

The man in black: Johnny Cash (1932-2003)

by [C. Clifton Black](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

Johnny Cash is considered a pioneer of “outlaw music,” yet even his secular compositions beat with a moral and religious heart. Cash’s childhood was stamped by country music and his mother’s devotion to the Pentecostal Church of God. When J. R. Cash was 12, several months after he accepted Christ, his older brother Jack—a preacher—was killed in a farming accident. Thirty-five years later, Cash’s instantly recognizable stage costume was not the sequin-spangled eye-poppers of his Grand Ole Opry colleagues, but the black frock coat of a 1920s circuit rider or undertaker.

In 1954, after his discharge from the U.S. Air Force, Cash signed with Sam Phillips, the legendary producer of Sun Records in Memphis who also mentored the fledgling career of Elvis Presley. Three years and 40 hit singles later, Cash left Sun for a new contract with Columbia—never, he maintained, for better money but because he wanted to record spiritual songs that Phillips prohibited, claiming he didn’t know how to market them. True to its word, Columbia released as the second LP by their new artist *Hymns by Johnny Cash* (1959), followed by *Hymns from the Heart* (1961). What’s notable about all his religious recordings is their manifest genesis in Cash’s own convictions, not in some agent’s decision that the requisite Christmas album would burnish his image.

The song that consolidated Cash’s “outlaw” reputation is “Folsom Prison Blues” (1956), sung from the point of view of a jailed killer listening to a distant train whistle. The climax comes in the second stanza:

When I was just a baby,
My momma told me, “Son,
“Always be a good boy; don’t ever play with guns.”
But I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die.
When I hear that whistle blowin’,
I hang my head and cry.

The convict weeps not merely because he’s in prison, but because he’s imprisoned to sin: the sheer meanness of gunning down someone in cold blood just for the hell of it. A later stanza nails it down:

But I know’d I had it comin’,
I know I can’t be free.
But those people keep on movin’,
And that’s what tortures me.

Music critic Neil Strauss puts his finger on a crucial difference between the sinners in Cash’s songs and most of the protagonists in today’s gangsta rap. The latter are often vicious, with no center but nihilism. Those locked away in Folsom are guilt-racked, famished for real redemption from real misery.

Cash’s musical persona had some basis in fact. During his 30s he seemed bent on destroying himself with painkillers, amphetamines and barbiturates, which decimated his body and his first marriage. When out of control—which was much too often—Cash wrecked property, nearly killed himself in a borrowed car, and was arrested seven times. A sheriff in Lafayette, Georgia, released him, even offering him back his dope: “You’ve got free will: Kill yourself or save your life.” After a half-hearted suicide attempt, Cash quit drugs cold turkey, upheld by the Christian conviction of a woman who in 1968 would become his second wife: June Carter. They

remained married until a heart attack claimed her life in May of this year.

Three months after kicking his habit, he recorded *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* (1968), regarded by many as his best and by some as the finest live concert by any popular performer on record. By then he had done shows in many prisons, perfecting a repertoire peppered with his own hits (“I Walk the Line,” “Ring of Fire”), rock, ballads, comic novelties and spirituals. Cash knew his listeners:

Prisoners are the greatest audience that an entertainer can perform for. We bring them a ray of sunshine in their dungeon and they’re not ashamed to respond, and show their appreciation. . . . The culture of a thousand years is shattered with the clanging of the cell door behind you. . . . You sit on your cold, steel mattressless bunk and watch a cock roach crawl out from under the filthy commode, and you don’t kill it. You envy the roach as you watch it crawl out under the cell door. . . . Your big accomplishment for the day is a mathematical deduction. You are positive of this, and only this: There are nine vertical and sixteen horizontal bars on your door.

Folsom Prison still sounds fresh. It conveys the electricity of 2,000 inmates, under tight guard, with intermittent announcements over a warden’s loudspeaker and Cash chuckling obscenities to the delight of his listeners and the dismay of his producer. For all its up-tempo numbers, the concert is shot through with deep melancholy that seems to have clicked with a literally captive audience. Cash’s humor is outright gallows (“25 Minutes to Go”—before a noose snaps the narrator’s neck) or brokenhearted goofy (“Flushed from the Bathroom of Your Heart”). The songs are filled with pitch-black mines, deadly walls, orphans, adulterous wives, scoundrels hanged for the one crime they didn’t commit, even ghosts (“The Long Black Veil”).

And yet, there’s redemption. The last number, “Greystone Chapel,” written by Glen Sherley, an inmate in the audience, thanks God for the only place at the prison whose door was never locked:

Now this Greystone Chapel here at Folsom—
It has a touch of God’s hand on every stone.
It’s a flower of light in a field of darkness,
And it’s given me the strength to carry on.
Inside the walls of prison, my body may be,
But my Lord has set my soul free.

The concert ends as it began, with thousands in jail. But in between eternity invades a prison cafeteria.

If *Folsom* is plaintive, *Johnny Cash at San Quentin* (1969) is a hell-raiser that morphs into camp meeting without a shred of camp. The concert was Cash’s fourth at San Quentin. Among his back-up musicians was June Carter. Thirty-one years later she confessed how terrified she was: “San Quentin is a maximum-security prison. Some men are here for armed robbery, rape, pedophilia, arson, murder. And there were a few innocent men. It felt like a dream. ‘O Lord,’ I cried.”

After some opening crowd-pleasers, Cash strums his guitar and addresses his audience in a no-nonsense tone that immediately gives them back some freedom of choice:

I tell you what: . . . [The producers] said, “You gotta do this song, you gotta do that song; you know, you gotta stand like this or act like this.” And I just don’t get it, man. You know, I’m here—I’m here to do what *you* want me to and what *I* want to do.

With that, a thunderous holler went up. From there on, Cash held his audience.

A good thing, too. When his agent asked if more guards were needed to protect the stage, the security chief replied that one hundred, even two hundred guards couldn't control a thousand, spring-loaded prisoners if things spun out of control. They didn't.

Midway through the concert, however, Cash took a chance that must have caused somebody to flinch. He introduced a song he had written for the occasion: an angry, four-stanza damnation of that very concert hall.

San Quentin, may you rot and burn in hell.
May your walls fall, and may I live to tell.
May all the world forget you ever stood,
And may all the world regret you did no good.
San Quentin, I hate every inch of you.

Almost every line of "San Quentin" drew a roar of recognition, and Cash immediately gratified the crowd's yell for an encore. Cash made no excuses for what men had done to land them in hell, but neither did he vindicate the hell others had made for them.

Later, having broken the tension with "A Boy Named Sue" (the premiere of a feisty novelty that eventually sold over a million copies), Cash and crew again reversed field by rendering Thomas A. Dorsey's spiritual "(There'll Be) Peace in the Valley." As it turned out, "Peace" was no pious aberration but the first in a series of four religious numbers, which Cash slyly introduced as "a serious note" in the concert. Of course, he had been dead serious from the start. What he really intended was to inject some evangelical Christian spirituality, now that San Quentin's inmates were ready to hear it. And they were.

The least well known of this set is, musically speaking, no great shucks. But as Cash's own proclamation of the gospel in that volatile context, it is a masterly piece of indirection whose real subject is the nobility of a derelict life changed by Christ:

He turned the water into wine.
He turned the water into wine.
In the little Cana-town,
The word went all around that
He turned the water into wine.

It takes no stretch to get the point: If Jesus could do that with something as ordinary as water, then he can make something out of the vulgar, the lonely, the lost—all the sinners, caught or not.

Probably the most famous inmate to witness Cash's first concert at San Quentin (1958) was Merle Haggard, who later, after receiving a full pardon from Governor Ronald Reagan, became a country-western singer himself. Of Cash, Haggard has said, "He brought Jesus Christ into the picture [at San Quentin], and he introduced him in a way that the tough, hardened, hard-core convict wasn't embarrassed to listen to. He didn't point no fingers; he just knew how to do it."