

JOHNNY CASH

The "Man in Black" was never really a rock & roller, but he has remained surprisingly popular with younger rock audiences through the years, thanks to his craggy, enigmatic persona and to the world-weary directness of his best music. Cash was a star of the Sun roster from 1955 to 1958, though his tastes and talents led him away from rockabilly toward a storytelling country-folk style that better suited his resonant voice and adult sensibilities. Backed by guitarist Luther Perkins and bassist Marshall Grant, the **Tennessee Two**, Cash recorded several country classics at Sun, including "**Folsom Prison Blues**," "Cry, Cry, Cry" and "I Walk the Line."

Cash's music had little of rockabilly's manic energy, though his records are sparse and streamlined in classic Sun style and feature slapback echo, slapping bass and other distinctive Sun traits, along with a distinctly southern wild side (consider the singer in "Folsom Prison Blues" who "I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die...") that formed the basis of Cash' desperado image. In contrast to the trebly, excited sound of the Sun rockers, however, Cash's voice was deep and mature, resigned rather than rebellious, while Luther Perkins presented a similarly subdued mix of choked low-string melodies and single-string solos.

Cash and Sam Phillips experimented with more pop-oriented songs and arrangements, such as "Ballad of a Teenage Queen," but Cash's heart remained rooted in country music while Phillips' attention turned more toward Jerry Lee Lewis' rock & roll career. Cash left Sun in 1958 for Columbia Records, along with his friend Carl Perkins, and promptly plummeted into a decade-long drug and alcohol binge. He became a country superstar in the 1960's nonetheless, and built upon his Memphis lessons to popularize a leaner, rawer "outlaw" alternative to the Nashville country establishment. At a time when the country establishment and the rock world seemed like polar opposites, Cash retained a kinship with rock & roll reflected in his vocal duets with friend Bob Dylan, on Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* album, and in his insistence on booking rock artists on a television program he hosted in 1969-70. (Dylan, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Derek & The Dominos, Creedence Clearwater Revival and other progressive voices received rare network exposure on the *Johnny Cash Show*.) A true survivor, forty harrowing years beyond his Sun days, Cash remains a larger-than-life hero able to transcend time, changing styles and the limits of his own talent to forge a distinctly American voice.