

# THE MAN IN



Johnny Cash 1974

In the early 1960s, the legendary musician Johnny Cash wrote a poem called “The Cost in Life,” about the tension generated by his compulsive sinning and persistent yearning for a purer life:

*When I consider why that I  
Live and love and work and die,  
And know no more than most are told  
Of new things...books and stories old.*

*And why my Maker lets me live*

*Why He gives the things he gives  
For I don't follow many rules  
I often walk the way of fools.  
I often think, 'Lord, why allow  
Me to live and prosper now?'  
Then I know some time, some way,  
He'll collect what I should pay.*

*Why does he not snuff me out  
For I don't know what life's about  
The debt I owe for sin is high  
Still he lets me live, love, work and die.*

“Still he lets me live, love, work and die.”  
The final line encapsulates Cash's ethos for

# BLACK

# FOUND THE LIGHT

by Patrick S. Durek

the last three-and-a-half decades of his life. When he longed to numb his pain with drugs—at times falling into relapse—he turned his focus to God, returning to sobriety. When his first marriage deteriorated into divorce, he found a soul mate to whom he devoted his undivided love. When failing health and the loss of friends and relatives could have justified retirement, he plunged himself into recording sessions. When he finally approached the end of life, he accepted release, telling his sister Joanne, “I can hardly wait to see Heaven, to see the Lord and to see our family.”

## Scraping the Filthy Bottom...of Life

Johnny Cash, following thirty-five years of “scraping the filthy bottom of the barrel of life” (his words), was reborn and renewed through God’s grace. He was given a third of a century more to fulfill his life’s work, which consisted of spreading the message of Christ through a diverse media of film and television, fiction and audio-books, and, of course, songs and concerts and recordings.

“I clearly remember the first mood-altering drug to enter my body,” Cash wrote in 1997’s *Cash: The Autobiography*. After breaking a rib in a pre-adolescent, impromptu wrestling match, his doctor injected him with morphine, transforming the most excruciating pain into pleasure. “I thought, Boy, this

is really something,” Cash wrote. “This is the greatest thing in the world, to make you feel so good when it was hurting so bad.” He used to tell himself, “God created this; it’s got to be the greatest thing in the world.”

Over a decade later, at age 25, Cash discovered amphetamines (“It turned me on like electricity flowing into a lightbulb...”), then barbiturates (“...to stop the shaking from the amphetamines”). Johnny’s addiction, fueled by handfuls of stimulants and depressants, spiraled into a ferocious tornado that pulled him down, tore him away from his loved ones and from God.

The drugs also clouded his mind, brushed a hazy film over his judgement, leading to recklessness. He did seven one-night stints in jail for misdemeanors, many of them auto-related. On one occasion, Cash drove his camper off the side of a deserted road, flipping over and sliding down the Santa Maria highway, fortunate to break only his jaw.

Another time, Cash and his guitarist, Luther Perkins, nonchalantly crashed through the covered porch of the old Sahara Hotel, in



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Las Vegas. And one drive through Los Padres National Wildlife Forest ended in catastrophe. Neglected maintenance led to a cracked bearing that dripped scalding oil onto the cellophane-dry grass, bursting into flames and engulfing the forest. He was fined the equivalent of one million dollars. On another drive, an intoxicated Cash leapt out of his '54 Plymouth just as it exploded. He had left open the valve on the propane tank in his trunk.

In addition to putting his life at constant risk, he was an absent husband to his first wife, Vivian, and a negligent father. A blossoming performing career meant increased touring but also decreased domestic time. "It was a sad situation between Vivian and me," wrote Cash in *Autobiography*, "I wasn't going to give up the life

this time Cash also added alcohol to his inebriating repertoire. He illustrated the abyss into which he was sinking: "Vivian, my preacher, and some of my friends fought for me, trying to make me save myself, but that just infuriated me, and I started staying away from home even more.... All the time my habit just got worse."

And so did his professionalism. By 1967, an emaciated Cash was frequently canceling recording sessions and concerts, singing in a parched croak when he managed to sing at all. "I was a walking vision of death," Cash wrote. "And that's exactly how I felt." His physical and spiritual destitution had reached its pinnacle. He had lost all desire to live.

### His "Circle of Faith"

Cash drove his Jeep to Nickajack

Cave, thirty miles west of Chattanooga, intent on meeting his fate. In a 1995 interview for *Journal of Country Music*, Cash described the cataclysmic moment: "It just felt like I was at the end of the line...I hadn't eaten in days, I hadn't slept in days, and my mind wasn't workin' too good anyway. I couldn't stand myself anymore. I wanted to get away from me. And if that meant dyin', then OK, I'm ready. I just had to get away from myself." He parked his Jeep at the foot of the cave and crawled as far into the abyss as the batteries in his flashlight allowed. And when they burned out—"I lay down to die in total darkness," Cash wrote in *Autobiography*. "The absolute lack of light was appropriate, for at that moment I was as far from God as I have ever been. My separation from Him, the deepest and most ravaging of the various kinds of loneliness I'd felt over the years, seemed finally complete."

But at that point, perhaps hours or minutes away from Cash's relinquishment of life, God intervened. As proclaimed in Ephesians 2:8 (NKJV), "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."

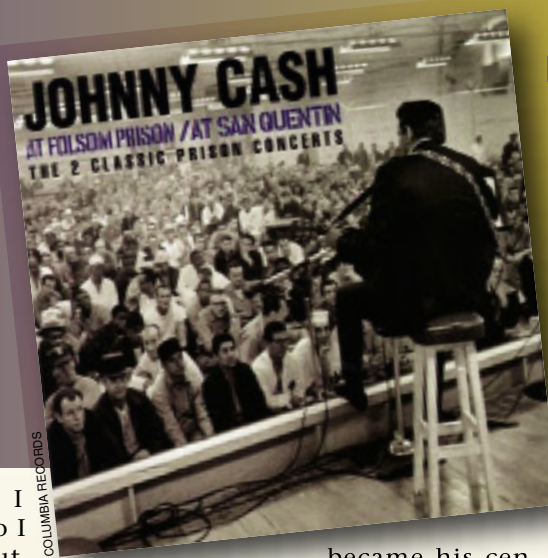
Cash was overwhelmed. "I felt this great comfortin' presence say-

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Inspired by Matthew 25:36, "I was in prison, and you came to visit me," Cash recorded two albums of live concerts for prisoners—*At Folsom Prison* and *At San Quentin*.



in', 'No, you're not dyin'. I got things for you to do.' So I got up, found my way out. Cliffs, ledges, drop-offs. I don't know how I got out, 'cept God got me out."

Johnny Cash began the arduous process of liberating himself from the drugs that had for years been his crutch, his escape from life's pangs. His new love, June Carter, and her parents formed a "circle of faith" around him, shielding him from friends who were drug partners. June was relentless. "She'd take my drugs and throw them away," Cash told *Rolling Stone* in a 2000 interview. "And we'd have a big fight over it. I'd get some more, and she'd do it again. She'd lie to me. She'd hide my money. She'd do anything. She fought me with everything she had."

### Connecting With God

It was at this time that he began to reconnect with God. And with this connection came a catharsis: Vivian filed for divorce. Cash returned to the stage (sober) and recorded *Live at Folsom Prison*, which ignited his career. *The Johnny Cash Show* commenced. He married June. He had a son. And God



Cash returned to the stage (sober)... He married June. He had a son. And God became his central guiding light... After decades of "wrong," Cash, through faith, found fresh energy to do right. He wasted no time.

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Cash's grace also initiated a period of intense spiritual contemplation, focusing on the Bible. Steve Turner, author of *The Man Called Cash*, writes: "[Cash] spoke most often of his spiritual pain. A battle waged within him, he said, between his divinely inspired desire to do right and his natural inclination to do wrong, between serving God and serving himself." After decades of "wrong," Cash, through faith, found fresh energy to do right. He wasted no time.

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He also soon signed a deal with ABC to host a television variety show, *The Johnny Cash Show*. Michael Streissguth, in his book *Johnny Cash*, writes that the pro-

gram, which aired from 1969 to 1971, "spoke loudly and decisively on race, at least as loudly as *Folsom* and *San Quentin* had spoken on class and compassion." In an early episode, Cash embraced African-American R&B singer O.C. Smith. A year later, following a performance by Ray Charles, Cash walked over and sat down beside him on the piano bench. To a recently-desegregated South, it was a profound statement. And when Cash thanked Charles "for bringing country music around the world," it, too, broke racial barriers.

### Why Cash Was "The Man in Black"

Perhaps the most memorable performance on *The Johnny Cash Show* was the premiere of the song "Man in Black," for an episode filmed at Vanderbilt University. To a sea of college students, Cash sang about the reasons for his dark attire: He wore black "for the poor and beaten down," "for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime, but is there because he's a victim of the times," "for the sick and lonely old," and "for the reckless whose bad trip left them cold." He wore black "for those who never read or listened to the words that Jesus said about the road to happiness



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It was also on the [television] show that he professed his faith, shattering yet another steel door of taboo that television clung to like a security blanket. One was simply not *supposed* to refer to faith and oneself in the same sentence.



through love and charity,” and “in mournin’ for the lives that could have been. Each week we lose a hundred fine young men.” The song distills the essence of Cash’s new spirituality, comprising compassion for the poor and the imprisoned, love for the elderly and addicts, a faith-based anti-war ethic, and a devotion to spreading the word of Christ.

It was also on the show that he professed his faith, shattering yet another steel door of taboo that television clung to like a security blanket. One was simply not *supposed* to refer to faith and oneself in the same sentence. ABC urged him not to make the declaration; Cash didn’t care. On the Novem-

ber 19, 1970 show he said the following:

“Well, folks, I’ve introduced lots of hymns and gospel songs on this show. I just want to make it clear that I’m feeling what I’m singing about in this next one. I am a Christian.... The number-one power in this world is God. The number-two power is Satan, and though he manages to fight for second in my life, I want to dedicate this song to the proposition that God is the victor in my life. I’d be nothing without Him. I want to get in a good lick right now for Number One.”

### Sharing the Gospel

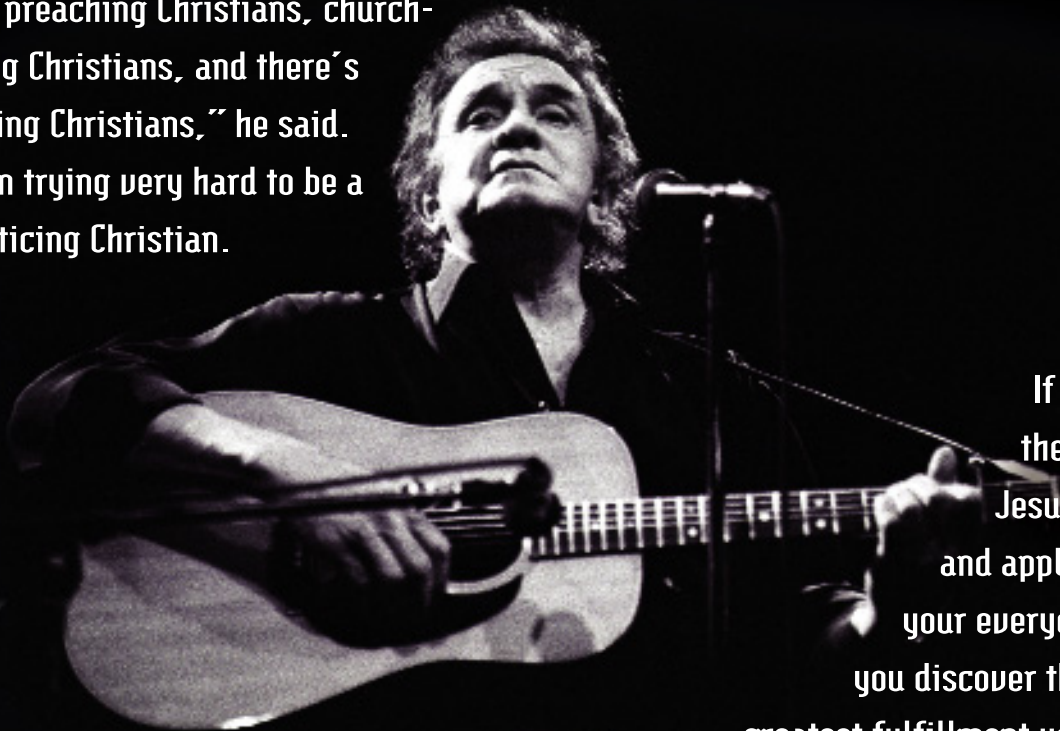
Though his TV show had garnered

respectable ratings, ABC canceled the program a year later. And for Cash, as always, one door shut meant that another could be opened. He got to work on a film about the life of Christ called *Gospel Road: A Story of Jesus*. Filmed in Israel, it was cast primarily with family and friends (including June as Mary Magdalene and his pastor, Jimmy Snow, as Pontius Pilate) and narrated by Cash. *Gospel Road* was released by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (Graham had recently become a staunch friend of Cash), and was—and is—striking in its linking of Christ to contemporary culture. Author Michael Streissguth muses

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“There’s preaching Christians, church-playing Christians, and there’s practicing Christians,” he said.

“And I’m trying very hard to be a practicing Christian.



Johnny Cash 1994

If you take the words of Jesus literally and apply them to your everyday life, you discover that the greatest fulfillment you’ll ever find really does lie in giving.”

ROB VERNHORN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



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on the crucifixion scene: "The image of Christ on the cross is transplanted from Golgotha to the smoggy, faceless cities of 1970s America, suggesting either that we continue to crucify Him or that the promise of His death lives with us even in modern times."

Cash had vociferously studied the Scriptures independently, but he yearned for even deeper study. Cash and June signed up for intensive Bible study at Christian International School of Theology. Two years later, in 1977, not only had he achieved an associate of theology degree, but he was also ordained as a minister. It is testament to Cash's humility that even today few fans realize that he was ordained.

With *The Johnny Cash Show* and *Gospel Road*, Cash had effectively used film to express his Christian compassion. Now, looking for something new, he turned to another medium—writing. In *Autobiography* Cash described the impetus to write a book: "The last of my correspondence [Bible-study] courses was on the life of St. Paul the Apostle, who fascinated me greatly, and eventually the thought occurred to me that I could do with his story what I'd done with that of Jesus in *Gospel Road*: tell it my way for my own benefit and that of anyone else who might be interested." The result: a novel,

*Man in White*, published in 1986. The story of rabid anti-Christian Saul's conversion into Paul the gospel-sowing Apostle evidently resonated with Cash. Just as Saul was redeemed through God's grace and turned from sin to the sacred, Cash too was touched by Christ's love, forsaking a wretched past for a pious present. It is, in short, a novel about instant redemption.

By the mid-1980s, audiobooks had become a multi-billion dollar industry. People with neither the time nor the inclination to read opted to listen to recordings of books. In 1990, Johnny Cash recorded an audiobook of his reading the entire New Testament. Comprising sixteen CDs and nineteen hours, it was yet another new, creative way for Cash to spread the gospel.

Cash's final decade featured a robust prolificacy of music. In 1993, following a relatively quiet 1980s, rock producer Rick Rubin offered Cash an opportunity to sit down, sing and record "anything he wanted" on his *American Recordings*

label. Cash accepted. In less than a decade and until his death in 2003, he churned out five albums of new songs and covers. The songs on these final albums are steeped in reflections on life, suffering, love and faith.

### Three Types of Christians

Johnny Cash's life story is a journey of sin to redemption made possible via God's grace. After years of stubborn resistance, Cash surrendered completely to God's will.

That submission to God, and subsequent grace, would not have been possible had he not also accepted the anguish included with destiny. For much of his life, Cash suffered. He suffered from emotional, psychological and physical pain. In the first half of his life, he numbed the pain with pills, reckless behavior, infidelity and dishonesty. In the second half, he embraced the turbulence and turmoil as well as the blessings and gifts that God sent him. And the knowledge of his special mission gave him strength in times of doubt.

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When he finally approached the end of life, he accepted release, telling his sister Joanne, "I can hardly wait to see Heaven, to see the Lord and to see our family."

"There are times that I want to go off into the woods and cry," he once confessed, "because what I feel is too big a load for me to carry. We're only called to be Christians, and I don't feel any special calling, but I seem to have been given much by God. And much seems to be required of me."

Cash was also that rare breed of Christian who took seriously the words of Jesus, tirelessly striving to live the word, rather than just talk about it. He told Patrick Carr, in a 1979 interview for *Country Music*, about what he saw as a disheartening disconnect between many churches and society:

"Like I say, the churches are full, but the slums and the ghettos are still full, and for the most part, the

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churches and the needy haven't quite gotten together yet.... I mean, to go into a church is great, but to go out and put it all into action, that's where it's all at. And I haven't seen a lot of action."

In a 1973 interview for *Country Music*, Cash talked about the "three types" of Christians.

"There's preaching Christians, church-playing Christians, and there's practicing Christians," he said. "And I'm trying very hard to be a practicing Christian. If you take the words of Jesus literally and apply them to your everyday life, you discover that the greatest fulfillment you'll ever find really does lie in giving."

After receiving God's grace in

Nickajack Cave, Johnny Cash devoted every waking hour of his existence to giving. Despite setbacks and obstacles, he never lost faith in God's love or in the redemptive power of Christ.

The gifts he gave over his last three-and-a-half decades—songs by both himself and others; con-

certs for everyone from presidents to prisoners; recordings of old songs, new songs, gospel songs, and the New Testament; books about himself and about St. Paul; a film about Jesus Christ and a television program that showcased the rainbow of talents of God's children; and the en-

couraging, humble statements of personal faith—all serve as testament that Johnny Cash was indeed a practicing Christian, a man who put faith in action. □

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Johnny Cash 1997