



Insight

Why We Love the Man in Black

When Johnny Cash died in 2003, the world's best musicians weighed in on the Man in Black's contribution to the American musical canon. Bob Dylan said, "Johnny was and is the North Star... He is what the land and the country are all about, the heart and soul of it personified..." Merle Haggard likened Cash to "Abraham or Moses, one of the great men who will ever grace the Earth." Bono said, "Every man could relate to [Cash]... he was a very godly man, but you had the sense that he spent his time here in the desert."

Why was the humble son of a Depression-era sharecropper worthy of such high praise? Cash was blessed, first and foremost, with a deep love of music that was nurtured by singing gospel songs with his mother in the cotton fields of Dyess, Arkansas. Cash also was a hard worker, whose 96 albums and thirteen number one hits span six decades and multiple genres, including Country Western, rockabilly, rock, pop, gospel, Christmas, movie soundtracks and spoken word.

Beyond his talent and longevity, Cash's popularity and influence is rooted in his persona as an American Everyman. He embodied the contradictions of American identity, such as the tension between freedom and patriotism, individual rights and nationalism, and the sacred and the profane, wrote author Leigh Edwards.

Indeed, it's as tough to define Johnny Cash the man as it is to categorize his music. He was a vet, a patriot, an outlaw, a devout Christian, a drug addict, a progressive voice for the disenfranchised, and a friend of religious and political conservatives. He was as comfortable in Folsom and San Quentin as he was at the White House, and was welcomed equally in both the Country Music and Rock and Roll Halls of Fame.

Singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson had Cash in mind when he penned the lyrics to "The Pilgrim: Chapter 33": "He's a poet, he's a picker; he's a prophet, he's a pusher; he's a pilgrim and a preacher, and a problem when he's stoned. He's a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction, taking every wrong direction on his lonely way back home."

Maybe that's why we love him – because, like us, Cash has always been a man alone, trying to find his way back home. We care about him because he invites us to feel his pain, whether it's in his lingering grief over the loss of his brother, his struggle to find happiness at home, or his battle with addiction.

Time magazine writer Richard Corliss wrote that before Cash, rarely "had a singer taken vocal pain – not the adolescent shriek of most rock singers, but the abiding ache of a veteran victim – and made it so audible, so immediate, so dark and deep. Rarely, before or since, has a voice also shown the grit to express, endure and outlive that misery."

The Ring of Fire is supposedly the place we go when we fall in love, but maybe today, it is the deeper abyss that encompasses all human emotions. It may hurt to tumble downward, but you're not alone. The Man in Black is there beside you.

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