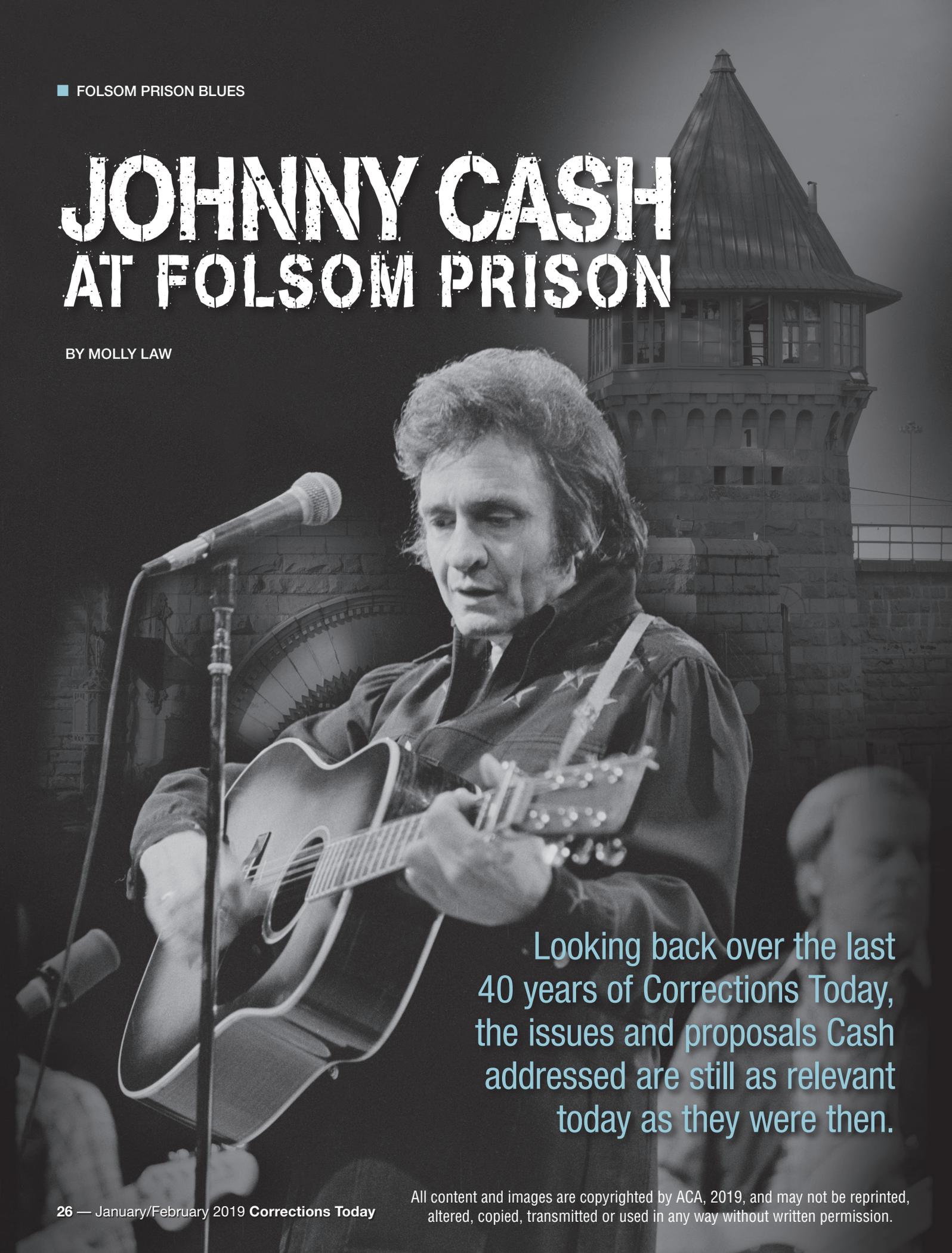


# JOHNNY CASH AT FOLSOM PRISON

BY MOLLY LAW



Looking back over the last 40 years of Corrections Today, the issues and proposals Cash addressed are still as relevant today as they were then.

# “I’m stuck in Folsom Prison, and time keeps draggin’ on ...”

**T**hese well-known lyrics solidified in people’s minds all over the country that the Arkansas-born, bestselling music artist committed the crimes described in “Folsom Prison Blues” and spent hard time, if not in Folsom Prison, than in another federal penitentiary.

Johnny Cash gave everyone good reason to believe that the lyrics in “Folsom Prison Blues” were true. Cash’s former drummer, W.S. Holland, in BBC News says, “There’s people today that you can talk to and they will believe that he actually did that.” His slow-drawl and guitar-picking music, along with the strong conviction in his voice as he sang, created his rebellious, somber and humble attitude. On top of it all, he wore all black, coining him as “the Man in Black,” furthering the misconception. The National Registry says, “There had always been a bit of danger about Cash. Early in his career, he was never part of the teen idol-dom of many of his peers (Elvis, etc.)” BBC News seconds this as well, “His popularity, fueled by the desperado image, made a refreshing antidote to the clean-cut popstars of the era. Cash did little to dispel the growing myth around him.” Cash did spend some time behind bars, but according to his biographer, Michael Streissguth, they were only one-night stays in jail for drunk and disorderly conduct.

Cash’s outward persona, revealed through his music, appearance and behavior, was not all he offered to the world. Cash played and recorded in more prisons around the country than just the live recording album at Folsom Prison. Folsom Prison sparked the fire in Cash’s life that led to, according to NY Daily News, “one of the greatest albums of all time by Rolling Stone and it cemented Cash’s legacy as one of the most influential artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” It also led Cash to a life-long pursuit for prison reform on Capitol Hill and even at the White House.

Looking back over the last 40 years of Corrections Today, the issues and proposals Cash addressed are still as relevant and remain in the center of prison reform today.

## Folsom Prison Blues

Folsom Prison is responsible for two major milestones in Cash’s career: one that started it and one that revived it. According to the Federalist, “Cash’s fascination with a prison album stemmed from viewing the Crane Wilbur film ‘Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison’ in 1953 while he was in the Air Force.” There was a journey Cash went on before he recorded the live album at the prison that essentially made him famous. His first prison performance, according to NY Daily News, was in 1957 at Huntsville State prison in Texas. In 1958, he played at San Quentin State prison in California on New Year’s Day, which was where he also recorded his second live album ten years later that went on to be a No. 1 album and stayed at the top of the charts for weeks.

---

**Folsom Prison is responsible  
for two major milestones in  
Cash’s career: one that started  
it and one that revived it.**

---

The live recording at Folsom was not the first time Cash had played there either. Reverend Floyd Gressett, who counseled inmates at Folsom and was one

of Cash's closest friends, invited Cash to come and meet some of the inmates. According to History, "Cash, who had written 'Folsom Prison Blues' in 1953, was intrigued by the thought of meeting inmates — and performing his song at the prison that inspired it." He had been there several times before, according to the California State Library, including Nov. 8, 1966. "Cash later described the prison audiences as being the most enthusiastic crowd he'd ever played for." Although it was undocumented, it was considered an artistic success. The National Registry says, "Immediately afterward, Cash began to formulate the idea of a recorded concert played inside Folsom's walls." The execution that led to the eventual live recording at Folsom Prison took a bit longer than Cash had originally anticipated.

According to the Federalist, it took a lot of work for Cash just to convince his record label to allow him to make the album. "It took a shakeup in leadership at Columbia Records that saw Bob Johnston, an executive known for his disagreements with his superiors, put in charge of Cash's production before The Man in Black found an enthusiastic partner willing to go to bat for him and his crazy idea of recording a live studio album at a California state prison." Two years after his visit in 1966, Lloyd Kelly, the prison's recreation director, Cash, June Carter Cash, the Statler Brothers, Carl Perkins and Cash's band, the Tennessee Three, two recording engineers, a still photographer and a few others walked in through the metal gates of Folsom Prison and performed and recorded two live shows.

When Cash and company walked through Folsom Prison, it was a maximum-security facility that housed over 1,000 inmates. But when he took that stage in that prison cafeteria and his low baritone voice reverberated off the prison walls, "Hello, I'm Johnny Cash," and right before the shout of every inmate's voice became indistinguishable, it certainly did not feel like a maximum-security facility any longer. According to the National Registry, "Cash and those gathered seemed to feed off each other. Together, they engaged in a musical tour de force of passion forgiveness and redemption." Gene Beley, one of the only living reporters who was there that day, remembers the full scope of emotions that went through every inmate, "It was probably the first time they were allowed to give such emotion ... It was quite an education ... You know, you visualize murderers and thieves looking like

In an exclusive interview with **Corrections Today**, Statler Brother **Don Reid** described his experience at Folsom Prison with Johnny Cash:

*"Yes, we, the Statlers, were at Folsom with John. Also at San Quentin and other prisons all over the world performing shows for the prisoners. There are albums and videos of all of us inside the gates but I'm not sure they ever capture the seriousness of the moment when you first realize the desolate feeling of being there. When you walk in and those heavy steel doors clang together behind you, there is a sickness in your stomach that makes you aware of the isolation you have stepped into and the loneliness of the men captured there. Each time we took the stage in a prison, we were struck by the ... faces of the men looking back at us. They were hungry for entertainment and yet untrusting of any outsiders until we proved ourselves to be there for their good. Leaving was never the relief one might think it to be, because there was always that sense of guilt that you were able to walk out into the daylight, but you were leaving other human beings behind to a life and a hopeless reality you could only imagine."*



*Folsom State Prison is a California state prison located 20 miles northeast of the state capital of Sacramento.*

Photo courtesy The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Carol M. Highsmith, photographer

really bad guys. Probably 50 percent looked like the boy next door. They were just like high school kids at a big concert.” According to the *Federalist* this was felt because of Cash’s previous concerts that were not recorded, “Cash had been doing songs throughout prisons well before recording this show and he would continue to do that well afterward, so his set list was a fine-tuned machine by this point, perfectly pitched to his audience.”

Cash’s record label, according to the National Registry, were not hopeful in its overall outcome regarding a general audience and sales. However, their initial predictions, thankfully, were wrong. According to *History*, “The Folsom Prison album helped revive Cash’s career and reputation, allowing him to turn his outlaw image into an asset, not a professional liability.” This new-found asset became something greater for Cash than the unexpected reception and popularity of the album itself. According to his youngest brother, Tommy Cash, in *BBC News*, “He always identified with the underdog ... He identified with the prisoners because many of them had served their sentences and had been rehabilitated, in some cases, but were still there the rest of their lives. He felt great empathy with those people.” The live recording that day caused ripples not only in Cash’s own career, but for a whole group of people and worldwide system.

## His fight for prison reform

Cash performed for the inmates at Cummins Prison in 1969, which was filmed for local television, but he also took it one step further and donated \$5,000 of his own money for the building of a prison chapel and he also challenged Governor Rockefeller to match his donation.

Cash not only performed for inmates and made their day, but he pressed on to make every day for them better. Prison Fellowship says, “In addition to his many performances inside prison walls, Cash was a tireless advocate on behalf of those for whom he performed, even speaking before Congress about the nature and purpose of incarceration.” On July 26, 1972, Cash came before a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on prison reform with two former inmates by his side. Cash also had the support of Tennessee Senator William E. Brocks who proposed legislation for prison rehabilitation reform. According to Prison Fellowship, Cash proposed several reforms, including the segregation of hardened criminals and first-time offenders, the

reclassification of certain offenses to allow for alternate rehabilitation programs and the use of counseling to prepare prisoners for release.

---

## The live recording that day caused ripples not only in Cash’s own career, but for a whole group of people and worldwide system.

---

During the subcommittee, Cash revealed not only what was wrong with the American penal system, but how it could be improved. That was where Cash’s heart was in all of this. According to *BBC News*, “Cash’s conversations with the men at Cummins clearly touched him.” These are Cash’s own words that he gave before the Senate Subcommittee:

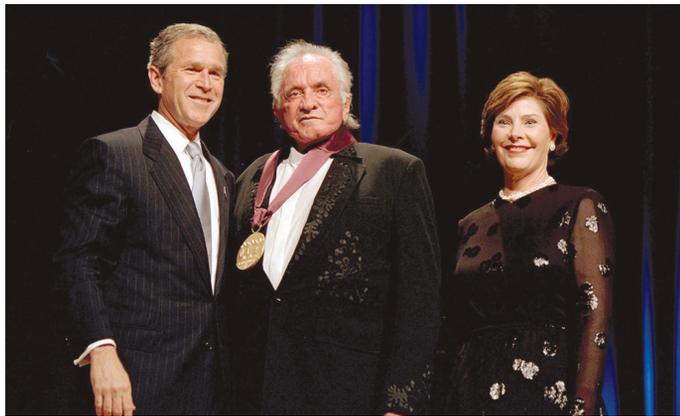
“I have seen and heard of things at some of the concerts that would chill the blood of the average citizen. But I think possibly the blood of the average citizen needs to be chilled in order for public apathy and conviction to come about ...”

Cash took every chance to talk about prison reform and he did not stop at the subcommittee that day. Cash also proposed improvements for prison conditions with six sitting presidents: Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush throughout his lifetime. His drive for prison reform came from his own personal belief that there is power in rehabilitation.

## The one and only, Mr. Johnny Cash

People resonated with Cash’s music because it was full of rebellion, darkness and sometimes even hopelessness, but his fight for those he sang was one of hope and intention. *Streissguth* says in *BBC News*, “I think Cash had a feeling that somehow he had been endowed with this fame in order to do something with it, and one of the ways he could do something with it was talking

about prison reform. He connected with the idea that a man could be redeemed.” Although some of the reforms Cash proposed did not happen in his lifetime, many are in place and the fight he began is still being carried out by so many today. For instance, Cummins is a very different place from the one Cash performed and donated money for the building of a chapel, “The chapel for which Cash had campaigned so passionately is one of the lasting legacies, not only of Cash’s visit to Cummins but of his entire prison reform crusade. It is durable, concrete evidence of Cash’s interest in commitment to the men he met behind bars.” According to BBC News, Cummins Unit-Arkansas Department of Corrections is now a modern prison that focuses on inmate reform and preparation for when they are released. Cummins has been ACA accredited since 2009 in which they received a congratulatory letter from



Former President George W. Bush and Mrs. Laura Bush with 2001 National Medal of Arts Recipient Johnny Cash.



Photos courtesy The National Archives

Country and Western Singers Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash visit former President Gerald R. Ford at the White House.

ACA stating, “Your accreditation represents the satisfactory completion of a rigorous self-evaluation, followed by an outside review by a team of experienced, independent auditors. Every profession strives to provide a high quality of service to society. To know that you, your staff, and other officials are complying with the requirements of the accreditation process is indeed a statement of a high level of commitment to the staff and persons under your care.” Folsom State Prison, as it is now named, is also ACA accredited and still proudly remembers the presence of the Man in Black, who did far more than sing a song.

---

**Cash, as a media presence, was able to connect with inmates in an entirely new way.**

---

Cash, as a media presence, was able to connect with inmates in an entirely new way. The misconception that he had served hard time gave inmates a voice, one that they never had before. Cash, through music, revealed their humanity and his public position allowed him to move within unique spaces to bring about real change.

*Molly Law is an associate editor at the American Correctional Association.*

### Like father, like daughter

Roseanne Cash carries her father’s fervor for causes that are bigger than herself. Just as her father fought for inmates’ rights, Cash’s new album, “She Remembers Everything,” affirms women’s perspectives. Like father, like daughter, Roseanne Cash’s “mind is on what it takes to dislodge entrenched patterns and hierarchies.”



istock/Paperkites