

Features



TOP

Johnny Cash Music Festival at ASU

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Submitted by

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Jonesboro, Arkansas— Rosanne Cash hosted last year's second annual Johnny Cash Music Festival, but this year, that honor goes to Tommy Cash, the baby of the seven-sibling Cash family, and with Joanne Cash Yates—the sixth of the seven—the two survivors.

The third annual Johnny Cash Music Festival is set for Aug. 17, again at Arkansas State University's Convocation Center in Jonesboro. Vince Gill is headlining a bill that also stars Yates, Larry Gatlin and the Gatlin Brothers and the Statler Brothers' Jimmy Fortune.


Proceeds from the event will continue the restoration of the Johnny Cash Boyhood Home in Dyess, Arkansas, as well as support an ASU scholarship fund established in Cash's name. Four students currently attend ASU due to money raised at the previous festivals.

"I'm grateful they asked me to host the show and sing a song or two," says Cash, who has had a substantial country music career in his own right, his signature song being the 1969 hit "Six White Horses," a sort-of country version of "Abraham, Martin And John" that likewise evoked John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Joanne will do a song or two, and then we'll sing a song together," continues Cash, who marvels at both the progress in restoring his family's home in Dyess—to open in spring, 2014—and the eagerness to visit it among Cash fans from all over the world.

Johnny Cash moved to Dyess with his family when he was three, and lived there until he graduated high school in 1950.

The house was part of a community established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s as a Depression-era agricultural resettlement colony. Part of the New Deal program, it provided an opportunity for destitute farmers, who were advanced 20 or 40 acres of farmland, a mule, a small home and money to buy food and plant crops—with the understanding that if they were successful they'd pay back the government.

"The interior is completely done," Tommy  Cash reports. "The only thing odd about it is that when I was a kid, it looked so big, and now I realize how small it was—two bedrooms, one bathroom, living room, dining room and kitchen. But it's beautiful what they're doing: Joanne and I are the only two siblings left, but we have a lot of nieces and nephews and close friends who are coming to see it, and the amazing thing is that we're getting inquiries from groups around the world who want to come and see the house where Johnny Cash lived and grew up."

Of course back then, he wasn't Johnny Cash.

"He was J.R. to all of us," says Cash. "That was his real name—J.R. Cash. He was just Big Brother to me. He let me ride on his cotton sack when I was four and five-years-old, and made chocolate fudge on Wednesday nights. It wasn't until 1955 when Sam Phillips at Sun Records said, 'You got to have a name other than 'J.R.' and used the name 'Johnny' on his first record that he became 'Johnny Cash'—and the rest is history."

Cash says that their mother already knew that his brother was "different and unique" when he was five-years-old, and Yates recalls that "for as long as I can remember, even as a little bitty girl, he was writing songs, on any kind of piece of paper. I asked him one time if he was writing poems, and he said, 'No. I'm writing songs. I'm going to be a singer.'"

Then, when Johnny Cash "first became a superstar and [early Sun hits] 'Cry! Cry! Cry!' and 'Hey, Porter' were playing on the radio, he brought me to his show in Jonesboro and said that a young man was going to come out and 'front' the show. I asked him what that meant and he said he would come out and get the crowd excited and then they'd bring the star out. And I said, 'Who's the star?' and he said 'I am!' And I said, 'You can't be the star—you're my brother!'"

 Of course, it turned out that the young man who was fronting Cash's show was none other than his fellow Sun recording artist Elvis Presley.

“All the girls were going crazy, and when Elvis walked off stage and John went on, I went backstage and talked to him. John said, I brought you all the way over to see me sing and you went back to talk to Elvis!’ I said, ‘I can talk to you any time and hear you sing!’ He said, ‘I just won’t bring you to another show,’ and I said, ‘Yes you will!’”

But Johnny Cash remained “my big, protective brother through my life—until the day he left us,” adds Yates, recalling a day when he miraculously produced an umbrella (“way back then not everybody had one”) and held it over her, Tommy and sister Reba Cash during a downpour on the quarter-mile walk home from the school bus stop, “taking the rain” himself.

“There are hundreds of stories like that,” she says, and further likens the Cash family to that of The Waltons.

“Our house was not as big, but as far as the way our family was, we always had that love for each other and we were helping each other,” says Yates. “We had the perfect life, with the exception that my daddy worked as hard as any human being I’ve ever known. But he said one time that working and taking care of your family is a gift from God.”

And now, with the house well on its way to complete restoration, Yates, who is finishing her 30th gospel album, thinks, “Johnny would be absolutely in awe of what’s happening.”

“Not just our house,” she says, “but the other buildings.”

Indeed, the Johnny Cash Boyhood Home restoration project also includes the town’s administration building and theater—the latter facility, which had only its front façade standing, to be rebuilt for use as a visitors center.

The Cash Home will serve as a museum honoring Johnny Cash's legacy.

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