

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #227

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today is part two of our three-part mini-series on troubled but [iconic¹](#) American musicians of the 1950s and 60s.

[00:00:32] In part one we talked about the amazing and unlikely life of Ray Charles, and learned how he went on to achieve great influence and success, [despite all the odds²](#).

¹ very famous, symbolic

² despite having to deal with a lot of difficulty

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:00:44] In part three, we'll talk about Elvis Presley, the King of Rock & Roll, and how he went from relative [obscurity](#)³ to being an object of [desire](#)⁴ for tens of millions of teenage Americans.

[00:00:57] And in today's episode, part two, we'll talk about The Man in Black, Johnny Cash.

[00:01:04] He went from picking [cotton](#)⁵ during the Great Depression to being one of the most successful country musicians in history, with his deep and instantly [recognisable](#)⁶ voice and traditional "all in black" [outfit](#)⁷.

[00:01:18] But his story is, again, tragic and unlikely, and on our journey we'll meet the FBI, hard drugs, childhood tragedy, love, divorce, forest fires and prison.

[00:01:32] We have a lot to get through, so let's not waste a minute.

[00:01:37] Johnny Cash was born on February 26th of 1932, a year and a half after Ray Charles and three years before Elvis.

³ the state of being unknown

⁴ a strong feeling of wanting someone

⁵ a soft white substance that grows on a tall plant and is used for clothing

⁶ easy to recognise, to know who he was

⁷ set of clothes

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:01:47] He was actually not born “Johnny Cash” - he was born J.R. Cash. His mother wanted to call him John, his father wanted to call him Ray, so they [settled](#)⁸ on calling him “J.R”.

[00:02:02] Like Ray Charles, J.R Cash grew up in the deep south of America during the Great Depression.

[00:02:10] As a young boy he would work in the [cotton](#) fields with his parents, and they would sing songs while they worked. Life was not easy for the young J.R, and his family was constantly struggling to put enough food on the table.

[00:02:27] And like Ray Charles, who was growing up at the same time three states to the east, the young J.R experienced deep tragedy at a young age.

[00:02:39] When he was 12 years old, he saw his older brother, Jack, have a terrible accident.

[00:02:46] Jack would cut wood for his family using a [table saw](#)⁹. One day, as he was cutting wood he was [pulled into](#)¹⁰ this saw, and it almost cut him in half. The poor boy survived for a week afterwards, but then died of his [wounds](#)¹¹.

⁸ decided to

⁹ a woodworking tool powered by an electric motor

¹⁰ pulled or drawn towards it

¹¹ injuries

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:03:05] And the young Johnny Cash, J.R, was right there when it happened.

[00:03:11] As one would expect, this experience left a [profound¹² mark¹³](#) on the young Johnny. Before he had been a [happy-go-lucky¹⁴](#) kind of kid, always [fooling around¹⁵](#) and making jokes.

[00:03:26] Afterwards the jokes and laughs stopped, and he preferred to spend time on his own reading or drawing.

[00:03:34] He [turned further to¹⁶](#) music, and started writing his own music when he was 12. He had been brought up in a Christian environment. He went to church, and it was gospel music that was what he was most familiar with.

[00:03:50] As was required of men of his age, Cash joined the armed forces in 1950, shortly after his 18th birthday.

[00:03:59] A little bit of [trivia¹⁷](#) about this time, a funny story about this time, was that he actually travelled to West Germany and was an incredibly talented [interpreter¹⁸](#) of

¹² very great

¹³ lasting effect

¹⁴ always happy, having no worries

¹⁵ behaving in a silly and funny way

¹⁶ directed his attention more towards

¹⁷ small details or not so important information

¹⁸ someone whose job is to translate a type of language into or from another type of communication, like Morse Code

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[Morse Code](#)¹⁹, and reportedly was the first person to interpret a [coded](#)²⁰ message that the Soviets sent on March 5th, 1953, which announced the death of Josef Stalin.

[00:04:25] But Johnny Cash had bigger dreams than working as a military [interpreter](#).

[00:04:31] After four years working in the army he was allowed to leave, and he returned to [civilian](#)²¹ life.

[00:04:37] Success and [fame](#)²² weren't to come immediately though.

[00:04:42] First, he worked as a [door-to-door salesman](#)²³ to [make ends meet](#)²⁴, but hated it - he felt like he was [tricking](#)²⁵ people into buying things they don't need, and said "I used to worry about people [puttin' themselves into debt](#)²⁶. I'd say, 'You don't want any of this, do you?' They'd say, 'Hold on there, what are you selling?'"

[00:05:05] By this time he had got married. He had met a 17-year-old Italian-American girl called Vivian Liberto at a roller disco in 1951, they dated for three weeks before Cash

¹⁹ a system of dots and dashes, short and long sounds, or flashes of light, used to represent letters or numbers

²⁰ being in a secret form by using a system of words, letters or signs

²¹ normal life of a citizen, not related with the army

²² the state of being known

²³ a person whose job is to sell products going from one house to another

²⁴ have enough money to cover the basic needs

²⁵ deceiving, fooling

²⁶ owing money

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

was sent to Germany for three years, and one month after he returned the pair were married.

[00:05:24] Cash tried to get his big musical [break](#)²⁷, but didn't have much luck. He sang gospel music, but gospel [was on the out](#)²⁸; it wasn't what the public wanted to hear. One producer even reportedly told him "go home and [sin](#)²⁹, then come back with a song I can sell".

[00:05:47] Well, [sinning](#)³⁰ wasn't to prove to be a problem for Johnny Cash.

[00:05:52] He [adjusted](#)³¹ his tone, and [swapped](#)³² a more traditional gospel style for a deep, rocking style of country music, often about dark subjects, including murder, drugs, and all sorts of crime.

[00:06:07] The song that really [catapulted](#)³³ him to [fame](#) was Folsom Prison Blues, which he wrote in 1953 and released in 1955.

²⁷ an opportunity or chance that would lead to success

²⁸ becoming less popular

²⁹ break a religious law

³⁰ breaking religious laws

³¹ changed it to make more suitable

³² exchanged, gave it up for something else

³³ put or sent him in a sudden and quick way

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:06:18] It got to Number 1 in the Country Music charts, number 5 in the nationwide charts.

[00:06:24] Famously, he even performed it and recorded a version of this live at the prison, in front of the [inmates](#)³⁴ in 1958.

[00:06:35] Cash was fast becoming a national star, and followed up this hit with Walk The Line a year later, and Big River the year after that, in 1959.

[00:06:48] By this time he was on a [semi-permanent](#)³⁵ national tour, playing up to 200 concerts every year.

[00:06:58] He had [cultivated](#)³⁶ a particular image as well.

[00:07:02] Firstly, he always wore black. Black shoes, black trousers, a black jacket, and normally a black shirt.

[00:07:11] There are several theories about why he did this, and he even wrote a song called “Man in Black” in which he suggests the reasons he always wore black.

[00:07:21] One is [in solidarity with](#)³⁷ the poor, [oppressed](#)³⁸ and disadvantaged.

³⁴ people who were kept in prison

³⁵ happening almost all the time

³⁶ developed

³⁷ to support them

³⁸ treated in a bad way

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:07:26] Another theory has it that black was just a lot easier to clean than any other colour, and when you are travelling around the country playing two hundred shows a year, well, having black clothes probably does make a lot of sense.

[00:07:42] Or there's another theory that he wore it [out of solidarity](#)³⁹ for the American soldiers who had died in the Korean war.

[00:07:51] Or it might well have been because of black's association with [sin](#) and bad behaviour, and [sin](#) was something that Johnny Cash was becoming increasingly familiar with.

[00:08:04] By the time he was on tour, he was deeply addicted to prescription drugs - both amphetamines to speed things up and barbiturates to slow things down.

[00:08:15] He would take up to 100 pills a day, all [washed down](#)⁴⁰ with [crate-loads](#)⁴¹ of beer.

[00:08:22] To say that Johnny Cash was out of control is probably an [understatement](#)⁴².

³⁹ to show his support

⁴⁰ made easier to swallow with the help of a liquid

⁴¹ large amounts

⁴² something that describes less than the truth

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:08:28] There are stories of him from this time of his band members finding him passed out⁴³ on the floor with no pulse⁴⁴, with his heart stopped. And instead of taking him to hospital they simply picked him up, threw cold water over him and hit him about the head until he woke up, until he came to⁴⁵, and dragged⁴⁶ him to the next concert.

[00:08:52] Indeed, it was a badly-kept secret⁴⁷ that Johnny Cash was a complete liability⁴⁸, he was a trainwreck⁴⁹ of a man.

[00:09:02] He was an incredibly popular artist at this time though, and tickets to his concerts would always sell out. But promoters wouldn't know whether he would be sober⁵⁰ enough to actually perform.

[00:09:15] Much like Ray Charles, who remember was a heroin addict for much of his career, Johnny Cash managed to remain very productive from a songwriting point of

⁴³ not awake and aware of his environment, unconscious

⁴⁴ the regular beating of the heart

⁴⁵ awoke, came to his senses

⁴⁶ pulled

⁴⁷ secret that was known to many people

⁴⁸ someone that causes problems

⁴⁹ a chaotic or very problematic situation

⁵⁰ not drunk

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

view, and wrote some of his most successful music while completely [strung out on](#)⁵¹, while completely addicted to hard drugs.

[00:09:36] While he might have been able to continue to [draw](#)⁵² the crowds and write music, it [turns out](#)⁵³ that maintaining a hard drug addiction and leading a normal life isn't a great combination.

[00:09:49] Cash's behaviour was [taking a toll on](#)⁵⁴ his marriage. He was away from his wife and young family for the majority of the year, and when he returned home he would bring his drugs and drink with him.

[00:10:03] That was only one half of the problem though.

[00:10:06] While on tour, Cash had come across another band called The Carter Family, an American folk band.

[00:10:15] Of particular interest to Johnny Cash was one member of the band, June Carter.

⁵¹ addicted to hard drugs

⁵² attract

⁵³ happens, seems

⁵⁴ having a bad effect on

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:10:23] Cash became [infatuated](#)⁵⁵ with June Carter, he was completely in love with her, and they started a passionate love affair, despite both of them being married with children.

[00:10:36] Cash [made no secret of](#)⁵⁶ the affair. The pair toured together, they released singles together, they were [inseparable](#)⁵⁷.

[00:10:45] It might have been cute to see their romance [blossom](#)⁵⁸, but it certainly wasn't cute for Johnny Cash's wife. She filed for divorce in 1966, after 12 [traumatic](#)⁵⁹ years of dealing with a [drug-addled](#)⁶⁰ husband who was off on tour for most of the year and having a public affair with another woman.

[00:11:07] He had numerous [close shaves](#)⁶¹ with the authorities as well, all of them due to his [reckless](#)⁶² drinking and drug taking.

⁵⁵ having very strong feelings of attraction for, completely in love

⁵⁶ didn't hide

⁵⁷ spending most of their time together

⁵⁸ grow, bloom

⁵⁹ causing serious emotional damage and pain

⁶⁰ confused or lost due to the use of drugs

⁶¹ narrow escapes from danger

⁶² dangerous and risky

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:11:16] In June of 1965 he took his nephew on a camping trip in a national park in California, and [ended up](#)⁶³ causing a forest fire that burned down two square kilometres of forest and [drove away](#)⁶⁴ 53 [endangered](#)⁶⁵ birds.

[00:11:35] When he was brought into court in front of a judge, he said that his camper van had [malfunctioned](#)⁶⁶ and caused [sparks](#)⁶⁷ to set fire to the grass. But the judge didn't believe him, and thought it was much more likely that Cash had taken a load of pills and drunk a load of beer, started a fire to try to stay warm, then the fire had [blown out](#)⁶⁸ of control.

[00:12:01] And Cash, in his drunk and [drugged-up](#)⁶⁹ state, hadn't been able to stop it.

⁶³ eventually came to that situation

⁶⁴ caused them to leave

⁶⁵ at risk of extinction, in danger of not existing

⁶⁶ failed to work or operate correctly

⁶⁷ very small pieces of fire

⁶⁸ moved out, been carried out

⁶⁹ under the influence of drugs

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:12:07] It didn't help Cash's case that he turned up to court completely [off his face](#)⁷⁰, completely [comatose](#)⁷¹ on drugs, and told the judge "I don't care about your [damn](#)⁷² yellow [buzzards](#)⁷³."

[00:12:19] [Buzzards](#) are a type of bird, by the way.

[00:12:23] The judge made him pay \$82,000, which would be around three-quarters of a million dollars in today's money.

[00:12:32] This wasn't the first or the last time he would get in trouble with the law.

[00:12:38] Probably his most famous [encounter](#)⁷⁴ with the law was to come later that year.

[00:12:44] He was in Dallas, Texas, and was scheduled to fly out to Los Angeles.

[00:12:50] Instead he jumped on a plane to El Paso, Texas, knowing that it was just a 45-minute drive over the border to Mexico, where the kind of drugs Cash was after were readily available.

⁷⁰ under the influence of drugs

⁷¹ in a state of coma, senseless

⁷² (used to express anger)

⁷³ mean and unpleasant persons (literally a type of bird)

⁷⁴ meeting or experience

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:13:05] After arriving in El Paso he [jumped into](#)⁷⁵ a taxi, and gave the driver a mission. Pills, and lots of them.

[00:13:14] Before long the driver had returned with over a thousand pills, a mixture of amphetamines and tranquilizers.

[00:13:23] Cash proceeded to [stash](#)⁷⁶ them in his guitar case, and instructed the driver to head back north across the border.

[00:13:31] But he was a drug addict well-known to the police.

[00:13:36] Before he could do anything he was stopped by a narcotics [squad](#)⁷⁷, who thought he was trying to [smuggle](#)⁷⁸ heroin across the border.

[00:13:45] When they searched him they didn't find heroin, but they did find 688 Dexedrine pills and another 475 Equanils hidden in his guitar case.

[00:13:58] He was arrested, but was never sent to prison as the drugs he had were prescription pills instead of illegal narcotics.

⁷⁵ got into in a quick way

⁷⁶ store, hide

⁷⁷ small police group

⁷⁸ move illegally

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:14:08] If you thought this [close-shave](#)⁷⁹ with the law would be enough to persuade him to [mend his ways](#)⁸⁰, you would be mistaken.

[00:14:17] He went [straight back](#)⁸¹ to the drink and drugs, and it wasn't until two years later, after a [near-fatal](#)⁸² car accident in 1967, that he first managed to [get clean](#)⁸³, that he first managed to [get off](#)⁸⁴ the drugs.

[00:14:32] Another motivation for [getting clean](#)⁸⁵ was June Carter, who he proposed to on stage in February 1968, and they were married a week later.

[00:14:44] Although his [heyday](#)⁸⁶, and the period which he produced his most famous work came from the mid 1950s to the late 1960s, Johnny Cash continued to write and perform for the next four decades, writing over a thousand different songs.

⁷⁹ narrow escape from danger

⁸⁰ change his behaviour

⁸¹ right away back, immediately back

⁸² that almost cost him his life

⁸³ stay away from drugs

⁸⁴ stay away from

⁸⁵ staying away from drugs

⁸⁶ period of greatest success

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:15:03] The last song he released is one you may be familiar with - it's a cover of the Nine Inch Nails song, "Hurt". Cash performed his own version in 2002, just months before the love of his life, June Carter was to die, and while Cash himself was dying.

[00:15:24] Cash completely [reinterpreted](#)⁸⁷ the song - the original version is about a young man [spiralling out of control](#)⁸⁸, but Cash's version is about an old man [reflecting on](#)⁸⁹ his life. When you know that Cash was that man himself, the song becomes particularly [poignant](#)⁹⁰.

[00:15:45] Johnny Cash finally died after complications from diabetes on September 12th, 2003, at the age of 71. The years of [hard-living](#)⁹¹ had [taken their toll](#)⁹² on him. Parts of his stomach had had to be removed, and he was in a very bad way.

[00:16:05] Really, given all of the times that he was close to death, it is a miracle that he managed to live as long as he did.

⁸⁷ changed, saw in a new way

⁸⁸ being in an uncontrollable or chaotic situation

⁸⁹ remembering or thinking about

⁹⁰ causing feelings of sadness

⁹¹ having dangerous habits

⁹² had a bad effect

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:16:13] In terms of the legacy that he left behind, there are few people who have done so much to bring country music to the [masses](#)⁹³ as Johnny Cash.

[00:16:23] He certainly had his [fair share](#)⁹⁴ of [demons](#)⁹⁵, and his personal life was [chaotic](#)⁹⁶, often illegal, and at many times very dark indeed.

[00:16:34] But he was a [champion](#)⁹⁷ of the [underdog](#)⁹⁸, a [champion](#) of anyone [cast out](#)⁹⁹ and [neglected](#)¹⁰⁰ by society.

[00:16:41] He was a man who was certainly [deserving](#)¹⁰¹ of the nickname “The Man in Black”.

[00:16:49] OK then, that is it for today's episode on The Wild Life Of Johnny Cash.

⁹³ a great number of people

⁹⁴ more than enough

⁹⁵ personal problems or issues

⁹⁶ in a state of confusion or disorder

⁹⁷ defender or supporter

⁹⁸ people with no power

⁹⁹ excluded, thrown out

¹⁰⁰ not receiving proper attention

¹⁰¹ worthy

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

[00:16:55] Whether you are a [die-hard](#)¹⁰² Johnny Cash fan or you didn't know that much about the man before this, well I hope it's been an interesting one.

[00:17:04] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:17:08] For the Johnny Cash fans out there, what are your favourite of his songs?

[00:17:12] If you ask me, it has to be Folsom Prison Blues or Big River.

[00:17:16] But tell me, what are yours?

[00:17:19] The place for that is our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com.

[00:17:25] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:17:30] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

¹⁰² very devoted or loyal, hardcore

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Iconic	very famous, symbolic
Despite all the odds	despite having to deal with a lot of difficulty
Obscurity	the state of being unknown
Desire	a strong feeling of wanting someone
Cotton	a soft white substance that grows on a tall plant and is used for clothing
Recognisable	easy to recognise, to know who he was
Outfit	set of clothes
Settled	decided to
Table saw	a woodworking tool powered by an electric motor
Pulled into	pulled or drawn towards it
Wounds	injuries
Profound	very great

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

Mark	lasting effect
Happy-go-lucky	always happy, having no worries
Fooling around	behaving in a silly and funny way
Turned further to	directed his attention more towards
Trivia	small details or not so important information
Interpreter	someone whose job is to translate a type of language into or from another type of communication, like Morse Code
Morse code	a system of dots and dashes, short and long sounds, or flashes of light, used to represent letters or numbers
Coded	being in a secret form by using a system of words, letters or signs
Civilian	normal life of a citizen, not related with the army
Fame	the state of being known
Door-to-door salesman	a person whose job is to sell products going from one house to another
Make ends meet	have enough money to cover the basic needs
Tricking	deceiving, fooling

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

Puttin' themselves	owing money
into debt	
Break	an opportunity or chance that would lead to success
Was on the out	becoming less popular
Sin	break a religious law
Sinning	breaking religious laws
Adjusted	changed it to make more suitable
Swapped	exchanged, gave it up for something else
Catapulted	put or sent him in a sudden and quick way
Inmates	people who were kept in prison
Semi-permanent	happening almost all the time
Cultivated	developed
In solidarity with	to support them
Oppressed	treated in a bad way
Out of solidarity	to show his support
Washed down	made easier to swallow with the help of a liquid

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

Crate-loads	large amounts
Understatement	something that describes less than the truth
Passed out	not awake and aware of his environment, unconscious
Pulse	the regular beating of the heart
Came to	awoke, came to his senses
Dragged	pulled
Badly-kept secret	secret that was known to many people
Liability	someone that causes problems
Trainwreck	a chaotic or very problematic situation
Sober	not drunk
Strung out on	addicted to hard drugs
Draw	attract
Turns out	happens, seems
Taking a toll on	having a bad effect on
Infatuated	having very strong feelings of attraction for, completely in love

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

Made no secret of	didn't hide
Inseparable	spending most of their time together
Blossom	grow, bloom
Traumatic	causing serious emotional damage and pain
Drug-addled	confused or lost due to the use of drugs
Close shaves	narrow escapes from danger
Reckless	dangerous and risky
Ended up	eventually came to that situation
Drove away	caused them to leave
Endangered	at risk of extinction, in danger of not existing
Malfunctioned	failed to work or operate correctly
Sparks	very small pieces of fire
Blown out	moved out, been carried out
Drugged-up	under the influence of drugs
Off his face	under the influence of drugs

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

Comatose	in a state of coma, senseless
Damn	(used to express anger)
Buzzards	mean and unpleasant persons (literally a type of bird)
Encounter	meeting or experience
Jumped into	got into in a quick way
Stash	store, hide
Squad	small police group
Smuggle	move illegally
Close-shave	narrow escape from danger
Mend his ways	change his behaviour
Straight back	right away back, immediately back
Near-fatal	that almost cost him his life
Get clean	stay away from drugs
Get off	stay away from
Getting clean	staying away from drugs

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

Heyday	period of greatest success
Reinterpreted	changed, saw in a new way
Spiralling out of control	being in an uncontrollable or chaotic situation
Reflecting on	remembering or thinking about
Poignant	causing feelings of sadness
Hard-living	having dangerous habits
Taken their toll	had a bad effect
Masses	a great number of people
Fair share	more than enough
Demons	personal problems or issues
Chaotic	in a state of confusion or disorder
Champion	defender or supporter
Underdog	people with no power
Cast out	excluded, thrown out
Neglected	not receiving proper attention

The Wild Life of Johnny Cash

Deserving worthy

Die-hard very devoted or loyal, hardcore

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com