomplicated, and told tales of love, heartbreak, and sometimes alcoholism.



Music of the Period - Social and Political Influences

The shift toward the new musical style, Rockabilly, was partially due to C&W music's lack of appeal to younger people. C&W music was seen as traditional and slow, and the younger generation was more interested in upbeat, rebellious music. This social shift helped to increase the popularity of Rockabilly and its artists, such as Cash (Burt, A.).

Furthermore, post-World War II America was characterized by confidence. The younger generation was restless and ready for change, even in their music (Phillips, R.).



“Rockabilly Hero”, a collection of Cash’s music from the Rockabilly era.

Musical Style

- While most rockabilly artists were R&B influenced, Cash's music was decidedly Country-style. He further separated himself from the crowd with his bass-baritone voice (Stuessy & Lipscomb, 56).
- Cash utilized a “boom chicka” strumming pattern, which can be heard in “Folsom Prison Blues”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZPToXstS8M>
- Cash often spoke his lyrics, almost as though he were telling a story with musical accompaniment. This can be heard in “A Boy Named Sue”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOHPuY88Ry4>



Johnny Cash

Musical Style - Performances and Messages

- After writing “Folsom Prison Blues,” Cash was routinely invited to play at prisons. Two concerts were recorded as *At Folsom Prison (1968)* and *At San Quentin (1969)* (Silverman, 92).
- Cash nurtured an outlaw image and often sang about somber topics like drug addiction, and murder, as well as faith and redemption (Sun Records).
- In 1964, Cash released *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian* to call attention to Native American issues.

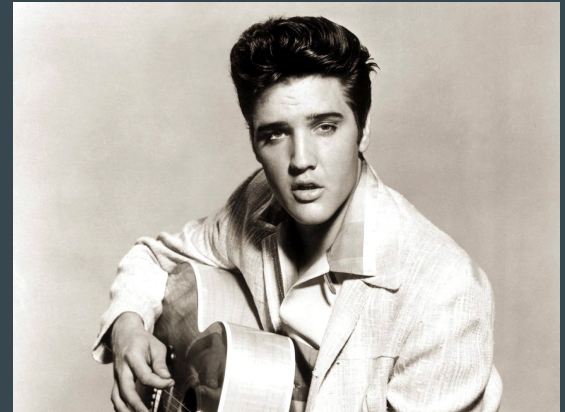


Cash's mugshot after one of his seven arrests.

Cash Compared to Other Artists

Compared to fellow Million Dollar Quartet member Elvis Presley

- Cash and Elvis bonded by talking about their love of black gospel and how it influenced them (Gerlach).
- Cash's voice was much lower than Elvis's, and Cash never shouted.
- Both were portrayed as rebels, but Cash's subject matter was darker and grittier.
- Cash was a much more reserved performer:
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xObSJWlWui0>
 - Mostly stationary
 - Only winks or looks at the crowd to engage them
 - Nothing sexual



Elvis Presley

Cash Compared to Other Artists

Compared to fellow Million Dollar Quartet member Jerry Lee Lewis

- Like Lewis, Cash was devoted to his faith; Cash released six gospel albums over his career and proclaimed his faith on television, which has been considered a poor career move.
- Jerry Lee Lewis, like Elvis, was a shouter, which contrasts with Cash's more quiet, somber tone
- Again, Cash was a relatively reserved performer. He didn't dance while playing his instrument like Jerry Lee Lewis did.



Jerry Lee Lewis

Cash Compared to Other Artists

(Compared to Buddy Holly -- another primarily Country-influenced rockabilly artist)

- Cash's voice was much lower than Holly's.
- Holly sang exclusively about boy-girl love - he never touched Cash's subjects of drug addiction, murder, faith, etc.
- Holly used many Country singing techniques including the yodel and glottal stop; Cash did almost nothing to play with his pitch.



Buddy Holly

Influenced by:

- Johnny Cash began writing music at an early age and was particularly influenced by the music sung around his childhood home: specifically the folk and gospel music sung by his mother (Phillips, R.).
 - Cash recalls, "The last thing I remember before going to sleep was my mother beating time on the old Sears-Roebuck guitar, singing "What Would You Give In Exchange For Your Soul" (Biography.com Editors).
 - "What Would You Give In Exchange For Your Soul" is an old Folk Gospel-inspired song, featuring only acoustic instruments and passionate C&W-type vocals.
 - "What Would You Give In Exchange for Your Soul" by Bill Monroe and Doc Watson (1963) (Rosenberg, N. V.). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkR_DYAIYSQ



Johnny Cash & his mother,
Carrie Cloverree

Influenced by:

Another huge influence on Cash's musical upbringing was the artists frequently featured on the Grand Ole Opry radio show on Friday and Saturday nights, including The Carter Family and Jimmy Rogers.

The Carter Family

- Influential in developing bluegrass and folk music
 - Recorded more than 300 sides, including “Will the Circle be Unbroken?”(1933) and “Wabash Cannonball” (1932).
- Carter family patriarch also sang in the bass-baritone voice for which Cash is known (The Carter Family Bio).



The Carter Family Band

Influenced by:

Jimmy Rogers

- Rogers popularized the use of guitar in C&W music -- prompting the sale of many.
- He worked as a railroad brakeman, and experience multi-racial popularity (Moore, S.)
 - Johnny Cash recorded a song (1966) earlier performed by the Carter Family, “Wabash Cannonball” about a fictional train: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZiQ89_s67Q



Jimmy Rogers AKA The Singing Brakeman

Artists Influenced by Johnny Cash:

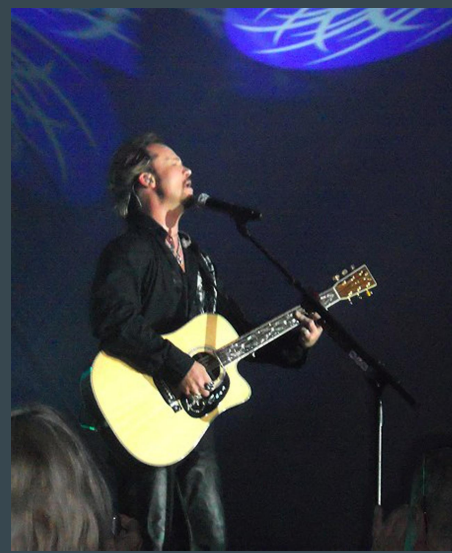
- Cash inspired countless music artists of his time as well as for many generations to follow.
- Keith Urban summed up his feelings on Cash in saying, “I think that any artist would have to say that there is some type of influence from Cash in them, if nothing else just as an astounding example of believing in yourself and following your path.” (Toombs, 2005).
- Keith Urban is a current popular Country & Western artist, recording songs such as “You Look Good in My Shirt” and “You’ll Think of Me.”



Keith Urban

Artists Influenced by Johnny Cash:

- Cash inspired music from many genres but had his largest impact on Country & Western music.
- Travis Tritt is a Country & Western artist who grew up idolizing Cash and stated, “I grew up watching Johnny Cash every week on television. He would come into my living room and say ‘Hello, I’m Johnny Cash.’ That was a huge part of growing up for me.” (Toombs, 2005).
- Tritt later went on to record “It’s a Great Day to Be Alive” and “Where Corn Don’t Grow.”



Travis Tritt



Johnny Cash

Artists Influenced by Johnny Cash:

- Cash influenced ex-son-in-law Marty Stuart throughout Stuart's life. Stuart could relate to him on many levels since they were both from similar parts of the country, they both had been in bands, and they were both close to Cash's daughter, Cindy.
- One of the first albums that Stuart ever bought was "The Fabulous Johnny Cash." Stuart claims that his most recent album releases were both inspired by Cash and his devotion to Gospel music (Toombs, 2005).
- "There's two kinds of people on Earth: those that love Johnny Cash, and those that will." -Marty Stuart



Cash and Stuart

Artists Influenced by Johnny Cash:

- Cash also inspired Folk and Mainstream Rock artists such as Bob Dylan and Bono (Simon & Schuster, 2001).
- Bob Dylan and Cash performed a duet together. Bob Dylan also made an appearance on the *Johnny Cash Show* (Simon & Schuster, 2001).
- Throughout Cash's lifetime he was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, inspiring countless people -- regardless of their profession.



Cash



Dylan and Cash

Musical Analysis of “Daddy Sang Bass”



- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGUP8oc9Bgs>
- Macrostructure: A B A B B' where A=Verse (0:00-0:23, 1:05-1:24), B=Chorus (0:24-1:04, 1:25-2:04), B'=Revised Chorus (2:05-2:38). The revised chorus is noted as such because it is missing the first “Daddy sang bass” line and repeats “In the sky, Lord, in the sky”.
- Microstructure: In the verses, phrases are one bar long each. Verses have a rhyme scheme of aabccb. In this case, “b” represents the combination of the third and fourth bars as the third bar’s phrase runs into the fourth bar, which sustains the end of the phrase. In the chorus, phrases are two bars long. The rhyme scheme is abcb deae. There is a rhyme within the “b” phrase as each bar ends with a rhyming word.

Musical Analysis of “Daddy Sang Bass”

Texture:

- In both verses (A sections), Cash sings over chordal vocals and instrumental accompaniment and thus each verse is a **homophonic melody with accompaniment**.
- In the chorus (B section), “Daddy sang bass” and “Mama sang tenor” are **monophonic**. “Me and little brother will join right in there” is **chordal homophony**. Following that, Cash’s lines return to **homophonic melody with accompaniment**. Every sample of “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” has the vocalists singing together in **chordal homophony**.

Musical Analysis of “Daddy Sang Bass”

- Double subdivision of duple meter
- Rhythm:
 - “Boom chicka (1 and a 2 and a...)” strumming by Cash
 - Frequent use of anacrusis before new phrases
- Melody:
 - Cash along with backup singers have a wide range
 - Flows in conjunctive style
- Pitch and timbre:
 - Neither Cash nor the backup singers use any traditional Country pitch tricks like yodeling, and both use a clear timbre fitting of the song’s gospel influences
- Instruments:
 - Acoustic guitar, drums, string section, horn section, piano, electric guitar, tambourine



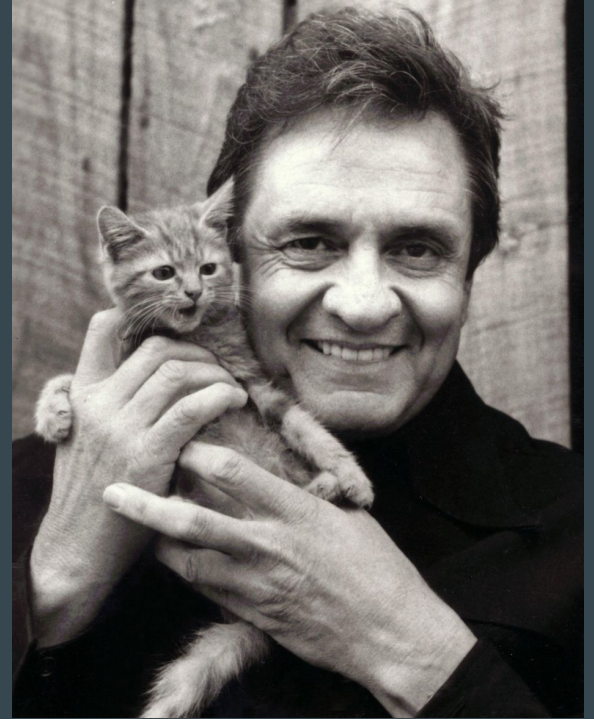
“Daddy Sang Bass” (live) with Johnny Cash on guitar and the Carter Sisters and the Statler Brothers doing backup vocals (Kingsbury, P.).

Conclusion

Cash first became interested in music at a young age, influenced initially by his mother. He went on to sign at Sun Records in 1955, where he was a pioneer in developing the new musical style, Rockabilly.

Cash was raised in poverty and encountered difficulties in his life including drug addiction and multiple arrests. In spite of this - and partly because of it - he was able to have a memorable and influential career.

Due to his successes, he became a great influence on other musicians and performers such as Keith Urban, Marty Stuart, and Bob Dylan.



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