

# Making Sense of Johnny Cash in Dyess, Arkansas: Remarks Given at the Johnny Cash Heritage Festival, 2017

by Michael Streissguth

First, many thanks are in order: To Rosanne Cash who has been an unflagging supporter of my work on her father and her family and a good friend, very worthy of the artistic tradition in the Cash family, and, of course, a grandchild of Dyess. Thanks to Ruth Hawkins, Director of Arkansas Heritage Sites at Arkansas State University and newly-installed member of the Arkansas Women's Hall of Fame who invited me here and who has spearheaded with her team the restoration of the Cash home in Dyess, as well as the town center buildings. When I first came to Dyess almost exactly thirteen years ago, to work on my biography of Johnny Cash, the Cash house looked like it would collapse in the gentlest summer breeze, and the center of town had seen better days, too. It's marvelous to see these buildings restored and teaching us not only about Johnny Cash but about life in this town that represents one of our nation's ambitious and transformative responses to the Great Depression.

I also must thank sons of Dyess A.J. Henson and his brother the late Everett Henson who brought me to Dyess in 2004. We drove over here in my clunky Dodge Spirit and although they had long since left Dyess, A.J. and Everett knew everybody who was still here. I felt at home in their care. What a privilege to spend an afternoon crisscrossing Dyess with Everett and A.J., two Dyess originals.

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One of the most interesting aspects of writ-

ing about Johnny Cash was sitting in the National Archives near Washington D.C. and reading official memos, personal letters, and anecdotes related to life in Dyess: about labor disputes, about officials having to throw a "holy-roller" out of the community because she created too many disturbances, about how farmers were chosen, about how some missed their hometowns and left the colony, about how people of color were not welcome to live here as colonists. But authors can't merely sit in archives. They have to visit a subject's hometown to find the core of the person he or she would become, the grain of sand, the early stages in a metamorphosis that results in greatness.

Part of my journey back in time to Dyess of the 1930s and 1940s meant talking to people who lived here those many years ago. They give us some sense of the fundamental Johnny Cash, known as J.R. during his childhood, before he was known the world over as "The Man In Black."

The story of the Man in Black—that adult superstar and chronicler of the American experience—is cast in darkness but it is also streaked with light—I'd already learned that from the interviews I did with those who knew him as a man. However—through the children of Dyess—I saw the dawn of the darkness and of the light as well as early shades of the natural born artist. Dyess helped make sense of Johnny Cash.

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To help you make more sense of Cash, I want to introduce in this talk four former residents of Dyess who knew J.R. Cash as a child: Roy Cash Jr.; Milton Stansbury, Joyce Woolsey Criswell, and A.J. Henson, whom you've already met.

A little background: the Cashes arrived from Cleveland County, Arkansas, at house number 266 in Dyess on Road 3 in the cold and rainy March of 1935 after winning the approval of state representatives who were administering Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) dollars. And I must emphasize that the families had to show they were experienced farmers: driven, capable, mentally sound. So those who came—the chosen people—were talented and poised to succeed. Interestingly, Ray Cash and his wife Carrie—J.R.'s parents—were not on the original list of Cleveland County farmers slated for relocation to Dyess. Perhaps they finally showed up on the list because the original “chosen ones” got cold feet—which happened a lot—or because of the intervention of J.R.'s uncle Dave Cash, a very powerful man in Cleveland County. In any case, they arrived to find a brand-new home sitting on 20 acres of cleared and drained land that, however, needed more clearing if it were to be farmed. That job fell to the families, and in the Cash family, that meant father Ray and his eldest son Roy, who was older brother to Louise, Jack, J.R., Reba, and, later, Tommy and Joanne.

And I should say for the benefit of all that Roy Cash Sr. is the forgotten Cash sibling. We hear mostly about Jack, the brother whom J.R. adored and who perished in a woodshop accident in 1944. He's the brother who Johnny talked about most and who popular culture has considered the most. Fair enough. But Roy, until Johnny soared to stardom, was the artist of the family: he published poetry; starred in high school plays; and he joined a country band called the Delta Rhythm Ramblers until he lost part of his middle finger and a thumb in an accident. And he never played the guitar again.

I'm not saying he would have been the Johnny Cash of the family—he wasn't the world's greatest singer—but I'm saying he may have formed the cast that J.R. filled. And you can tell of all the older siblings, he took the most interest in J.R.'s career. In the 1950s, in Memphis, he introduced Johnny to Marshall Grant and Luther Perkins, who would become Cash's Tennessee Two; he opened his house to Luther, Marshall and Johnny to practice; and, of anybody, appeared to beam the brightest when introduced as Johnny Cash's brother.

Because the older Cash siblings were deceased by the time I started writing, Roy Cash Jr.'s picture of his dad helped me get a good idea of what it was like for J.R. to grow up in the Cash household in the 1930s and 40s.

We know that J.R. had it rough under his father Ray, the disciplinarian, the insensitive one. And thanks to Roy Cash Jr. we have frank telling of how rough it could be because his father had told him. Roy Jr.: *“They had to clear that land, they sure did. And they did it with mules and hard labor and blood and sweat and tears. The only thing I recall my dad specifically talking about was just the hard work around the farm. My father was very, very closed mouthed, wouldn't talk about much of anything, so I just don't remember much of anything other than the hard work, and when he would get a whipping from his father, my grandfather, it would be a tough one. A leather strap off of the reins of a mule or something.”*

There's an implication that Roy Sr. was emotionally bruised in some way by his father. Was J.R., too? I got a hint from Roy Jr.: *“I think J.R. was withdrawn but not morose, but certainly not outgoing and extroverted. Melancholy. And very serious. Unless and until he was around very, very close family members. He could loosen up and really become quite jovial. Which a lot of people wouldn't consider him to ever be, I don't think. But, generally, I certainly would describe him as melancholy and very serious and introverted. It's just kind of the way he always was.”*

*“And I’m certain, that it was in John’s mind to get out of there as soon as he could. That’s what he did. He was worked very hard when he was home. He was worked from sunup to sundown and maybe even later there on the farm.”*

Roy Jr. paints a grave picture, but in his recollections there’s also a teenager who’s playful and mischievous—the light. Two J.R.’s emerging. *“He was the one who taught [his brother] Tom and me to swim,”* said Roy Jr., *“and he did that by throwing us in the river. I guess we were like nine or ten years old, and he was seventeen or eighteen. We were down at a bend in the Tyronza River where the water is very calm and he caught us down there one day and he took us, grabbed us one under each arm and threw us in the deep part of the river and basically said, ‘Okay guys, I want to see you swim.’ And we managed to swim out. I’m not sure what he would have done had we started drowning. We probably tried to jump him and beat him up, but he was too big for the two of us. He just laughed it off and went on his way.”*

Dyess helps us make sense of Johnny Cash.

A sidebar: People in Dyess knew Johnny Cash as J.R., but his given name was “John.” When he was born in 1932, his mother Carrie wanted to name him “John” for her father but Ray chose “Ray,” after himself. Although “John” won out, he became “J.R.” The name “John” appeared rarely after that: in the 1940 census and on his 1950 air force application. Incidentally, on that 1940 census form, Ray is listed as a laborer, even though by 1940, Ray was well on his way to paying off his government mortgage and would soon acquire even more land around the original plot. Why did he classify himself as a laborer? The answer could give us insights into the state of the economy in Dyess and the relationship between the colonists’ farming and the wage work that was available there.

Another sidebar: That Tyronza where Roy Jr. and Tommy Cash learned to swim inspired Cash to write, what I think, is one of his very best, “Five Feet High and Rising” of 1959,

which documents when his favorite river crested its banks in 1937, unleashing walls of water across Dyess. In the measured cadence of “Five Feet High and Rising,” our narrator keeps one eye on the rising waters and then recounts the plans to flee for higher ground, by bus, by boat. In songs like that and “Pickin’ Time,” and “Country Boy” he brings to life the rural experience which is beholden to the whims and rhythms of nature, this in the late 1950s as America was fasting urbanizing and leaving behind that way of life. Thanks to Cash, we have a first-person account of those times, a historical record in the folk music tradition, encased in an easy-flowing, steady-rolling country-rock sound. He was always at his best, in my opinion, when he drew directly from those Dyess-based experiences which gave him an authority that attracted listeners like Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger who merely sang about rural dramas but had never come close to living them. The recordings of “Five Feet and Rising” and “Pickin’ Time” clock in at less than two minutes. It’s hard to name any other work of art by a citizen of the Great Depression that distills so incisively the rural experience in America in the 1930s and ’40s. I can only think of a few photographs that compare: Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*, for example. By my lights, “Five Feet High and Rising” and “Pickin’ Time” take their place next to Depression-inspired works by John Steinbeck, Pere Lorentz, Merle Haggard, Studs Terkel, and, indeed, Dorothea Lange.

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I met Johnny Cash once and only once, backstage at a show in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, when I was in college. I slipped behind the curtains before the concert started, clutching my program, hoping for a handshake and an autograph. I turned a corner and there he was: standing tall. The scene I witnessed amazed me, so much so that I’ve forgotten what I said when it came my turn to meet him—or what he said back to me. There he was clutching the hand

of an old man who I assumed was retired from the steel mills or coal mines outside town. This was western Pennsylvania. And he said, "These are working man hands, chopping wood hands." And he held this man's hand palm up in his own, tracing the calluses and lines of this man's hand. And this old man regained a long, lost composure, and I remember thinking at the moment. "This is real." These songs about farmers, truck drivers, lumberjacks, leathernecks, train engineers, factory workers—about working people—spring from something. At the time, I didn't know much about his background. But, clearly, authentic interest in working people, cultivated in Dyess, had deeply informed his work. I've never forgotten that and, as much as anything else, is the reason I began writing about Johnny Cash.

So it caught my attention when another Dyess colonist named Milton Stansbury talked to me about Jesse Barnhill, a destitute boy with a withered hand and foot, probably as a result of polio, who lived on the outskirts of Dyess. Milton lived four farms away from the Cashes on the same road and was a good childhood friend, though most will say J.R. was best friends with Harvey Clanton, an inveterate prankster (and one of J.R.'s second selves) who looked like Spanky from *The Little Rascals*.

Back to Milton Stansbury and Jesse Barnhill. Now, anybody who's read *Cash: The Autobiography* from 1997 knows about Barnhill. Cash said he visited him often in his rundown shack and picked up the young friend's style of guitar playing. This is what Milton told me about Jesse: "*They were squatters living on a ditch bank on the northwest side of Dyess. That's the way they raised their family. They'd fish and hunt and did odd jobs for a living. I don't know where Jesse's parents were, but I think his grandparents raised him. He walked with a limp and I forget which arm it was, but he didn't have very good use of it. Jesse didn't run with anyone, really. No one would really take him under their wing, you know? So, he just kind of stayed by himself.*"

Other former colonists who knew Jesse told me that he made a guitar sound with his nose and that he bragged about sending his songs to Ernest Tubb. But J.R. alone seemed to know him best, spelling out very clearly in his book that he stole away to Barnhill's distant shack and watched him play guitar. Barnhill was an outsider living on the outskirts of this colony full of selected upwardly-mobile people. And Cash had taken an interest in him, in this person who was like many of the cast-off characters whom Johnny Cash would often sing about in adulthood. The prisoners and American Indians and poor people were the Jesse Barnhills of the world. And then I wondered if in Jesse Barnhill, like in Harvey Clanton, there was another second self. A look at the Dyess High School yearbook shows Barnhill dressed in black and brooding, amidst a sea of starched shirts and well-scrubbed faces, including J.R.'s.

About the time he visited Jesse, J.R.'s poetry came into focus in Dyess. Friends, like Milton, recalled it vividly, though not always charitably: "*We didn't pay much attention to it, but he used to like to write poems, and things of this nature and I remember out in the ag building, I had a class there with him, he would write poems and he would sing them sometimes. But us kids, as shallow as we were, we didn't say, 'Oh, man, you're going to make music.' You know, we wasn't thinking in that line. Looking back, you could see he had talent. It was there and it started coming out when he got up in high school. He would just quote his poetry sometimes. Of course, a lot of us thought he was kind of nuts anyway, you know. Of course, we knew that he wasn't nuts, it's just that none of us did that stuff. But, he was different, in a good sort of way. And, he was sort of reserved and he wasn't really outgoing but at times he was. If he saw something he liked or that he didn't like he would voice his opinion, real quick. But, mostly, he didn't really fit into the crowd as a whole, usually.*"

Dyess helps us make sense of Johnny Cash. Let me say one more thing about Milton

Stansbury. Like Roy Cash Jr., he knew that Ray Cash was a tough man and that he had a drinking problem. But Milton also told me about some of Ray's redeeming qualities. First of all, Milton stole watermelons from Ray's truck patch and pronounced them the best in the colony. But he also saw changes in him after Jack Cash's death, for example Ray visited Milton's Sunday School class at the Baptist Church in Dyess: "He used to love to drink and fight," said Milton. "He didn't do either after Jack died. He told us boys in class how it hurt him. And how when Jack died it crushed him. But I remember Mr. Cash telling us in a Sunday School class, 'This is why I'm here. Jack had to die to bring me to this point.'"

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Toward the end of Cash's life, many of you know that he recorded with the producer Rick Rubin, a much younger man known for his work with heavy metal and hip-hop artists. In the early 1990s, Cash's records weren't selling, and he was playing to half-filled theaters in Branson, Missouri. But all of a sudden, Cash had come back because Rubin had wisdom enough to tap into the darkness in Cash's image and pair him with sensitive musicians and songs from modern rockers like Soundgarden, U2, and Trent Reznor. But I have to admit that I would sometimes scratch my head at the song selection: A Simon and Garfunkel song? A Neil Diamond song? And then he did the old standard "That Lucky Old Sun" written by Haven Gillespie and Beasley Smith in 1949. Haven Gillespie had written the lyrics to "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." "That Lucky Old Sun" was on Cash's *Solitary Man* album of 2000, the second to the last released before he died, and, his voice sadly weathered, he struggled to deliver the lyrics. And I wondered. "Why?" And then I talked to Joyce Criswell who grew up in Dyess and went to high school with J.R.

Joyce had seen J.R. sing in the school auditorium in 1950. "Right before he graduated," she told me. "He sang 'That Lucky Old Sun'

and I thought that was the prettiest. He sang it so good." So Joyce made it make sense for me. Cash had come full circle: 1950 to 2000, fifty years.

"He was kind of aggravating sometimes," continued Joyce. "He and his friend Harvey Clanton. I remember them running around there, picking at people, pulling your hair and something like that. . . . He was nice looking and everything but I don't remember him going with anybody really there. I'm sure he must have, but it wasn't very much if he did. He didn't have a vehicle I don't imagine, you know, to go that far." (Little did she know how far he would go.)

Dyess helps us make sense of Johnny Cash.

A little more about Joyce. Now, you hear me saying J.R., but when you talk to the Dyess people who knew him in Dyess, they slur the "J" and the "R" together, which sounds like "jar," as in a jar of jam. I used to grin to myself when I heard it but I never commented, thinking it might be rude or insensitive, but one day Joyce just said it, "We just called him 'jar' for short."

She also said something that struck me as very sweet. I asked her if she saw much of Johnny after he started making records in Memphis. "No, I never did get to go see him," she answered. "But I always felt like I knew Elvis because he and Elvis were sort of together when they first started out. I didn't really know Elvis but I felt like I did because I knew J.R."

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Like Joyce, many of the Dyess residents whom I met aren't big talkers. They're not given to bragging or saying more than what's necessary. Responses to my questions were often brief and to the point, rarely embellished, the answers of practical people who had thrived and survived in Dyess by being practical. Some of their brief replies could have left me concluding that J.R. was just a regular guy. But I figured there had to be more, more even than what I've told you so far.

I found it in A.J. Henson who was just as reticent as many of his friends from Dyess. No doubt, A.J. helped me see how idyllic life could be in Dyess, in contrast to the hardship that J.R. knew elsewhere in his childhood. He told me about the simple joys of chewing on pink cotton bolls before they blossomed and pouring peanuts in a Coke at the midnight movies in Dyess Center—the peanuts floated and you’d catch a few as you sipped from your cup. Hitchhiking to Lepanto and shooting pool. Skipping school to go again to Lepanto to try to meet girls, but they were too shy to get acquainted with any. Snoozing in fluffy piles of cotton in the cotton gin in Dyess, skinny-dipping in the Tyronza, shooting turtles. A.J. also noticed J.R. got more serious after Jack died, no doubt another explanation for the plaintiveness Roy Cash Jr. witnessed as a child.

As I was driving out of Dyess with A.J. and Everett back in 2004, A.J. was in the front seat and I was interviewing both of them. Not easy interviewing and driving, but I asked A.J., what was J.R. like in comparison to the other kids in his group. *“He was just different.”* But how different? In what way? I asked. *“He was just different, that’s all.”* And I breathed in as we cruised down Route 55 toward West Memphis. *“Can you give me an example?”* I pressed. And he paused, and he stared down at his hands. Then he replied: *“He was sensitive. He thought a little deeper than the rest of us.”* Another pause. *“He went way down deep inside and brought up his feelings.”* At that moment, I knew I had found in Dyess what I’d come looking for.

Thank you. ▲▼▲

# Graft

by Robbie Borrello

Can’t you  
cover me like  
kudzu: all tendrilled legs

coiling mine,  
a Mississippi hill more  
spindly green

than mud. Love,  
hide me

like a pine. I don’t want  
to move. If you’ll  
come on

creep over, little vine,  
graft my veins  
into roots.

