

## Johnny Cash – The “Man in Black”



(L) Johnny Cash, 1968; (R) Cash meets with U.S. President Richard Nixon to advocate prison reform, 1972

With his rumbling baritone voice and a spare, percussive guitar, Johnny Cash was an iconic figure whose influence spans the 50s Rockabilly explosion, multimedia stardom in the 60s and a late-life comeback in the 90s. He remained a beloved star in the Country field for decades, despite his refusal to play by the genre's established rules. Meanwhile, the empathy for the underdog and passion for social justice that fueled much of his music aligned him with the Rock counterculture from the 60s onward.

Cash first recorded in the 50s for the Sun label, where he achieved success with such gritty hits including "Folsom Prison Blues" and "I Walk the Line." His star rose higher in the 60s after moving to the larger Columbia Records. At Columbia, Cash put his stamp on a wide variety of material, from introspective ballads to lighthearted novelty songs to serious protest numbers, as well as releasing thematic LPs inspired by American history and the struggles of Native Americans.

Cash became known as the “Man in Black” for his dark and somber suits, reflecting his desire to memorialize those downtrodden people who had not shared in his success but who, in some way, were his brothers and his sisters. His popularity reached a new peak in the late 60s with the release of *At Folsom Prison* (1968), a recording of one of the many concerts he performed for inmates as a part of his advocacy for prison reform. Cash experienced a substantial career revival in the 90s after recording a series of spare, soul-baring albums with celebrated producer Rick Rubin, known for his work with such artists as Jay-Z, Kanye West, Lady Gaga, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Although beset by various health problems, Cash continued to record with Rubin until his death in September 2003, culminating an epic career that spanned six decades of American music.

### Folsom Prison Blues (1955)

*I hear the train a comin', it's rolling round the bend  
And I ain't seen the sunshine since I don't know when,  
I'm stuck in Folsom Prison, and time keeps draggin' on  
But that train keeps a rollin' on down to San Antone.*

*When I was just a baby my mama 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 blowing, I hang my head and cry.*

*I bet there's rich folks eating in a fancy dining car  
They're probably drinkin' coffee and smoking big cigars.  
Well I know I had it coming, I know I can't be free  
But those people keep a movin', and that's what tortures me.*

*Well if they freed me from this prison,  
If that railroad train was mine  
I bet I'd move it on a little farther down the line  
Far from Folsom prison, that's where I want to stay  
And I'd let that lonesome whistle blow my blues away.*