

Singer Johnny Cash's first wife: *My Darling Vivian* shows us the woman who walked the line

By Erik Schreiber
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Directed by Matt Riddlehoover

Country music singer Johnny Cash (1932-2003) and his wife June Carter (1929-2003) famously and remarkably made music together for decades, and the two are closely associated in the public mind. But often forgotten is the fact that Carter was not Cash's first wife. Vivian Liberto (1934-2005) married Cash in 1954, not long before his rapid rise to fame.

Unlike Carter, Liberto avoided the spotlight. While Cash was recording hit songs and appearing on stage and television, Liberto raised the couple's four daughters and fended off not only the fans, but also the bobcats that prowled around the family's home. Cash's long absences, drug abuse and relationship with Carter contributed to Liberto's decision to file for divorce in 1966.

What little place Liberto held in popular consciousness quickly disappeared after Cash and Carter married. Singer Rosanne Cash, the first child of Cash and Liberto, has said that her mother's story was lost. *Walk the Line* (James Mangold, 2005), the film biography featuring Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon as Cash and Carter, with Ginnifer Goodwin as Vivian, returned Liberto to public attention, but portrayed her negatively, in her daughters' opinion.

My Darling Vivian, a documentary about Liberto's life, appears in part to be her family's attempt to set the record straight. Its director, Matt Riddlehoover, is married to a grandson of Cash and Liberto.

The film, an official selection of the South by Southwest 2020 Film Festival, draws extensively on interviews with the couple's daughters, as well as on family photos and home movies. The participants never

seem to be settling scores, but rather honoring Liberto with the same dignity that she displayed throughout her life. This often-touching film gives Liberto the credit that she, as modest and unassuming as she was, nevertheless sought.

Rosanne Cash suggests that the "elegant film" about her mother, "the real Vivian Liberto, not the Hollywood version—is painful but compassionate, wrenching but true. Even though she was an intensely private woman, I think she longed to have her story told, and her place in the history of my family acknowledged with respect and love."

Liberto was born in 1934 and raised in San Antonio, Texas. Her father, Thomas Liberto, was a Sicilian and a strict Catholic. A noted cultivator of roses, he bred a special rose for Lady Bird Johnson, wife of President Lyndon B. Johnson, when she visited the city. Perhaps because of the anti-Italian and anti-Catholic sentiment common in her environment, the young girl developed insecurity and self-doubt that persisted throughout her life.

Liberto, like Cash and Carter, grew to maturity in postwar America, a society rife with contradictions. A rising economic tide and increased opportunities for many working class families occurred within a generally stagnant and reactionary political and cultural atmosphere. At the same time, in popular culture, the breaking down of barriers between the races and between genres produced startling developments.

Liberto and Cash met at a roller skating rink in 1951. The two connected instantly, but Cash, an Air Force cadet, was deployed to West Germany a few weeks later. The couple wrote more than a thousand love letters to each other throughout the three years of his

tour, and their daughters read parts of them during the film. Unbeknownst to the young couple, long periods of separation would define their relationship.

When Cash returned home in 1954, he and Liberto married and moved to Memphis. Liberto quickly became pregnant with Rosanne and stayed home while Cash struggled as an unsuccessful door-to-door salesman. Six weeks after Rosanne's birth, Liberto became pregnant with the couple's second daughter, Kathy. Liberto later told her girls that although they were poor, this was the happiest period of their marriage.

Cash played and sang with local musicians in the evenings, and they eventually won a contract with Sun Records. Before long, Cash had recorded hit songs such as "Folsom Prison Blues" (1955), "I Walk the Line" (1956), which he wrote for Liberto, and "Home of the Blues" (1957). The family, now grown to include daughters Cindy and Tara, moved to the Los Angeles area before settling in Casitas Springs, in Ventura County, California. Cash began touring extensively and, perhaps because of the demands of the road and of his career, began drinking and heavily using amphetamines. While he hung out with other singers such as Waylon Jennings and Bob Dylan, Liberto raised their daughters and waited until late at night for him to come home, often in vain.

In March 1965, Alabama police brutally beat peaceful civil rights protesters in an incident that became known as Bloody Sunday. A few months later, narcotics officers arrested Cash after finding more than a thousand amphetamine and barbiturate pills in his guitar case. A newspaper photograph of Cash and Liberto leaving the courthouse led some to believe that Liberto was black. Promoters abruptly canceled Cash's concerts in the South, and the Ku Klux Klan began threatening the couple. To end the controversy, Cash and Liberto, sadly, had to ask various officials to affirm that Liberto was white. The stress took a further psychic toll on her.

Liberto filed for divorce in 1966, hoping the action would jolt Cash into quitting drugs and ending his budding affair with Carter. Cash, however, did not contest the divorce, and the marriage soon ended. The divorce was a blow for Liberto, but she was determined to remarry before Cash did. In 1968, she married police officer Dick Distin, a choice that baffled her daughters.

Nevertheless, Liberto apparently never stopped loving Cash, with whom she remained on good terms.

To distract herself, Liberto hosted parties and developed an active social life. She volunteered much of her time to the Catholic church, even though it had excommunicated her because of her divorce. Only after Cash wrote to the archdiocese, stating that the divorce was entirely his fault, did it allow Liberto to receive communion again.

When Cash and Carter married, the media made much of their love story. Carter regularly spoke about Cash's daughters as if they were her own, which hurt Liberto. She wrote a letter to Cash, asking him to discourage Carter from speaking that way, but never sent it. Her daughters found the letter after Liberto's death and expressed certainty that Cash would have acceded to the request.

Although glamorous in her own quiet way, Liberto exemplified the dutiful housewife that women of her generation and class were taught to become. Yet few of her peers have had to guard their privacy amid the glare of fame, and fewer still have faced public vilification and death threats. Other challenges that Liberto faced, such as raising children while coping with bouts of depression and an increasingly unreliable husband, will be more familiar to viewers. Her ability to survive these trials with apparent grace is a remarkable accomplishment. In telling Liberto's story, *My Darling Vivian*, intentionally or not, calls attention to other unsung women (and men) who valiantly face similar struggles.

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