

# WU?@therep

## RING OF FIRE

**Created by Richard Maltby, Jr.**

**Conceived by William Meade**

**Orchestrations by Steven Bishop and Jeff Lisenby**

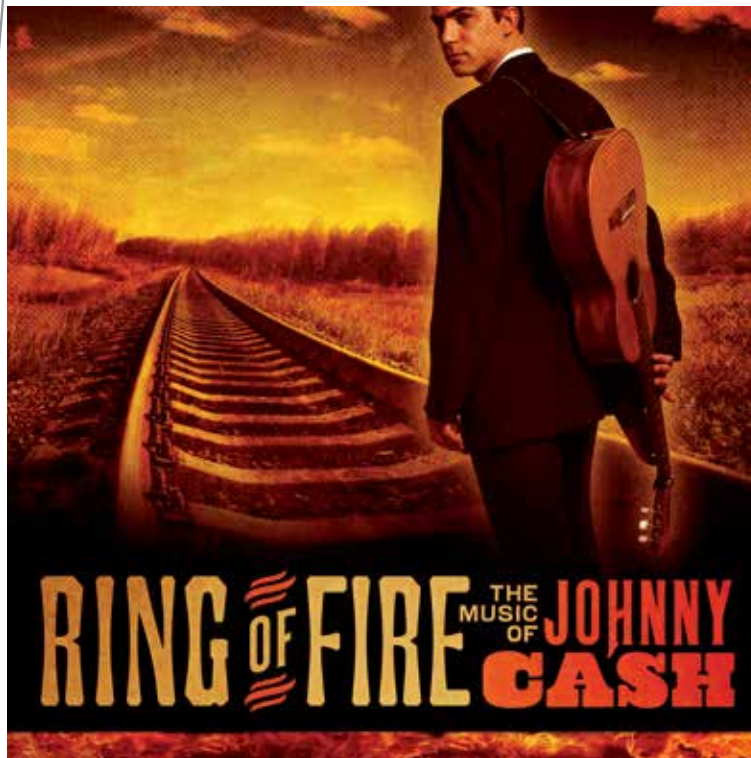
**Adapted from the Broadway Production**

**by Richard Maltby, Jr. and Jason Edwards**

**Directed by Jason Edwards**

### CONTENTS

- 2 The 411
- 3 A/S/L & RBTL
- 4 HTH & FYI
- 5 B4U
- 6 IRL
- 7 Read More About It
- 8 IRL2



MAJOR SPONSOR



# the 411

At The Rep, we know that life moves fast—okay, really fast. But we also know that some things are worth

slowing down for. We believe that live theatre is one of those pit stops worth making and are excited that you are going to stop by for a show. To help you get the most bang for your buck, we have put together **WU? @ THE REP**—an IM guide that will give you everything you need to know to get at the top of your theatergoing game—fast. You'll find character descriptions (**A/S/L**), a plot summary (**FYI**), biographical information (**F2F**), historical context (**B4U**), and other bits and pieces (**HTH**). Most importantly, we'll have some ideas about what this all means **IRL**, anyway.

## CU@therep!



### The Teacher's Lounge

In an effort to make our educational materials accessible to students and easy for educators to incorporate into the classroom, our study guide is written in a student-oriented format. We hope that you will circulate this guide among your students in the weeks preceding your visit to The Rep, encouraging them to browse it before and after class and as time allows, using it as a launch point for both pre- and post-performance discussions. You may also want to visit our website, [www.repstl.org](http://www.repstl.org), for additional information including activity suggestions and behind-the-scenes information. Any materials, either from this guide or from our website may be reproduced for use in the classroom.

**NEATO!**

As always, we appreciate your making live theatre a part of your classroom experience and welcome your feedback and questions.

## WELCOME!

The desire to learn, insatiable when awakened, can sometimes lie dormant until touched by the right teacher or the right experience. We at The Rep are grateful to have the opportunity to play a role supporting you as you awaken the desire for learning in your students.

Johnny Cash's music spans genres, generations and generalities. The messages of love, faith, struggle and hope found in his songs speak to us all. Through his words and melodies, your students will gain some insight into what made this man a legend.

It would be a good idea to take a minute on the bus to give your students these quick theatre etiquette reminders:

- This show has one intermission; there will be time for bathroom breaks before the show and halfway through.
- The actors can hear the audience and appreciate the laughter, gasps and quiet attention to action. However, talking, moving around and eating is very distracting to others and can dampen the energy of what is happening on stage.
- Pictures, phone calls and texting are not allowed at any time during the performance.

Live theatre won't allow your students to take a passive role—they must work with us to create the experience which takes the learning deeper. Our unique ability to fuse words and images onstage allows your students to explore new ideas as well as excites their imaginations. We will do our part so your students will be stirred to understandings and self-awareness while delving into new and familiar worlds. You are doing your part by using The Rep to extend your intellectual and aesthetic curriculum. Thank you!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marsha".

Marsha Coplon  
Director of Education

### REP EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Director of Education  
Associate Director of Education  
Education Programs Manager  
Study Guide Writer

Marsha Coplon  
Sarah Brandt  
April Strelinger  
Laura Schlereth

# ASL

# RBT

**JOHNNY CASH:** a singer-songwriter who is considered not only a country music icon, but also a prolific contributor to other music genres, including rock 'n' roll, blues, folk and gospel

**RAY CASH AND CARRIE RIVERS:** Johnny's parents raised their children working in the cotton fields

**JACK CASH:** Johnny's older brother with whom he was very close

**JUNE CARTER:** an American singer, songwriter and comedienne who started performing at the age of 10 with her famous family and eventually became Johnny's second wife

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Johnny Cash grew up during the Great Depression in a blue-collar family that received financial assistance from the government. Working on a cotton farm, he was no stranger to hard manual work, and a good portion of the play's beginning focuses on his family's experience "working from dawn to dusk." Many times the most endearing protagonists are those who come from humble beginnings who have to climb uphill to reach success. Although working on a farm may not seem like training to be a musician, the experience gave Cash a bit more grit and a down-to-earth sensibility that everyday people could relate to.

## LOSS AND PAIN

Just like Cash was no stranger to hard work, he also wasn't immune to tragedy. His brother, with whom he was very close, died in a tragic accident when he was 15 and Johnny was only 12. Losing someone dear to you—especially someone close in age—not only causes intense grief but also a heightened sense of one's own mortality. As common with most people affected by tragedies, this heavy dose of reality fundamentally changed Cash in a way that made him simultaneously stronger and also more vulnerable.

## FLAWS

Most celebrities with sordid pasts will usually do anything to hide them. However, Cash seemed very willing to admit to his faults from his addiction to drugs and alcohol to his violent episodes to his failed relationships. And while many judged him, many others embraced him for being honest about his flaws and multiple mistakes because it made him more relatable and subsequently more successful.

## SPIRITUALITY

Cash was raised by his parents as Southern Baptist, and he remained a Christian throughout his life. One can feel his deep spirituality through many of his songs that were singled out for the play, including "In the Sweet By and By," "The Far Side Banks of Jordan" and "Why Me, Lord." It seems like Johnny's spirituality gave him a sense of humility, as he always felt like there was something greater than himself that he had to answer to. How do you think this contributed to his popularity not only as a musician but as pop culture icon?



**PLANTATION:** a large estate or farm

**HOMESTEADING:** claiming work or farmland

**FOLSOM PRISON:** a California State Prison where Johnny Cash performed several concerts in the late 60s

**FEDERAL EMERGENCY RELIEF ADMINISTRATION (FERA):** a government program that distributed half a billion dollars to state and local agencies to help Americans impacted by the Great Depression

**SMOKEHOUSE:** a building where meat or fish is cured with smoke

**PROMISED LAND:** the land promised to the Israelites by God according to the Hebrew bible; in pop culture, the 'promised land' is a place believed to offer ultimate happiness

**ADVERSITY:** misfortune or hardship

**BASS AND TENOR:** vocal ranges in music

**YONDER:** in the distance, over there

**CABARET:** place of entertainment

**CAVORTING:** behaving in a high-spirited, festive manner

**RIVER QUEEN:** a sidewheel steamer that was used for an unsuccessful peace conference during the last year of the American Civil War

**ZINGER:** a clever remark skillfully delivered

**GRAND OLE OPRY:** a weekly country music stage concert in Nashville, Tennessee, that has showcased the biggest stars of the genre

**BREADLINE:** people waiting for free meals given out by a government agency or a charity organization

**FICKLE:** easily changeable

**LEVEE:** an embankment designed to prevent the flooding of a river

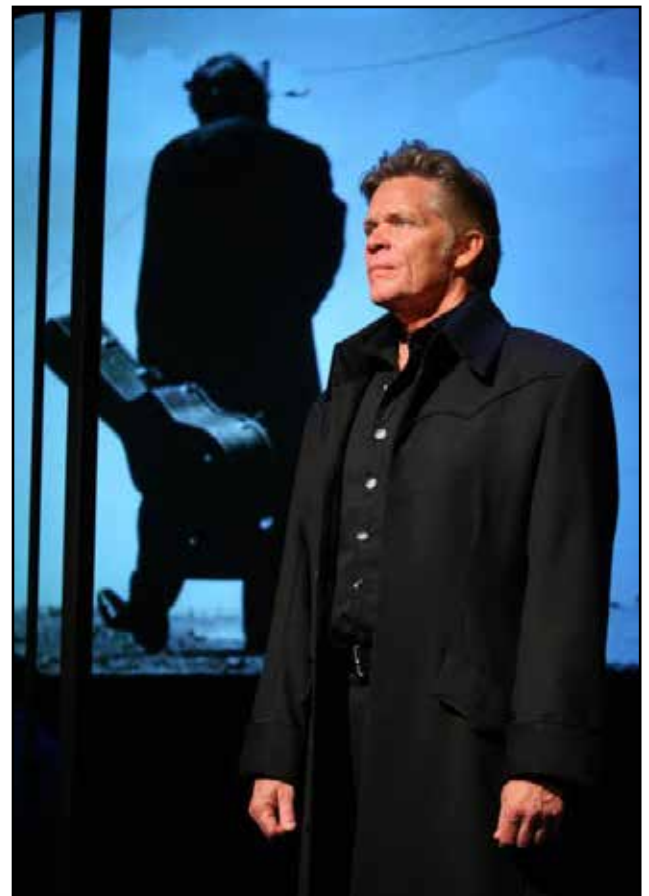
**PARLOR:** a living room for entertaining guests

**TRIFLIN':** insignificant or frivolous

**SALOON:** a bar

**MANGY:** scruffy

**PORTER:** a railcar attendant



*Jason Edwards*

*Photo by Stephen B. Thornton*



## JOHNNY AND JUNE

THE LOVE STORY between Johnny Cash and June Carter is one of the most famous in music history, especially country music, so it's only fitting that they met at the Grand Ole Opry. It was July 7, 1956, and Johnny's mega-hit "I Walk the Line" had just been released two months earlier. He was performing at the Opry for the first time. June, who grew up performing with her famous musical family, most notably as part of the Carter Sisters, had just finished touring with Elvis and was also performing that night.

Both were mutual fans of each other but were married to other people at the time—June to fellow country singer Carl Smith, and Johnny to Vivian Liberto, his wife and mother of their three daughters. However, there was an instant spark that neither Johnny or June could deny. June described the experience in the liner notes of Johnny's 2000 box set *Love, God, Murder*: "He had a command of his performance that I had never seen before. Just a guitar and a bass and a gentle kind of presence that made not only me, but whole audiences become his followers." June seemingly had the same effect on Johnny, who was dazzled not only by her musical ability but also her sense of humor and quick wit.

June divorced later that year and remarried a local police officer named Rip Nix in 1958. She came into contact with Johnny again in 1961 when her family joined his roadshow, during which they often performed together. June and Johnny both ended up divorcing their respective spouses in 1966, and it wasn't long before they became engaged themselves in 1968; in fact, Johnny proposed to June onstage during a live performance. They married later that year and had a son

together named John Carter Cash in 1970. Johnny and June also enjoyed professional success during this time releasing several hits including "Jackson" (1967) and "If I Were a Carpenter" (1969).

John Carter Cash recalled his parents intense bond in a 2014 interview: "The way they showed their love for each other was gentle," he said. "They were long-suffering, always forgiving, open-minded, willing to look over past pains. As a result, their love lasted a long time." Cash went on to say that his father often celebrated his wife with love mementos such as homemade photo albums on special occasions. They often included handwritten notes, such as this one:

"The smiles were real  
An intimate bond of togetherness  
Of knowing that our hearts are beating for  
each other in tempo.  
This is called happiness  
I also call it total joy that I am married  
for life to the only one I love."

June died in May 2003 following complications from heart surgery. John followed just four months later when he passed away of complications from diabetes. The two are buried next to each other in a cemetery in Tennessee and share one tombstone that lists their last names as well as the titles of two of their biggest respective hits: "I Walk the Line" and "Wildwood Flower."



## JOHNNY CASH: ONE OF THE FIRST CELEBRITY ACTIVISTS

Today many celebrities use the spotlight cast on them to also shine a light on a cause. Ellen Degeneres is an animal rights activist who promotes veganism. U2 singer Bono is co-founder and spokesperson for the ONE Campaign, which seeks to end extreme poverty and preventable disease. Young actress Emma Watson proved that it's never too early to start promoting social justice when she was appointed as a UN Goodwill Ambassador in 2014 and helped launch the He-For-She solidarity campaign for gender equality. Johnny Cash also felt the need to use his celebrity for the common good when he advocated for two groups whose rights he felt were often violated: prisoners and Native Americans.



### FOR PRISON REFORM

Cash was a passionate spokesman for prisoners, a demographic that society largely ignores. He had never served time behind bars, with

the exception of a few one-night jail stays for drunk or disorderly conduct, but Cash felt he easily could have ended up like many of the prisoners he met. He believed many were rehabilitated but continued to serve time under sentences disproportionate to the crime they had committed.

To show his support for those imprisoned and to raise more public awareness, Cash performed numerous concerts at prisons over his lifetime. His performance at Cummins Prison in April 1969 was filmed for local television, and his live albums recorded at Folsom State Prison and San Quentin

State Prison have become legendary not only in the world of music but also social justice. The songs interspersed with warden announcements and the prisoners' cheers and banter transported the public to a place that they rarely thought about. Some would think Cash identifying himself with criminals may have hurt his career, but it actually helped it by branding him with a gritty outlaw image that provided a refreshing alternative to the more clean-cut pop stars of the time.

Cash helped bring the issue to Capitol Hill at a 1972 Senate hearing on prison reform. He proposed several changes, including the separation of first-time offenders and long-time criminals; changes to the laws so that minor offenders weren't punished with prison time; and a stronger focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment, which would include counseling to prepare inmates for life after prison and prevent them for committing more crimes. Although many of Cash's hopeful prison reforms still have a long way to go, he brought the issue into public awareness in a way that had not been done before.

### FOR NATIVE AMERICANS

Another group that Cash staunchly supported were Native Americans. His 1964 concept album *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indians* focused on Native American history and the injustices faced by Native American people. Its best-known song is Cash's rendition of "The Ballad of Ira Hayes," which told the story of a Pima Indian who became a national hero as one of the Marines who raised the US flag at Iwo Jima but who descended into PTSD-induced alcoholism after the war and accidentally drowned one night while intoxicated.



Cash was inspired by the story of “Ira Hayes” when he saw folk singer Peter La Farge, who penned the song and was deeply devoted to the Native American cause, perform it one night in 1962. Cash, who was battling his own addictions, thoroughly researched Native American history, educating himself on the

issues and even visiting with Hayes’ mother at the Pima reservation in Arizona.

“I dove into primary and secondary sources, immersing myself in the tragic stories of the Cherokee and the Apache, among others, until I was almost as raw as Peter,” Cash has said. “By the time I actually recorded the album, I carried a heavy load of sadness and outrage.”

Unfortunately, radio stations rejected *Bitter Tears* because they didn’t see it as a commercial hit, but Cash didn’t take the dismissal lying down. He took out a full-

page ad in *Billboard* in which he asked station professionals “where are your guts?” Cash’s efforts made a difference; “Ira Hayes” eventually reached No. 3 on the country singles charts, while the *Bitter Tears* album as a whole peaked at No. 2. Cash continued to show his support by performing benefit shows on reservations, which raised money for schools and hospitals not supported by the government.

Antonino D’Ambrosio, author of the book *A Heartbeat and A Guitar – Johnny Cash and the Making of Bitter Tears* (2009) spoke about the social importance of the album in a 2010 interview: “It was clear that Cash was doing something very profound here at the height of his career. Cash offered a definitive anti-war statement, which still resonates today. Yet he was also speaking to the human condition and using his music as a creative response in active of pursuit of the most important thing art can do: telling the truth.”

## READ MORE ABOUT IT

If you enjoyed the story of *Ring of Fire*, we encourage you to explore the following books, movies and music for more information..



*Walk the Line*, 136 minutes, 20th Century Fox, 2005.

See Joaquin Phoenix as the Man in Black and Reese Witherspoon (in an Oscar-winning role) as June Carter Cash in this film that tells their famous love story. And no dubbing in this flick! Phoenix and Witherspoon perform all songs themselves.

*At Folsom Prison*, Columbia Records, 1968.

Whether you listen to it on vinyl, on a CD, or on Spotify, this live album of Cash’s performance at Folsom Prison in 1968 is a special experience of musical, historical and social significance.

*The Essential Johnny Cash*, Legacy/Columbia, 2002.

If you’re looking for a more comprehensive album of Cash’s work, listen to this compilation album that focuses mainly on Cash’s first 15 years as a recording artist.

*Cash, Johnny. Cash: The Autobiography*, HarperOne, 2003.

Johnny Cash tells his life story in his own words, discussing the highs and lows, his boyhood and the road to stardom, and all the significant people who shaped him along the way.

## A SOBERING LOOK AT ADDICTION

Johnny Cash was always open about his serious addictions to alcohol and especially drugs. He relied heavily on amphetamines and barbiturates but has admitted to having “tried every drug there was to try.” Although he was an incredibly successful musician, Cash felt like a slave to his addictions, and like many addicts, he struggled with drug abuse his entire life, which consisted of several sober periods and relapses.

### HOW TO CLASSIFY ADDICTION

Addiction is a highly misunderstood disease, especially in the way that many do not even consider it a disease. There’s a common misconception that addiction is simply a matter of weakness of willpower or discipline, or that an addict is lacking in morality. In fact, addiction to drugs and alcohol is a complex disease that affects a person both mentally and physically. Although the initial choice to use drugs is voluntary, the brain’s chemistry is physically changed and can dramatically influence impulse control.

### EVERY ACTION HAS A REACTION

One of the most basic ways drugs affect the brain is that most cause the brain to release large amounts of neurotransmitters, mainly dopamine, which exists in the areas of the brain that control movement, emotion, motivation and feelings of pleasure. This overstimulation of the brain’s reward system produces feelings of ecstasy or euphoria.

The brain responds to the overwhelming surge of dopamine by producing less of it, which reduces the person’s ability to enjoy the drug but also to enjoy other events/people/activities that used to bring pleasure. As a result, the abuser feels the need to use larger quantities of the drug or a stronger drug to get the same level of high they

achieved at the beginning. This reaction starts a pattern that essentially trains drug abusers to repeat the reward cycle in a spiraling progression, which leads to heavier use.

### THE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

Once addicted, a drug abuser may understand logically that they must stop using for the sake of their health and quality of life, but the disease feels much like asthma or diabetes in that the addict desperately craves a substance to relieve their symptoms of depression or even physical pain. This compulsive behavior continues despite the fact that their life may be deteriorating around them, i.e. estranged relatives or friends, loss of job, etc. Many other diseases are relieved or eradicated with the use of medication—but that’s the very type of thing a substance abuser must stay away from.

### HOW TO TREAT ADDICTION

Many question why some people are more susceptible to addiction than others, but it’s unfortunately not a simple answer. It appears that everything from genetics to environment to a person’s age when they first use drugs can play a factor. However, despite the factors leading up to drug abuse or the complexity of chronic addiction, there are several effective treatments available in out- or in-patient programs that usually utilize a detoxification process, one-on-one therapy and group counseling. Many addicts use the famous 12-step program first created by Alcoholics Anonymous and also used by Narcotics Anonymous, which hosts regular self-help group meetings to give an addict a network and sense of routine and to relieve feelings of shame and isolation, which is shown to greatly help with rehabilitation success.





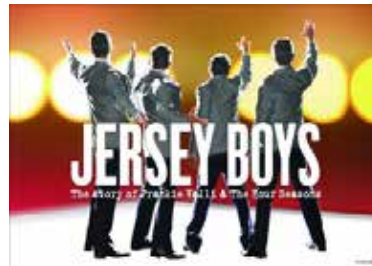
# JUKEBOX MUSICALS

*Ring of Fire* is a unique musical in that it uses previously released popular songs as its score, a style which is sometimes known as a “jukebox musical.” Sometimes the score is by various artists with its own unique storyline; this has been especially popular on television shows in recent years including *Glee* (2009) and *Smash* (2012), which used pop songs to contextualize plots revolving around a high school glee club and a Broadway production, respectively. Sometimes jukebox musicals use the music of one artist to construct a brand new tale, such as the 1999 musical *Mamma Mia!*, which tells the story of a wedding on a Greek island through the music of ABBA. And sometimes, in the case of *Ring of Fire*, the musical tells the biographical story of one artist through his or her music.

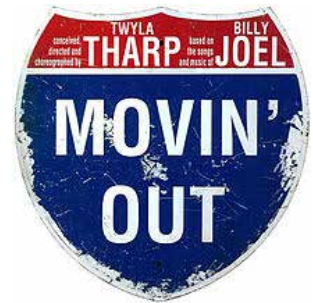
Jukebox musicals can be a lot of fun. Imagine the challenge of having to tie several songs together to tell a cohesive, original story. It requires a special kind of creativity, and it can be very interesting to see how playwrights interpret the songs to create a new tale. Next time you get the chance, try seeing one of the more popular jukebox musicals below, or hey, what’s stopping you from perhaps writing your own based on your favorite musical group or artist?



AMERICAN IDIOT (2009) uses the music of punk rock band Green Day’s 2004 rock album of the same name to tell the story of three disillusioned young men who must choose between the safety of suburbia and following their dreams in the city.



JERSEY BOYS (2005) is a biographical dramatization of the formation, success and eventual break-up of the real-life 1960s rock ‘n roll and pop group Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, as told through their hit songs.



MOVIN' OUT (2002) uses the music of Billy Joel to explore the lives of five American youths growing up on Long Island during the 1960s whose lives are changed drastically by the Vietnam War.

## NAME THAT TUNE



Did you enjoy the music in *Ring of Fire*? How familiar were you with the work of Johnny Cash? Many may know his most popular hits like *Ring of Fire* (1963) or *I Walk the Line* (1956), but were some or all of the other songs new to you? Let's see how much the lyrics resonated with you by matching the song titles to each set of lyrics below.

- A. Ring of Fire**   **B. Flesh and Blood**  
**C. Straight A's in Love**   **D. Jackson**  
**E. A Boy Named Sue**

1. A cardinal sang just for me and I thanked him for his song.  
Then the sun went slowly down the West and I had to move along  
These are some of the things on which my mind and spirit feed;  
But \_\_\_\_\_ needs \_\_\_\_\_ and you're the one I need.
2. Some Gal would giggle and I'd get red  
and some guy'd laugh and I'd bust his head,  
I tell ya, life ain't easy for \_\_\_\_\_.
3. We got married in a fever,  
hotter than a pepper sprout.  
We've been talkin' 'bout \_\_\_\_\_,  
ever since the fire went out.
4. Love is a burning thing and it makes a fiery ring.  
Bound by wild desire, I fell into a \_\_\_\_\_.  
I fell into a burning \_\_\_\_\_, I went down, down, down as the flames went higher  
And it burns, burns, burns, the \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Well, the readin' and the writin' arithmetic never did get through to me  
It ain't because I'm square or thick 'cause I learned my A, B, C  
But when I graduated from the grammar school and I moved one grade above  
I began to be a snook at books, but I made \_\_\_\_\_.

# COUPLE ACTS IN MUSIC

Johnny and June were a one-of-a-kind musical act, but they're definitely not the only couple who made music together. It seems logical that two musical personalities would be attracted to each other and that beautiful melodies would result from all the sparks flying. However, it seems Johnny and June were a rarity in that they remained married the rest of their lives. All the couples below eventually divorced for various reasons but not before they made a serious impact on the world of music.

## SONNY AND CHER

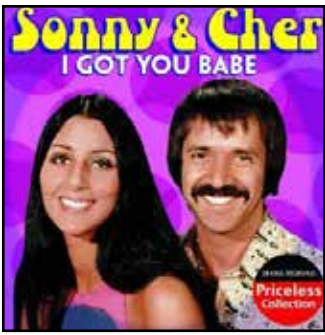
Cherilyn Sarkisian met Salvatore Bono in a coffee shop in the early 60s and the two got their start in music working as back-up singers for the famous music producer Phil Spector. They hit it big as their own act with the 1965 smash hit "I Got You Babe." The two also became television personalities with their variety show *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* that premiered in 1971 and featured the comedic pairing of Cher's wise-cracking insults with Sonny's good-natured reception of the jabs. However, the show ended in 1975 when Sonny and Cher bitterly divorced.

## IKE AND TINA TURNER

Ike was performing with his R&B band *Kings of Rhythm* in East St. Louis in the mid-50s when he met the teenage, gospel-trained singer named Anna Mae Bullock. Impressed with her singing talent and dynamic stage presence, Turner made her a part of his revue and changed her name to Tina. The two married just a few years later in 1958. Together they performed the *Ike & Tina Turner Revue* in the 1960s and 70s, which was wildly successful, largely because of Tina's fiery performing style. They produced such hits as "Fool in Love" (1960) and their infamous 1971 version of "Proud Mary." However, Ike was an alcoholic and drug addict who severely abused Tina and continuously subjected her to domineering cruelty. Tina finally found the strength to leave Ike, divorcing him in 1976, and triumphantly emerged as a survivor and a superstar in her own right in the 1980s.

## WHITE STRIPES

This husband and wife duo formed in Detroit in 1997, with Jack White as the main vocalist who played guitar, bass and keyboards, and Meg White who played drums and provided occasional vocals. Making music that combined garage rock with blues and punk, the couple, who were often mistaken for siblings (a misconception they slyly encouraged) were actually married in 1996 and divorced in 2000 before they made it big with their third album *White Blood Cells* (2001). The two continued to perform together until they officially broke up (as a band) in 2011. Unlike many other musical groups, the White Stripes claimed the breakup was not due to artistic differences or a falling out "but mostly to preserve what is beautiful and special about the band."



# SWDY?

***"Before rock 'n' roll there was country. And before Memphis, well for me anyway, there was Arkansas."***

- \* This statement is brief, but it speaks volumes on the play's tone. What context do you read from it? It seems to speak to Johnny's roots. He might have eventually become a legend in rock 'n' roll, a more mainstream genre of music, but he got his start in country. And he may have made it big in Memphis, but he's originally from Arkansas. What do you think the playwright is trying to convey with this line?

***"Doc Hollingsworth took one quick look and went straight to work, givin' me a shot that killed the pain just as soon as the needle went in. Not only that, but I started feelin' really good. I thought, 'Boy this is really somethin. This is the greatest thing in the world, to make you feel so good when it was hurtin' so bad. I'm gonna have to have me some more of that some time.'"***

- \* Addiction is a powerful disease that everyone can relate to on some level; it may not always affect one's everyday life, but dependency on anything is rarely healthy. Johnny states that drugs made him feel "so good when it was hurtin' so bad." He might be describing the literal use of "hurt" in it being physical pain, but what deeper meaning does this statement have? What else can "hurt" and how do some people take unhealthy measures to stop that pain?

***"Inside me, my boyhood feels so close, but when I look around, it sometimes seems to belong to a vanished world. Is it really possible to imagine whole families, boys and girls of eight to eighteen, at their parents' sides in the cotton fields, working through the July heat from dawn to dusk, driving away exhaustion with songs of the spirit? Are there still places where a young boy can leave his house after breakfast with just a fishing pole and spend the whole day rambling and adventuring alone supervised and unafraid, trusted, and un-feared for?"***

- \* This is a major statement of nostalgia. Why do you think the playwright decided to include it? How is reflecting on how times have changed important? When was the last time you were thinking fondly on a pastime and had a sense of nostalgia? What was it that made you so wistful?

***"When the cotton began to open in October, it was just beautiful. First there'd be lovely white blossoms, and then, in about three days, they'd turn to pink, whole fields of 'em. What a picture that was. So we worked. And worked. And worked."***

- \* This line paints a beautiful picture. What is usually a writer's goal when they use vivid imagery? There also seems to be something purposeful about not only including the idyllic imagery but also mentioning how that beauty was a result of work, work, work. What do you think the point of that is?

(Name That Tune  
answer key:  
1B, 2E, 3D, 4A, 5C)

