In 1970, Johnny Cash scored a hit with a protest song called “What Is Truth,” but the question in the title could easily be the theme running through all of the legendary singer-songwriter’s music. In a monumental career that spanned six decades, Cash used his lyrics as a moral compass to explore life’s complexities.

“I want to write a song that has something to say—a song that will have a meaning not only for me, but for everybody who hears it,” he said.

Cash was born in Kingsland, Arkansas, on February 26, 1932. One of seven children in a farming family, he absorbed gospel music in church, country music from the radio, and old-time folk music in porch sing-alongs. When he was twelve, his beloved older brother Jack died in an accident—a tragedy that haunted Cash’s life and turned him to writing poetry, stories, and song lyrics. After high school, he spent four years in the air force, a time when he began a serious pursuit of music, learning the guitar, writing songs, and forming an off-hours country band.

Out of the air force, Cash moved to Memphis, where he made a living as an appliance salesman while attracting the attention of Sun Records, the label that launched Elvis Presley’s career. At first, Cash wanted to record gospel, but Sun producer Sam Phillips turned the young singer toward “rockabilly” —a country-rock hybrid—and Cash began to make waves on country charts with his self-penned songs.

As Cash developed his career in the 1960s, he drew on gospel, country, and folk traditions to write his music, and he was especially influenced by a new wave of folk music that addressed social issues. Cash soon set himself apart from other country artists with his lyrics that focused on the plight of Native Americans and the nation’s prison population.

Often he relied on the melodies of old folk songs, “rewriting the lyrics or taking the basic idea and creating a new song,” Cash expert Don Cusic writes. “This is part of the folk tradition of songwriting... Every song written is influenced by songs the songwriter has heard before.”

Deeply religious, Cash wrote about both saints and sinners as he struggled to overcome his own personal demons. Likewise, he praised America’s virtues while pointing out its flaws. In liner notes of his album Unchained, he cites a lengthy list of his “obsessions,” including family, hard times, horses, railroads, war, patriotism, humor, prison, salvation, death, pride, heartbreak, and God.

After a career decline in the 1980s, Cash sealed his stature as an American music original with a series of raw recordings, including some reworkings of his earlier songs. Recording almost up to his final days, Cash died on September 12, 2003, in Nashville, Tennessee, of complications from diabetes. His name is enshrined in both the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and he also received the National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal.

“In the end, as in the beginning,” author Graeme Thomson writes, “Johnny Cash proved a master at articulating not just his own dark, sweet, complicated heart, but something profound about us all.”

**Sources:** Encyclopedia of Country Music; Johnny Cash: The Songs, edited by Don Cusic; The Resurrection of Johnny Cash by Graeme Thomson; Rolling Stone