In 1972, Johnny Cash looked back on a tumultuous decade. "Yes, congratulations John Cash on your superstardom. Big deal," he wrote to himself. "True, you must be grateful for God's showers of blessings, but regardless of all you have been quoted as saying to the contrary, you are too excited over your personal wealth, career successes and other vain, fleeting things."

Cash's ambivalence and a tug-of-war between his addiction to amphetamines and his deep religious conviction continued until his death in 2003.

Delivered in a deep bass-baritone voice by a man dressed in black, his signature songs — "I Walk the Line," "Folsom Prison Blues," "Ring of Fire" and "Hurt" — gave voice to the underdog and the outlaw and to themes of sadness, moral strife and redemption.

A country music icon who did not restrict himself to one genre, Cash is considered one of the most influential singer-songwriters of the second half of the 20th century.

In "Johnny Cash," Robert Hilburn, a music critic for the Los Angeles Times for more than 30 years, draws on dozens of interviews to provide a detailed (and, at times, too detailed) narrative of Cash's personal and professional life.

He adopts a familiar thesis to explain Cash's career. Cash began with "a sense of daring and edge, a great young musician on a gallant quest to remain true to his artistic impulses," Hilburn suggests. His music "was the only shelter from the emotional storm around him."

Cash's success "empowered him with the self-assurance that is both essential and dangerous in an artist." And with a "lack of critical reflection and outside input (that) eventually catches up with even the greatest of artists."

Hilburn ably captures Cash's pop culture artistry, his years in "the wilderness," his resurgence, and his passionate and painful relationships, shaped in no small measure by his drug addiction, with his wives and children and with the members of his entourage.

Nonetheless, Hilburn sometimes struggles to get to the defining essence of his subject. Did an "unrelenting sympathy for the underdog," one wonders, really stimulate feelings of "kinship" with the
three young armed men who robbed John, June Carter Cash and their son, John Carter Cash, and ransacked their house in Jamaica?

Did Cash's role in an eminently forgettable made-for-TV movie, co-starring Andy Griffith and set in rural Georgia in the 1940s, really speak to his "belief in good triumphing over evil"?

Like many celebrities, Johnny Cash is an elusive person. In a "telling revelation," Hilburn indicates that Cash didn't often think about his father, whose approval he had desperately wanted and rarely received, or visit his grave. But he continued to view Ray Cash as "the most interesting specter in my memories, looming around in there saying, 'Figure me out, son.'"

Full of information that will at once delight, depress, stimulate and surprise Cash's fans, Hilburn's admirable biography also evokes an image of the "Man in Black," staring ahead, somberly and slyly, and daring you to "Figure me out, son."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.