

# Remembering "The Man in Black"

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## *By the way...*

Johnny Cash, after suffering the ravages of age and disease, passed from this world a year ago. Upon his death on September 12, 2003, much was written about this country music legend. But the most memorable description of this American balladeer was penned in 1971 by one of his cohorts, Kris Kristofferson:

*"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 walkin' contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction, takin' ev'ry wrong direction on his lonely way back home."*

He is remembered for an assortment of contradictions. He wasn't a great musical technician, yet he became one of the few seminal influences in the modern music world. He wasn't a model citizen, yet he was close to our nation's leaders in both the secular and sacred realms. His songs were simple, and about simple things, yet many were, as St. Augustine once said about the Gospel According to John, "shallow enough for a child to wade in but deep enough for an elephant to swim in".

He is remembered for his voice, but not because it was a good voice. Low and gravelly, it spoke more than it sang. He didn't succumb to the age of marketing in country music, yet enjoyed a revival of respect late in his career despite the popularity of electronic wizardry and glitzy showman-

ship. As "the man in black," he was frozen in timewhile everyone else went psychedelic.

When he joined the United States Air Force in 1950, he was the one who didn't have a name. His birth certificate merely said, "J. R. Cash." Uncle Sam insisted he needed a first name, so he chose to be called simply

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**Before Johnny became cool, I attended a Cash concert at the old Boston Garden in 1970. None of my friends could understand my appreciation for his music. What I liked was the honesty, the blue collar reality, and the relentless search for the answers to life's questions —**

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"John." When the golden age of American television focused on idyllic families -- the Ozzie Nelsons, the Ward Cleavers, the Ben Cartwrights, John Cash was no model husband or father. Amphetamine dependency and unbridled recklessness brought an end to his first marriage in 1965 and almost ended his career. And while he didn't escape much in his 71 years, he managed to escape categorization.

He was perhaps the first performer/hotel room trasher, and stood tall in a long line of musician drug abusers until June Carter rescued him from his freefall of self-destruction. His marriage to her in 1968 began a redemption that is one of the remarkable stories in American entertainment.

Amazingly, some compared this J.C. to another with the same initials, Jesus Christ, but Cash would never have accepted that comparison. He was the classic sinner searching for a way out of his predicament, firm in his hope that something better could be found.

He was both bound and

free, sinner and saint, and he represented that poignant tension in the human condition as well as anyone. In my mind that tension is the real value in the best of the older country music, up through the early 1970's. Since then, most performers have

adopted what many call the new sound. I don't think it's so much the sound that is different, because "rock-n-roll" or "rock-a-billy" was always embedded in country music. It's the character that has changed.

Everyone knows about the gospel influence in country. Much of the style came from the southern Bible belt where many of the earlier artists had roots in their church choirs (referred to ad nauseum in artists' bios). But it was the gospel content that was significant in the old days. Most of songwriters and performers approached the gospel with some measure of belief, but struggled with the impossibility of living it. They, too, were walking contradictions.

Before Johnny became cool, I



attended a Cash concert

at the old Boston Garden in 1970. None of my friends could understand my appreciation for his music. What I liked was the honesty, the blue collar reality, and the relentless search for the answers to life's questions -- questions that many today don't bother asking.

The honesty in the older country music taught that even when lives crashed and burned, they were not beyond redemption. That's why the bottle, trains, and prison became icons in so many country songs -- symbols for escape from the contradictions that mark the human condition. The metaphor was of a salvation just beyond reach, but the reach was faithfully made again and again.

We are all walking contradictions, and a man in contradiction will be driven one way or the other. It seems right that his humility finally drove Johnny to Jesus, and the man in black is wearing white today.

*Steve Sorensen lives in Russell with his wife and Greta. He has been a puppet, a pauper, a preacher, a poet, a pawn, and he knows a king. He pounds on the keyboard because he thinks that a word is worth a thousand pictures. He's seen it done, but hasn't yet succeeded in writing that word himself. Maybe next time. Greta, by the way, is a miniature dachshund, just to clear up the pictures that word created. You can contact Greta or her master at Greta52@verizon.net.*