

How and Why Did Johnny Cash Become the Man in Black?

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Abstract

Johnny Cash (1932-2003), American country singer, songwriter, actor, author, and humanitarian, famously performed wearing all-black attire. While there are many explanations for his somber dress, Cash himself most often contended that he was doing so symbolically, as a social justice protest against society's unfair treatment of many—especially those imprisoned. Despite his persona as a 'man of the people,' he worked with several designers, including Nudie Cohn (1902-1984), known for flamboyant Western wear, and Manuel Cuevas (1933-), head tailor, designer, and eventual partner of Nudie's Rodeo Tailors. Both Cohn and Cuevas claimed to be the designer who dressed Cash in black. However, others have offered their own opinions for why Johnny Cash wore black. In *Cash*, his 1997 autobiography, Cash himself answers the research question "Why do you wear black?" saying that, as for him, black was a symbol of rebellion against the social injustices of the time and adding, 'I wore black because I liked it.'

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Introduction

Johnny Cash, American country music singer, songwriter, storyteller, guitarist, and social justice activist, entertained audiences his entire adult life (1932-2003). His bass-baritone voice, when singing and speaking, encompassed several music genres and social justice causes. His life and career provide context for his preference for wearing personal and professional black clothes.

When 'All the Colours of Black' was announced as the 2023 ICOM Costume Committee Conference's theme, we thought of Johnny Cash, known in the United States as the 'Man in Black'. While debating our final decision, we learned that Johnny often spoke with pride about his Scottish ancestry, which made our topic particularly fitting for the conference, held in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Scotland, September 24-28, 2023.

Johnny Cash wrote two autobiographies, *Man in Black* (1975) and *Johnny Cash: The Autobiography*, with Patrick Carr (1997). Both books begin with sections on the Cash family's ancestry. In *Man in Black*, Johnny states: 'I am of Scottish descent. William Cash, a Scottish mariner, came to Westmoreland County, Virginia in 1673' (Cash 1975, 28). In his second book, Johnny retells his father's Scottish ancestry and the long journey from Fife County, Scotland, to the state of Arkansas (Cash and Carr 1997, 3-4).

On the Road from J. R. to John R. to Johnny Cash

J. R. Cash was born on February 26, 1932, to Ray and Carrie Cash. The family lived in Kingsland, Cleveland County, Arkansas, where they eked out a meagre living farming cotton during America's Great Depression (Cash and Carr 1997, 5). In March 1935, when Johnny was three years old, the family moved to Dyess Colony, Mississippi County, Arkansas, cleared their 20 acres of virgin land, and continued to farm cotton. Dyess Colony, a federal resettlement community of almost 500 colonist families, was part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal Works Progress Administration (Streissguth 2006, 8-14) (**Fig. 1**).

It was a hard-scrabble, hard-knock existence for parents Ray and Carrie and children Roy, Louise, Jack, J. R., Reba, Joanne, and Tommy. The family was devastated by the death of Jack in a table saw accident, and J. R.'s grief for his older brother lasted a lifetime. Music was a comfort to the family: they sang gospel songs at church and while working in their cotton field. J. R. spent his spare time singing, listening to a battery-operated radio, and memorizing his favorite songs. He had no idea that in the future, his close attention to these radio broadcasts would influence his United States Air Force military training and assignment.

Lois Lenski (1893-1974) wrote a series of regional, juvenile novels about American towns and families. One of them was *Cotton in My Sack*, published in 1949. Based on her two 1947 visits to Blytheville, Arkansas, the book gives context to the cotton culture of Mississippi County, located in the north-east corner (the boot heel) of Arkansas, bounded on the east by the Mississippi

River. The Dyess Colony was located 33 miles south-west of Blytheville, making the book pertinent to the Cash family's cotton farm.

In chapters I and II, readers experience the Hurley family's cotton harvest daily work: pulling long sacks along rows of cotton, picking bolls, and taking the cotton to the gin to be transformed into bales. 'All the time she had been talking, the girl's nimble fingers had been putting cotton in her sack, as she started on the next row. Her bent back moved from plant to plant, and her thin arms moved in a steady rhythm' (Lenski 1949, 6). 'Saturday was the most wonderful day of the week because the whole family went to town. Town was a magic place on Saturday, because all the people had money to spend' (Lenski 1949, 16).

Johnny's song 'Pickin' Time,' on the 1958 album *The Fabulous Johnny Cash*, celebrates the everyday life of these poor rural folks, their hard work, and the benefits of a successful cotton harvest. The six verses emphasise the hardships of cotton farming until fall and the harvest. Then folks can take their cotton to town in their old wagon, buy new shoes, improve their diets, and buy coal-oil. The preacher reminds his congregation that even the Lord will wait until harvest to receive their church offerings. Johnny called this his 'perfect song' (Cash, Stielper, and John Carter Cash 2023, 68, 71).

Within a few weeks of graduating from Dyess High School, J. R. enlisted in the United States Air Force. The military requirement that personnel use a first name and middle initial meant that J. R. had to select a first name. He chose to be known as John R. Cash. During basic training at Lackland AFB, San Antonio, Texas, he showed a high aptitude for radio work. John was then assigned to Keesler AFB, Mississippi, to study Morse code, typing, and electronics. His final state-side training was at Brooks AFB, San Antonio, Texas, for specialised radio intercept training. After completing training, he reported to the 12th Radio Squadron Mobile (RSM) at Landsberg am Lech, West Germany. During this tour of duty, he purchased a tape recorder and his first guitar, composed song lyrics, jammed with his buddies, and formed his first band, The Landsberg Barbarians (Streissguth 2006, 38-49) (**Fig. 2**).

After his USAF tour ended in 1954, John returned to San Antonio, Texas, and married Vivian Liberto (Streissguth 2006, 51). Their marriage lasted from 1954 until 1966 and they had four daughters (Streissguth 2006, 135). His music career took off, but his stressful childhood, bad habits picked up during his Air Force days, constant touring, financial woes, and law suits strained the marriage and fanned his dependence on drugs and alcohol.

Johnny married June Carter (1929 to 2003) in 1968. June, a musician and singer in her own right, was the daughter of Maybelle and Ezra Carter, hillbilly and country music royalty. During their long-lasting marriage, Johnny and June collaborated on music and film projects, traveled the world, gave concerts, and supported their humanitarian causes (**Fig. 3**).

Johnny Cash, his Body of Work, and Honors

The career of Johnny Cash, as he became known to his music fans after his military years, spanned the spectrum of 20th century technology: vinyl records, radio broadcasts, a television show, and guest appearances on TV series ranging from *The Muppets* to *Little House on the Prairie*. He starred in movies, toured the world giving concerts, and produced spoken word recordings, including the Bible. His themes of sin and redemption, faith and salvation, and sorrow and hope crossed music genre boundaries, from gospel to country, rockabilly, folk, pop, and rock and roll.

Over the decades, Johnny has received many honors and awards. A few of the most outstanding include: induction into several Music Halls of Fame, such as Country, Rock n' Roll, Gospel, and Rockabilly; honors from the Academy of Country Music and Country Music Association; songwriter awards; Grammy Awards, including the Living Legend Award; and the 2021 National Medal of Arts, presented in 2002.

Social Justice Activist and Humanitarian

Johnny's childhood, youth, and adulthood clearly influenced his music. Of his many social justice interests, here are only three of them: the plight of American Indians, the Vietnam War, and prison reform. He used his 1964 concept album, *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian* to speak on their behalf. His recording of 'The Ballad of Ira Hayes,' written by Peter LaFarge, told the story of a Pima Indian and World War II veteran. It was deemed so political that some radio stations refused to play it. In an open letter to *Billboard*, addressed to radio stations, Johnny protested, '...where are your guts?' (Tunnell and Hamm 2009, 274).

His early acceptance of the Vietnam War turned to opposition. Mark Stielper wrote that John (and June) 'visited Vietnam, felt the terror of the exploding shells shaking the earth and soul, watched in horror as we lost our best and brightest, and cried for peace' (Cash, Stielper, and John Carter Cash 2023, 3). His songs 'Route 1, Box 144' (1969), 'Man in Black' (1971), 'Singing in Vietnam Talking Blues' (1971), and 'Drive On' (1992) expressed his pain and anti-war protest (Cash, Stielper and John Carter Cash 2023, 171, 176, 182, 194).

His greatest social justice cause was prison reform. Beginning in 1957 at Huntsville State Prison in Texas, he performed around thirty benefit concert shows. The two most famous concerts, at Folsom (1968) and San Quentin Prisons (1969), both in California, resulted in albums recorded live on site (Streissguth 2006, 48, 148-150). His classic 'Folsom Prison Blues' (1955) became an anthem for prison reform. Tunnell and Ham called the Folsom concert '...Johnny Cash's most famous moment in music, [and] a defining event in American penology' (Tunnel and Ham, 277) (**Fig. 4**).

We have introduced J. R., John R., and Johnny Cash, known since 1971 as the Man in Black. Turning now to his famous black wardrobe, we share highlights about the designers who dressed him in his iconic attire.

Early Commercial Garb

Johnny began to wear black because it was the only way his first group, The Tennessee Two, could coordinate on stage. Johnny said, 'We thought we should try to dress alike, but nobody had a nice suit, and the only colored shirts we had alike were black' (Cash 1975, 74). Doug Hudson, the Board of Directors of Marty Stuart's Congress of Country Music in Philadelphia, Mississippi, contacted Marty Stuart on our behalf about a Johnny Cash suit in their museum collection. Marty Stuart was a long-time friend, neighbor, and erstwhile son-in-law of Johnny Cash. According to the story relayed to us, Johnny wore a plain black suit while opening for Elvis Presley in 1955. Elvis wore a pink suit and "got all the ink [publicity]." So, Johnny's mother, Carrie, went to J. C. Penney's, purchased silver trim and a silver treble cleft applique, and sewed the trims on Johnny's black suit. Johnny named this outfit 'Mother's suit' (Hudson 2023). In reminiscing about his early days, the mid-1950s, Johnny mentioned the National Shirt Shop 'where you could get something loud and flashy or something in a good rich black for \$3.98 [he did])...' (Cash and Carr 1997, 73).

Johnny's Hats and Shoes

Johnny wore affordable commercial clothing early in his career, but, as his fame began to rise and his finances improved, he turned to custom hats, footwear, and clothing. Stetson, founded in 1865, provided Johnny with many custom-blocked hats, and he thanked Paris Hatters, an old Texas company, for putting him "in the shade" (Paris Hatters 2023).

Johnny loved custom footwear as well. In his 1997 autobiography, he said, 'I'm thankful for a pair of shoes that feel really good on my feet' (Cash and Carr 1997, 8). Pasquale Di Fabrizio, a legendary Los Angeles shoemaker, and Moreschi, an Italian cobbler of luxury shoes, both shod Johnny. Another Italian name, Lucchese, is associated with some of Cash's most notable footwear. Acme Boot Company, although a commercial concern, provided custom-fitted boots for Johnny, who made several ads for them and was considered an exceptionally successful salesperson (Morris 1985, 55).

Nudie Cohn

The two most prominent clothing designers associated with our Man in Black were Nudie Cohn and Manuel Cuevas. Nudie, known as the "Rhinestone Cowboy," was born Nuta Kotlyarenko in

1902, in Ukraine. At eight years old, he became a tailor's apprentice. At 11, Nudie immigrated to New York City, where he worked first as a shoeshine boy and boxer. Nudie and his wife Barbara later opened 'Nudie's for the Ladies,' a boutique for chorus girls and strippers. In the early 1940s, Nudie moved to Los Angeles, and soon his Nudie's Rodeo Tailors became the premier source for country-music stars' flashiest garb. One of his most famous creations was a gaudy \$10,000 gold-lamé suit tailored for Elvis Presley. Nudie's provided many notable garments for Johnny, and among them are bicentennial outfits, celebrating the 200th anniversary of the United States of America. Johnny Cash, proclaimed Bicentennial Grand Marshall, wore the outfits often throughout the late 1970s. Cash acknowledged the splendor of a "Nudie Suit" in describing fellow country artist Porter Wagoner wearing one—'his approaching in one of his Nudie-type suits is like a fire coming' (Cash and Carr 1997, 279) (**Fig. 5**).

Cohn's spectacular garments live on in exhibitions and as part of museum collections, and Nudie's Honky Tonk bar/concert venue in Nashville, Tennessee, displays many Nudie Suits in its exhibition area. The Academy of Country and Western Music recognised Nudie Cohn's artistry with a special award shortly before his death in 1984. Decades after his death, Nudie's 'look' reappeared in 2016 'on the spring and fall runways at Gucci, Valentino, and Fausto Puglisi, and in collections from fast-fashion retailers like Nasty Gal' (Aducci 2016, 53). Nudie's granddaughter, Jamie Cuevas Nudie, continues to operate his business and keep his memory alive.

Manuel Cuevas

Manuel Cuevas, hired by Nudie in 1948, quickly became his head designer. Since he worked for Nudie when some of Cash's most iconic clothing was created, Manuel probably makes the very best argument for having put Johnny Cash in elegant designer black (**Fig. 6**).

Born in 1933 in Mexico, Manuel began sewing when he was seven years old and, by the age of twelve, was apprenticed to a tailor. Shortly after he immigrated to California, Manuel went to work for Nudie Cohn, cementing their relationship by marrying Nudie's daughter. Known for his kindness and generosity, Marty Stuart tells the following story about Manuel: Stuart had gone to Nudie's to buy a suit. "And I looked at this suit and told him I wanted to buy it, and the suit was \$2,500! So, Manuel [Cuevas] saw what was going on, and he came over and said, 'Kid, someday you'll be able to buy all the suits you want, but today you get a free shirt' (McQuaid 2000, 86). In 1975, Manuel, now nicknamed 'The Rhinestone Rembrandt,' struck out on his own, and many of Cohn's clients followed—notably Johnny Cash. In 1988, Manuel moved his business to Nashville, Tennessee, the beating heart of the country music business, where he became famous enough to have a 'Manuel Day' declared in 2011.

Adding to his acclaim, Mr. Cuevas's State Jacket Collection, a series representing each of the 50 states, has been exhibited widely. The list of Cuevas's awards and honors is long, but among the most notable are the 2018 [National Heritage Fellowship](#) awarded by the [National](#)

[Endowment for the Arts](#) and, in 2012, a Lifetime Achievement Award presented by President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa of Mexico.

Manuel said, ‘Johnny Cash was my friend for many years. I dressed him in black because I knew his personality. He had experienced lessons in life that gave him qualities of the “man in black”’ (Windsor 2018, 73). Over the years, Manuel crafted many outfits for Cash. Early on, responding to Cash’s serious and often dark and brooding presence on stage, Manuel made him nine black suits. He recalled that Johnny said ‘How come they’re all black; what’s this?... I told him, “Black was on sale...”’ (Maraniss 2016). But Johnny loved the look and became the eponymous Man in Black.

(Fig. 7)

We were privileged to be able to examine first-hand an iconic Manuel Cuevas suit, exhibited at the Musical Instrument Museum in Scottsdale, Arizona. Cash wore this beautifully tailored 3-piece wool gabardine outfit many times, most notably when he was awarded the 2001 National Medal of Arts by President George W. Bush. The awards ceremony occurred the following year, in 2002. This suit is richly embellished with black-on-black, oak-leaf-and-acorn machine embroidery on cuffs, pockets, lapels, and down the side seams of the pants.

One of the most dramatic garments Manuel created for Cash was a black leather duster, now exhibited at the Country Music Hall of Fame (**Fig. 8**). The duster, created for Cash in the 1980s, is adorned with silver spangles and *conchas*. Those many sharp-edged spangles prompted Johnny to call this garment his ‘weapon’ (Country Music Hall of Fame 2023).

At 90, Manuel Cuevas has no plans to retire—still designing, drafting, cutting, stitching, embroidering, and fitting. He says, ‘Age is catching up with me, and I’m not as fast as I used to be, but...I’ve never really worked a day in my life because I love what I do...’ (Jordan 2023).

From Johnny Cash to the Man in Black

From his childhood Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and his early performance wardrobe to his death in 2003, Johnny maintained his somber appearance. On February 17, 1971, while taping *The Johnny Cash Show* at Vanderbilt University, a private university founded in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1873, he debuted his new song, ‘Man in Black.’ In eight verses, his unfinished lyrics summarised his social justice and protest manifesto about poverty, prisoners, illiteracy, homelessness, and the Vietnam War. Johnny himself answered our research question: ‘Why black?’ In a letter dated September 30, 1992, he wrote:

To Whom It May Concern:

In 1971 I wrote a song called “Man in Black.” Since then, I have never worn anything but black on the concerts or television. My fans expect this image.

I wear the black for the sick and the lonely old. For the reckless ones who's (sic) bad trip left them cold. And just so we're reminded of the ones who are held back. Up front there ought to be "A Man in Black" ... etc...

(Cash, Stielper, and John Carter Cash 2023, 176-179).

Conclusion

As music fans commemorate the 20th anniversary of Johnny's death, his life and music are being celebrated around the world. From clues in crossword puzzles, metal lunch boxes, and 'Walk the Line'-themed kitchen towels, to small action figures, today's popular culture reflects his life and career. From simultaneous touring tribute concerts, such as 'The Johnny Cash Roadshow' (JCR) in Europe, starring Clive John, to 'Johnny Cash: The Official Concert Experience' in the United States, Johnny Cash remains a strong and inspiring social justice presence in the music world.

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Museum, Scottsdale, Arizona



Fig. 1

Johnny Cash Childhood Home after restoration,
Dyess, Arkansas.

Courtesy of Arkansas State University Heritage Sites.



Fig. 2

John R. Cash wearing USAF coveralls,
San Antonio, Texas, 1953.

Courtesy of John R. Cash Revocable Trust.

Fig. 3

Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash, 1971.

Courtesy of United States of America, US Copyright Office, Public Domain.





Fig. 4

Johnny Cash in front of Folsom State Prison, Represa, California, January 13, 1968.

Courtesy of John R. Cash Revocable Trust.



Fig. 5

Nudie Cohn and Johnny Cash, 1974.

Courtesy of Nudie's Rodeo Tailors.



Fig. 6

Manuel Cuevas at work at Manuel's American Designs, Nashville, Tennessee.

Courtesy of the Manuel Family Collection.

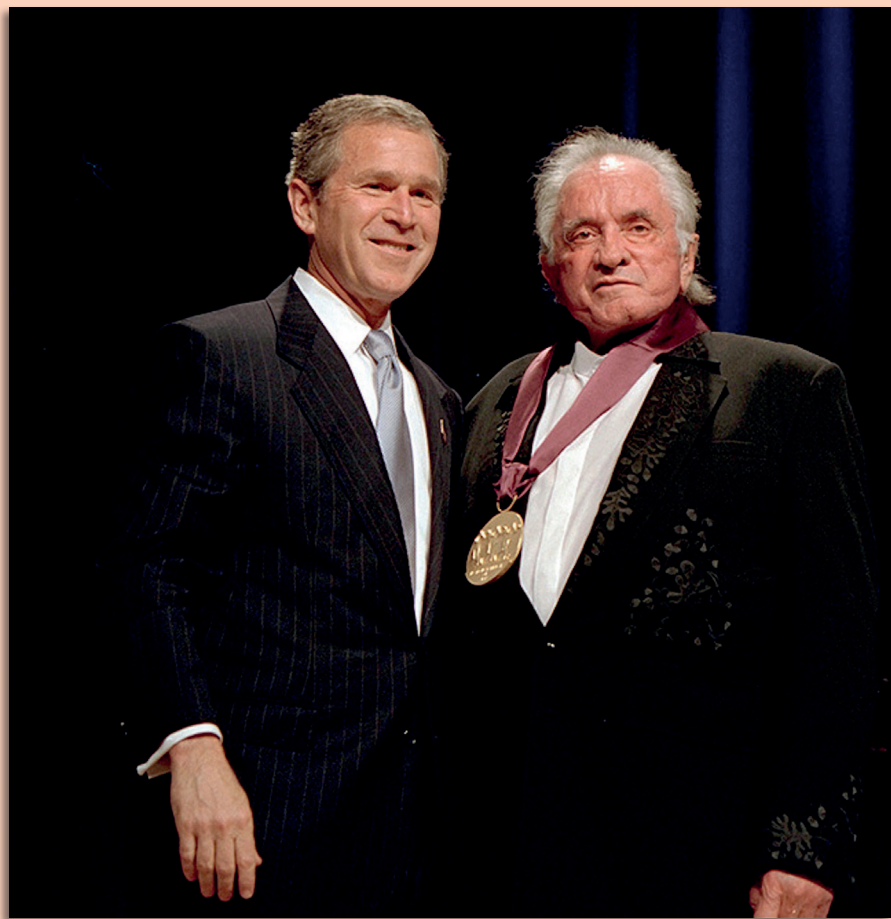


Fig. 7

President George W. Bush awards Johnny Cash the 2001 National Medal of Arts.

Courtesy of United States of America, National Archives, photo no. P16307-20, RG 64.
Public Domain.



Fig. 8

Johnny Cash's Cuevas leather duster.

Courtesy of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.