

# Country music legend Merle Haggard (1937-2016)

Hiram Lee  
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Country music legend Merle Haggard died April 6 at the age of 79. His career spanned more than half a century, during which time he landed no fewer than 38 number-one hits on the US country music charts. To his credit, Haggard often used his voice, one of the best in country music, to address the concerns of working people. He also sang with compassion for those locked away in America's prisons, a fate he himself had suffered. To his considerable discredit, the singer also lined up at times with reactionary American patriotism and social backwardness.

Haggard's early life was extraordinarily difficult. He was born April 6, 1937, in Bakersfield, California, near the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley. His family had migrated from Oklahoma two years previously, joining the wave of "dustbowl refugees" who fled the drought conditions and economic ruin inflicted on the plains states during the Great Depression.

As improbable as it may sound, Haggard was raised in a boxcar, actually a former refrigerated train car, which his father converted into a home, a fact that all but obligated Haggard to become a country music singer!

Growing up near the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific railroad line, Haggard fell in love with the sight and sound of tanker cars hauling oil up and down the tracks. The opening lines of his 1968 hit "Mama Tried" may not have been an exaggeration: "The first thing I remember knowin' was a lonesome whistle blowin' and a youngin's dream of growing up to ride."

If his first love was trains, music can't have been far behind. He developed a passion for country music early in life. As he often demonstrated in his popular imitations of other performers, Haggard knew every last idiosyncrasy of singers like Johnny Cash, Hank Snow and Marty Robbins. In 1951, Haggard attended a concert by country star Lefty Frizzell, an experience that left a lasting impression. Frizzell's smooth voice and rocking band were a precursor to Haggard's own work.

Particularly after the death of his father in 1945, Haggard was a restless and rebellious young man. "The only place I wanted to be," wrote Haggard in his autobiography *My House of Memories*, "was anywhere except where I was." He ran away from home constantly, hopped freight trains headed out of town, and began stealing cars. He spent years in and out of

juvenile detention centers, escaping from more than a few.

After hitchhiking into Los Angeles in 1951, a 14-year-old Haggard and a friend were arrested for a crime they didn't commit. Haggard later recalled how six patrol cars suddenly descended on them. The police shouted "Down on the sidewalk, or we'll kill ya! In fact we'd love to!" The boys were locked up for five days on armed robbery charges until the actual robbers were arrested and the two teenagers were set free.

Eventually, Haggard would be arrested for a crime he did commit, or tried to commit. After attempting, and failing, to rob a restaurant in 1958, Haggard was booked into the Bakersfield Jail. He rapidly escaped, prompting a manhunt that was followed on the local television news. A shoot-on-sight order was reportedly given to police. Haggard was lucky to have been taken alive. When he was finally captured, he was sentenced to 15 years in the notorious San Quentin prison. He served three before he was paroled.

It was in San Quentin that Haggard saw Johnny Cash perform, during one of Cash's many concerts before prison audiences. Haggard credited the performance with turning his life around, causing him to seriously consider pursuing a career in music. He joined the prison band not long after the Cash concert. He was paroled in 1960. His first album *Strangers* was released in 1965.

Along with Buck Owens, Wynn Stewart, Jean Shepard and others, Merle Haggard's recordings embodied the Bakersfield Sound. Unlike most country music, the Bakersfield Sound embraced the heavy backbeat of rock 'n' roll and incorporated the swing of Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. The Bakersfield musicians rejected the slick production style coming out of Nashville at the time, favoring instead the sound of a small live band, not unlike what could be heard at any local honky tonk. Haggard's backing band, The Strangers, featuring the exceptional lead guitarist Roy Nichols, was among the most exciting in country music.

Not surprisingly, prison life would be a central theme in Haggard's music. In his 1967 single, "Branded Man," Haggard told the story of an ex-con struggling to assimilate into the outside world. Haggard's voice, sad but sober, avoids the self-pitying tones that are common to country music. "I'd like to

hold my head up and be proud of who I am,” sings Haggard, “but they won’t let my secret go untold. I paid the debt I owed ’em but they’re still not satisfied. Now I’m a branded man out in the cold.”

On “Sing Me Back Home,” Haggard sings of a death-row inmate asking to hear the songs of his childhood one last time before his execution. This song, too, had a basis in real-life events. While in San Quentin, Haggard had befriended a man who escaped, shot a police officer and was later executed at the prison.

“Mama Tried” was among Haggard’s best. “I turned 21 in prison doing life without parole...” goes the chorus. With his steadily ascending repetition of the phrase “mama tried,” Haggard suggests the prolonged effort of the unsuccessful mother to set her child on the right path. It’s worth noting that the US prison population in 1968, when “Mama Tried” was released, numbered 188,000. According to the latest statistics, for 2013, the US prison population has since climbed to 1,574,700.

In “If We Make It Through December,” Haggard tells the story of a working class family facing a difficult financial situation during Christmas. The family tries to convince itself the future will be better: “If we make it through December, everything’s going to be alright I know.”

“Irma Jackson,” released in 1972 but written several years before, was Haggard’s song in defense of interracial marriage. Capitol Records forced him to withhold the song for a number of years.

“Swinging Doors” and “The Bottle Let Me Down,” from 1966, as well as “Workin’ Man Blues” and “Silver Wings,” from 1969—all the singer’s compositions—are also especially memorable. Remarkable too are Haggard’s versions of 20 Jimmie Rodgers songs on his 1969 album *Same Train, A Different Time*—at least the tracks that do not suffer from sentimentality (some of which is in the Rodgers originals).

While Haggard wrote and sang movingly about each of these subjects, it would be a mistake to turn him into some sort of political hero. He was a contradictory figure capable of expressing left-leaning sentiments on one song before shifting suddenly to the right on his next.

Haggard responded to the anti-war protests of the Vietnam era with two right-wing, pseudo-populist anthems, “Okie from Muskogee” (1969) and “The Fightin’ Side of Me” (1970). The former is such a ridiculous song that Haggard has often been credited with parodying ultra-right jingoism. Unfortunately, no, he was quite serious.

With its famous opening line, “We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee,” “Okie from Muskogee” was intended as a defense of “ordinary” American folk against the hippie counterculture. In 2010, Haggard told *The Boot* his reasons for writing the song:

“When I was in prison, I knew what it was like to have freedom taken away. Freedom is everything. During Vietnam,

there were all kinds of protests. Here were these [servicemen] going over there and dying for a cause—we don’t even know what it was really all about—and here are these young kids, that were free, bull---ing about it. There’s something wrong with that and with [disparaging] those poor guys. We were in a wonderful time in America, and music was in a wonderful place. America was at its peak, and what the hell did these kids have to complain about?”

Haggard was tapping into and encouraging the resentment of more backward layers of the population toward the student protesters. To say that it was a “wonderful time in America” in the late 1960s, the period of mass upheavals in the inner cities, was self-deception at the very least. “Okie from Muskogee” and “The Fightin’ Side of Me” are Haggard at his worst, pandering to notions about the idyllic, simple life in small-town America—which were myths then and far more so now.

Haggard’s work would continue along this zigzagging pattern in the years and decades to follow. In 1989, he sang “Me and Crippled Soldiers Give a Damn” in opposition to the Supreme Court ruling that found that burning the American flag was a form of protected speech. Then, in the early 2000s, he opposed the Iraq War in songs like “That’s the News” (2003) and the confused “America First” (2005). He also made an appearance in Barry Levinson’s *Wag the Dog* (1997), which scathingly lampooned the media manufacturing of “human rights” crises to justify US military interventions and divert attention from events at home.

But for all the unevenness of his later work, those remarkable recordings of the late 1960s and early 1970s remain. At its best and most honest, Haggard’s music captured something essential and truthful about working class life at the end of the postwar boom in the United States. He often exposed, perhaps in spite of himself, the truth lurking behind the sentimental story of American exceptionalism present in his least successful music and which he so often promoted in interviews.



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