



# Nine Choices: Johnny Cash and American Culture

*Jonathan Silverman*

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For much of his career, Johnny Cash opened his shows with the tagline, “Hello, I’m Johnny Cash.” This introduction seemed unnecessary, since everyone in the audience knew who he was—the famous musical artist whose career spanned almost five decades, whose troubled life on and off the stage received wide publicity, and whose craggy face seemed to express a depth and intensity not found in any other artist, living or dead.

For Cash, as for many celebrities, renown was the product of both hard work and luck. Often a visionary and always a tireless performer, he was subject to a whirlwind of social, economic, and cultural countercurrents. *Nine Choices* explores the tension between Cash’s desire for mainstream success, his personal struggles with alcohol and drugs, and an ever-changing cultural landscape that often circumscribed his options.

Drawing on interviews, archival research, and textual analysis, Jonathan Silverman focuses on Cash’s personal and artistic choices as a way of understanding his life, his impact on American culture, and the ways in which that culture in turn shaped him. Cash made decisions about where he would live, what he would play, who would produce his albums, whether he would support the Vietnam War, and even if he would flip his famous “bird”—the iconic image of Cash giving the finger which is now plastered on posters and T-shirts everywhere—in the context of cultural forces both visible and opaque. He made other decisions in consultation with a variety of people, many of whom were chiefly concerned with the reaction of his audiences.

Less a conventional biography than a study of the making of an identity, *Nine Choices* explores how Johnny Cash sought to define who he was, how he was perceived, and what he signified through a series of self-conscious actions. The result, Silverman shows, was a life that was often tumultuous but never uninteresting.



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