

It's 50 years since Johnny Cash's *Man In Black* album was released, an LP that helped define the singer as a spokesman for America's disadvantaged and dispossessed. But while Cash backed prison reform and was a passionate advocate of Native Americans' rights, his politics remained difficult to pin down...

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

THE DOVE WITH CLAWS

It's 17 April 1970 and Johnny Cash is standing, guitar slung nonchalantly over his shoulder, on a stage in the White House, a guest of the polarising Republican President Richard Nixon.

The visit has already whipped up a storm of headlines for the fact that the Nixon team have requested Cash sing two songs of their choosing, Merle Haggard's anti-hippie smackdown *Okie From Muskogee* and the controversial Guy Drake number *Welfare Cadillac*, a sneery hit that year which maddened liberals with its tale of a Cadillac-driving welfare scrounger.

Except Johnny Cash doesn't sing those songs, choosing instead to launch into a number titled *What Is Truth*, in front of the staunchly conservative and pro-Vietnam War audience. "A young man of 17 in Sunday school," Cash sings purposefully, "Being taught the golden rule/ And by the time another year has gone around/ It may be his turn to lay his life down/ Can you blame the voice of youth for asking, 'What is truth?'"

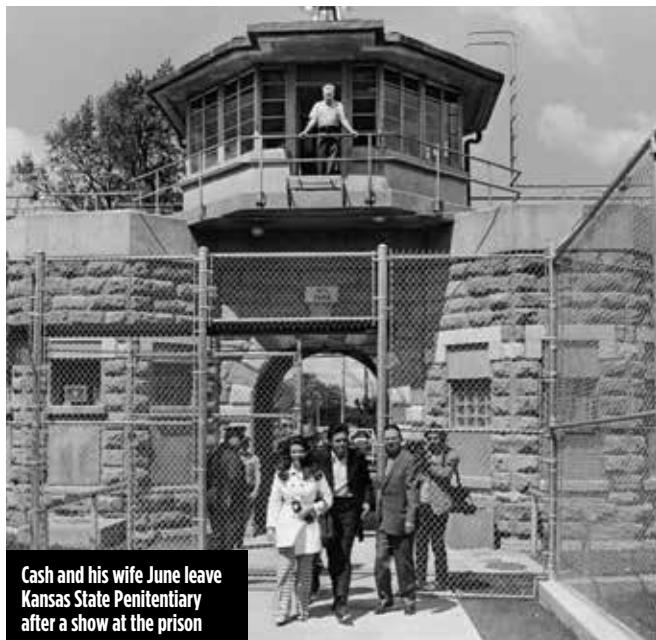
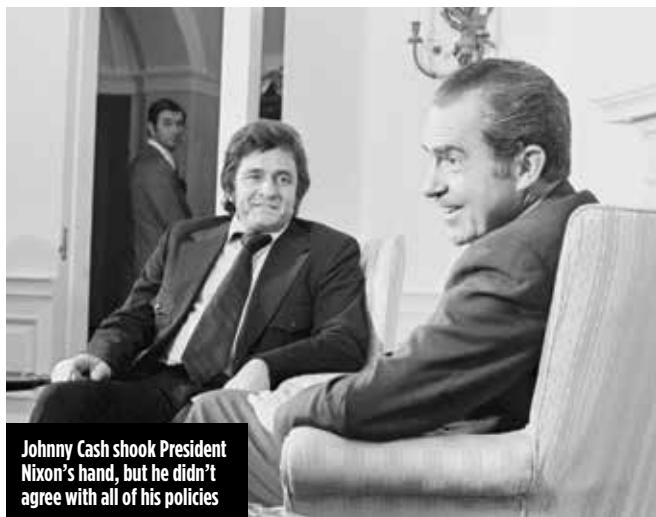
Those who were in the room that day said Nixon looked visibly uncomfortable during that song. It was assumed by all those around the President that Johnny Cash was 'one of us', a war-supporting, God-fearing, flag-saluting Republican. But, if you were looking closely, Cash's politics weren't as crystalline as that. This was a man who, on his ABC TV programme *The Johnny Cash Show*, gave a stage to the counter-culture's most stirring voices, from Bob Dylan and Arlo Guthrie to Joni Mitchell, even telling the one-time communist and civil rights activist Pete Seeger that he was "one of the best Americans and patriots I've ever known."

Yet on that same TV show, Cash delivered a speech declaring his support for the President "in his quest for a just and lasting peace" in Vietnam. At its climax, half the audience stood up and applauded. Others sat on their hands in disgust.

JOHNNY CASH DIDN'T HAVE a precise demographic. He wasn't a Bob Dylan or Phil Ochs, whose fans were largely urban, bookish and politically



For Cash, supporting the troops in Vietnam and supporting the war were two very different things



left-leaning, or Merle Haggard whose crowd in the 60s and 70s were flag-waving MAGA types before the phrase had even been coined. Cash straddled both those groups and everyone in between, it seemed. He may have sung about Native American rights and the injustices of the prison system, but as someone brought up in the Baptist tradition in the good ol' boy state of Arkansas, Middle America saw him as one of their own.

Prior to that April 1970 engagement at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Cash had flown out to South Vietnam to perform for the US troops (as recounted in his 1971 song *Singing In Vietnam Talking Blues*). Later, on that stage in front of President Nixon he recalled: "Somebody said, 'That makes you a hawk, you went to Vietnam'. But to watch the wounded come in and the helicopters, if you're a dove you might come away as a dove with claws."

That phrase 'a dove with claws' came to haunt Cash. He later admitted the metaphor was "stupid", not least because doves already have claws. But in some ways it summed up the contradictions of Johnny Cash. Hawks and doves were the words used to describe either side in the culture war that was ravaging the US in the 1960s. If you were pro-President and pro-War you were a hawk. Anti-War and socially progressive = dove. Yet Johnny Cash did not align himself with either side, just as he claimed never to have voted. He was, in many ways, both hawk and dove.

A former soldier himself (he'd worked as a Morse code operator for the US Air Force in West Germany in the early 50s), Cash understood the responsibility and obligation to serve. But supporting the troops in Vietnam and supporting the war were two very different things. Cash's heart was always with the underdogs, and he saw something of himself in those mostly teenage, mostly working-class lads who found themselves in the jungles of Vietnam in the 60s and 70s, at the orders of a succession of Presidents, both Democrat and Republican.

Similarly, Cash's interest in Native American rights, at a time when even deep-rooted progressives had little to say on the issue, was born of a profound ➤

Cash on stage at Cummins Prison Farm in his home state of Arkansas, April 1969



anger at the multitude of injustices done to a group that numbered, in the 1960s, over half a million. His compassion for the Native American people and their plight (helped, no doubt, by his belief of his own Cherokee ancestry) was so great that he crafted an entire album around their story, 1964's *Bitter Tears: Ballads Of The American Indian*. The album is made up of eight tracks, three written or co-written by Cash, with the others penned by folk singer, rodeo cowboy, actor and one-time navy intelligence

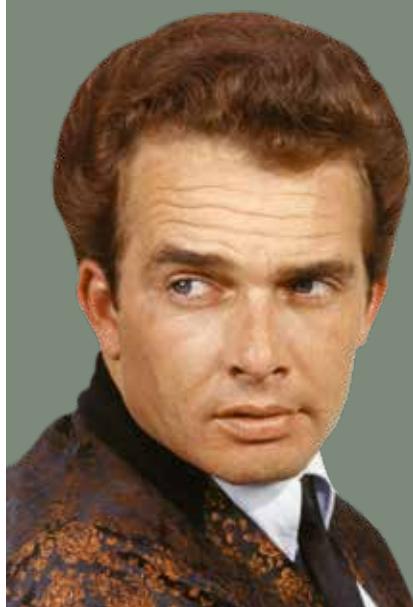
operative Peter La Farge. Stark and moving, it remains one of Cash's most pointedly political albums, yet he faced a backlash from some fans and was enraged when several radio stations refused to playlist its lead single, *The Ballad Of Ira Hayes*. The number, which Cash later performed in the White House, tells the true story of a US Marine of Pima descent who is one of those pictured in the iconic photograph of soldiers raising the American flag at Iwo Jima during World War II (when Hayes returned to

Okie From Muskogee

Merle Haggard's *Okie From Muskogee* is a song that has become synonymous with country music's supposed conservatism since its release in 1969. The singer had been inspired to write it after witnessing the anti-Vietnam War protests of the time, saying: "Here were these [servicemen] going over there and dying for a cause. And here are these young kids, that were free, bitching about it. There's something wrong with that."

It would become a redneck anthem with its anti-counter culture lyrics ("We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee/ We don't take our trips on LSD/ We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street/ We like livin' right, and bein' free"), though some critics have tried to suggest over the years that the song is a satire. Certainly, though its lyrics suggest that Haggard was a Trump voter-in-waiting, he in fact, years later, wrote a song about Trump's rival Hillary Clinton where he sang, "If we don't elect Hillary, then we'll never know/ She is the right lady, and her husband's a pro."

In the years after *Okie From Muskogee*, Haggard admitted to regrets over the song, telling the author RJ Smith in 2000: "I don't feel now the way I did when I wrote *Okie From Muskogee*. I still sing it because it describes a period of time. I write from common knowledge, current knowledge, collective intelligence. At the time I wrote that song, I was just about as intelligent as the American public was. And they was about as dumb as a rock. About Vietnam, about marijuana, and other things. When you get older, you find that things you were absolutely, positively sure about, you didn't know nothin' about."





Testifying on prison reform at the Senate Subcommittee on National Penitentiaries

the US he came back to discrimination and humiliation and died a penniless alcoholic).

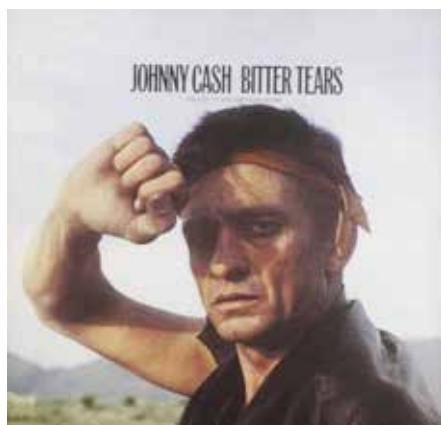
Cash was so passionate about the track, he even bought 1,000 copies to send to radio stations. Some played it, others didn't. In response, he paid for a full-page ad in *Billboard* magazine, calling the guilty radio stations "gutless" for denying it airtime. "As an American who is almost a half-breed Cherokee-Mohawk (and who knows what else?)," he concluded, "I had to fight back when I realised that so many radio stations are afraid of *Ira Hayes*. Just one question: WHY???" (It must be said here that theories of Cash's indigenous heritage were later debunked and that, during the recording of the album, he was at his pill-popping peak. "The higher I got," he admitted to *Penthouse* in 1975, "the more Indian blood I thought I had in me.")

In the end, *The Ballad Of Ira Hayes* would ascend to No.3 on the *Billboard* Hot Country Singles chart, with the LP peaking at No.2 on the Country Album chart. Given its reputation as a genetically conservative genre, it's somehow reassuring that the country community took *Bitter Tears* to its collective bosom back in '64. Songs about interracial couplings, such as the one Cash sang of in *White Girl* ("Now, I'm back among my people and they are kind to me/

Although, I'm sad with staggers, when I drink that tough whiskey/ For I've been a white girl's pet, a captive Indian/ Shown off and discarded, just a drunk who might have been") are uncommon in country music, and it was likely inspired by the hate campaign against Cash organised by the National States Rights Party, a neo-Nazi organisation with links to the Ku Klux Klan, who had been propagating a rumour that Cash's then-wife, the dark-skinned Italian-American Vivian Liberto, was Black. The couple received numerous death threats and Cash's gigs were boycotted by some fans in the South. The situation became so toxic that Johnny's manager was forced to deny that Liberto was Black, while Cash himself threatened to sue the far-right group.

White Girl, then, was a riposte to those Southern bigots that had made his and Vivian's life so insufferable and that the song was so accepted by the country community must have proved heartening to Cash. But

Cash's compassion for the Native American people was so great he crafted an album around their story



it's one song on an album that did much to bolster awareness of Native American issues at a time when few liberals were listening.

While *Bitter Tears*' importance in the Cash canon can't be overstated, it's his duplet of prison albums that loom largest in his discography. Cash had long been an impassioned advocate of prison reform.

In 1968, he even played a clutch of re-election concerts for Arkansas governor Winthrop Rockefeller. The son of financier and philanthropist John D Rockefeller, Winthrop had as burning an interest in remaking the prison system as Cash, decrying the often brutal conditions that prisoners in his state lived in. Rockefeller was the kind of progressive, socially

conscious, tax-and-spend Republican that would be unrecognisable to today's GOP. With Cash's help, the governor triumphed against his Democratic opponent, Marion Crank, that November.

CASH'S TWO PRISON-RECORDED ALBUMS, *At Folsom Prison* and *At San Quentin*, crackle with empathy, humanity and also fury. His song *San Quentin* is sung from the perspective of an inmate and is unflinching in its details of life in the slammer: "San Quentin, I hate every inch of you/ You've cut me and you've scarred me through and through/ And I'll walk out a wiser, weaker man/ Mr Congressman, you can't understand." To Cash, politicians turning a blind eye to the savagery of jail life was morally indefensible.

IN HIS 71 YEARS, JOHNNY CASH never once talked up or talked down either of the dominant political parties. He may have shaken hands with

Nixon and



The Cummins show was part of Winthrop Rockefeller's campaign for prison reform



A defender of the underdog, Cash meets the inmates at Cummins Prison Farm

campaigned for Rockefeller, but in many ways he was a Franklin D Roosevelt-era Democrat in his heart, once remarking that he had grown up "under socialism". Certainly, his hometown of Dyess was an FDR-sponsored New Deal experiment in which the Federal Emergency Relief Administration built homes for families, giving them land and providing livestock. For those that had benefited from the New Deal, big government was something benevolent, not sinister. In these divided times, we look for easy labels – left, right, liberal,

conservative, socialist, capitalist – whereas the reality is, most people waver somewhere in the middle. Johnny Cash was never interested in joining a tribe – he was too much of an outlaw for that – and didn't seem to care what affiliation others had, as long as they were decent and honest. "He didn't care where you stood politically," maintains Cash's daughter Rosanne. "He just took you as a person on face value. He could love all stripes, and that's why all stripes claim him."

Cash was known to be a supporter of the second amendment, and indeed owned





several firearms, yet he also wrote the cautionary *Don't Take Your Guns To Town* and later in his life was on the advisory board of the anti-gun violence organisation PAX, a position later taken up by Rosanne.

This ambiguity has led to some groups appropriating Cash's image that have fundamentally misunderstood what he was about. When an alt-right marcher was photographed in a Johnny Cash T-shirt during the Unite The Right rally



MICHAEL Ochs Archives / GETTY IMAGES MATTHEW PEYTON / GETTY IMAGES

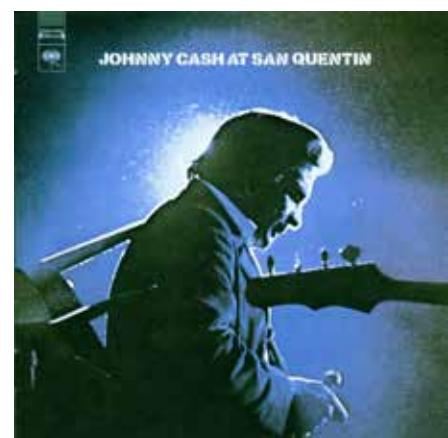
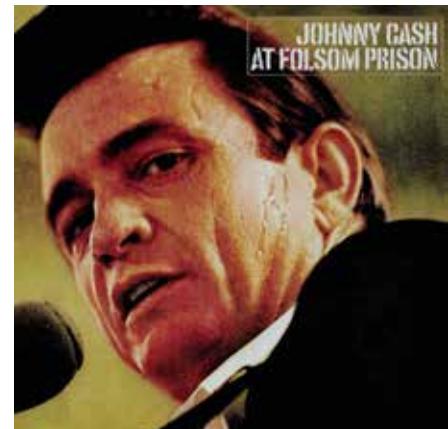


Inside the Dixie Chicks controversy

Sometimes it seems to be a liberal in the country music world is a bit like being a vegan at a barbecue. The genre is awash with performers whose beliefs are far from the liberal metropolitan ideas espoused by most rock and pop stars (Loretta Lynn, Craig Campbell, Trace Adkins and Justin Moore are just four country names unwavering in their support for Donald J Trump), so it takes a brave country artist – or artists – indeed to lambast the Republican Party. In 2003, The Dixie Chicks found out quite how destructive speaking out could be.

Just days before the United States invaded Iraq, the country trio announced to a London audience they did not support the war and were “ashamed” of President George W Bush hailing from Texas. The remarks triggered a fierce backlash in the US, with the band members receiving death threats and finding themselves blacklisted from thousands of country music stations. In an interview later that year, Martie Maguire told the German magazine *Der Spiegel*: “We don’t feel a part of the country scene any longer, it can’t be our home anymore.” Talking about being booed at that year’s ACM (Academy of Country Music) Awards, she said: “Instead, we won three Grammys against much stronger competition. So we now consider ourselves part of the big rock’n’roll family.”

In Charlottesville in 2017, Rosanne wrote that the image “sickened the family”. Her father, she said, was a man whose “heart beat with the rhythm of love and social justice”. Similarly, at the Republican national convention in 2004, the GOP sponsored a celebration of Cash. Rosanne was appalled, claiming that her father was no fan of then-President George W Bush’s ‘War On Terror’. Four years later, she was forced yet again to clarify her father’s political beliefs when the country singer John Rich, while at a



To Cash, politicians turning a blind eye to the savagery of jail life was morally indefensible

Republican rally, asserted, “I’m sure Johnny Cash would have been a John McCain supporter if he was still around.”

It is, however, through the music of Johnny Cash that we’re allowed the greatest insight into his worldview. In 1971, he released the *Man In Black* LP, and its title track seemed to sum up his lifelong empathy and solicitude for society’s have-nots.

“I wear the black for the poor and beaten down,” he sang on what many fans and critics consider to be his greatest song, “Living in the hopeless, hungry side of town/ I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime/ But is there because he’s a victim of the time.”

He may never have put a cross on a ballot sheet, but Johnny Cash changed the world in so many other ways. And if his political allegiances appear antithetical or perplexing to us, that only makes him a more compelling and fascinating figure. In politics, as in life, he walked the line. *