

“There is no one in contemporary country music who has created a more impressive legacy, or one that opens a wider variety of styles...taken as a whole, the body of work that he has created is absolutely staggering.”
Peter Guralnick, Lost Highway

“He is playing a very personal brand of music that is strongly rooted in the American past. Music that synthesizes the work of long departed artists from virtually every field of American popular music are being woven together in a totally organic manner.”
Tim Schneckloth, Downbeat, May, 1980

“He is the greatest country artist of our times.”
Jim Miller, Rolling Stone

merle haggard

If the question were asked, “Who forged the genre that is known today as ‘modern country music’?,” only a tiny group of country immortals could step forward to share the spotlight. One, out of that select handful, would be Merle Haggard. Merle wasn’t in the delivery room on the morning country music was born; it simply seems like he was. And you won’t hear anybody refer to him as the father of country music. But many will swear he’s at least its godfather.

What gray poupon has meant to mustard, Haggard has meant to country music. Like rock ’n roll without Presley, and like Sears without Roebuck, country music without Haggard simply isn’t!

Few country devotees, be they oldtimers or neophytes, are unfamiliar with the craggy Haggard mask of a thousand photographs - that countenance that’s been etched by time and experience like the granite face of your favorite cliff. And even fewer are those who are unfamiliar with the evocative Haggard delivery that has spawned an entire school of country vocal stylists.

In the ever-expanding array of country music stars, hitmakers and idols, Haggard walks in no man’s shadow. Instead, he casts a far-reaching shadow of his own. Rare is the country balladeer that has mastered the idiom at so many different levels as has he.

In listening to his uncanny craftsmanship, one quickly recognizes that this is a consummate troubadour who could have carved his niche as either a songwriter, a musician or a singer, so gifted was he in all those areas. Instead he chose to expand and hone his talents in many dimensions simultaneously, developing his name as the quintessential country artiste, rural America’s Renaissance man, whose caliber will long provide a standard for all country artists who follow.

Haggard’s life path has never been easy, nor has much of it been pretty, as aired in his 1981 book, *Sing Me Back Home*. His childhood years were spent in Bakersfield, California, and the death of his father, when Merle was just nine years old, became the catalyst that led to a squandered youth. At the same time, his love for the wandering songs of such as Jimmie

Rodgers, lead to an errant passion for the gleaming, endless railroad tracks and the siren song of slow freights and hobo jungles. And, along the way, to numerous brushes with the law.

Unfocused, unruly and unsettled, Merle learned early to walk the mean streets. As a teenager he took on every unskilled job that would have him, from oil field roustabout to hay-pitcher to short order cook. And that was the bright side. He also saw the insides of various penal institutions for crimes ranging from burglary to auto theft and even to escape. Before he had reached the age of 21, and not long after he married his first wife, Leona, he was serving time in the notorious San Quentin Penitentiary, thanks to a bungled attempt at burglarizing a tavern. But the three year stretch within those gray and desolate walls, including a stint in solitary confinement (for making home brew), became the experience that finally changed his perspective and the spark that turned his head around. He abruptly assumed the role of a model prisoner and was paroled in 1960. (Over a decade later, in 1972, California's governor Ronald Reagan granted him a full pardon.)

By the time he regained his freedom, he and Leona had four children, but the marriage had already fallen apart. But better times loomed just around the corner. Post-prison life, a typical tale of scratching out a meager survival, also became the beginning of his untypical musical career. Although he had made his stage debut at 15, sitting in on a Lefty Frizzell performance, it wasn't until after San Quentin that Merle joined a band as rhythm/bass guitarist and began to sing in the clubs and the dives of the infamous "beer can hill" area of Bakersfield.

In one brief stretch his life took a major turnaround. He was signed by Tally Records, owned by close friend Lewis Tally, and began cutting singles in a garage behind Tally's house. His first single was "Singing My Heart Out," which received some regional airplay on the West Coast, but it was in 1963 that he eventually broke into the top twenty of Billboard's country charts with his first national hit, "Sing A Sad Song."

Since then the country charts have been his second home. His next few singles -- "(All My Friends Are Gonna Be) Strangers," "Swinging Doors" and "The Bottle Let Me Down" -- all landed within the Top 10. Meanwhile, in the midst of this exciting period, he married Bonnie Owens, who also recorded for Tally, and his contract was sold to Capitol Records. And his career was ready to soar to rarefied heights. In 1966 he entered the Number One spot for the first time with "I'm A Lonesome Fugitive," and he won his first Top Male Vocalist of the Year award from the Academy of Country Music.

With a perfectionist's attention to detail, he painstakingly pieced together his new band, The Strangers. His diligence in that area, as in many others, has not gone unrewarded. The Strangers since have become known as one of country music's finest road bands, and they themselves have been the recipients of a number of industry accolades, including being eight-time winners of the Academy of Country Music's Touring Band of the Year Award, as well as, a pair of Music City News awards for Band of the Year. They have also recorded several albums of their own.

In '68, the label released "The Legend of Bonnie and Clyde," which, not unexpectedly, soared to Number One on all the trade charts. What *was* unexpected however, was the audience reaction to the "B" side. With absolutely no promotion or marketing input from the label, the side entered both the Cash Box and Record World charts and climbed to #23 (Cash Box). That song, "Today I Started Loving You Again," went on to become one of the most important and lucrative songs of his career.

(Other of his famed "B" sides, including "Silver Wings," (the flip of "Workin' Man Blues") also became strong audience pleasers, testifying to the impact of his casual and seemingly effortless craftsmanship.)

And, in 1969, with an assist from then band member Eddie Burris, he ventured into the arena of social commentary, voicing his feelings in "Okie From Muskogee," the song that was to have the most dramatic impact on his career. Released during the height of national conflict over Viet Nam, it was also to be his most controversial. (And, another #1 record for Hag.)

At the end of the 70's, after over a decade with Capitol Records and of marriage to wife Bonnie, both associations came to an end. In 1977, Haggard signed with MCA Records and continued his long term lease on the #1 position with a string of chart-topping singles, including "Think I'll Just Stay Here and Drink" and "Rainbow Stew." A year after signing with MCA, his marriage with Bonnie was dissolved. (True to the quizzical nature of his character, the two still remain friends, and Bonnie continues to sing and tour with Merle.) Immediately after his divorce from Bonnie, he married his third wife, Leona Williams, also a recording artist. And, eventually, Merle departed his longtime home area of Bakersfield. He relocated to his current home, a 150-acre spread on Lake Shasta.

In 1981, he signed with Epic Records, adding more #1 plaques to his wall, including "Yesterday's Wine," the title single from his powerful album duet with country music titan, George Jones. That same year he released another landmark album with another legendary country singer-songwriter (and a longtime friend), Willie Nelson, who is now a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame. The title cut from that album, "Poncho and Lefty," was also a Number One record for Merle.

In the mid-80's, he and Leona were divorced, and his later marriage to Debbie Parret also ended in divorce. Merle eventually married Theresa Ann Lane, his current wife, and the pair have two children, Janessa and Bennie.

Merle signed with Curb Records in 1990.

As a singer, Merle openly admits to "borrowing" the stylings of his idols, Lefty Frizzell, Bob Wills and Jimmie Rodgers, in his early years, and speaks of such beyond-the-genre influences upon his music as Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby. Still, it's his own charismatic individuality, along with those rich vocal textures that so well express the heart and soul of Haggard, that has always come shining through.

In addition to his vocal performance, he has also spent a great deal of time perfecting his instrumental skills. Over the years he has also developed into a remarkable lead guitarist, as well as a proficient fiddle player, both skills being woven into the fabric of his live performances.

What he has added to the archives of country music as a songwriter, however, will live on far beyond the prestigious accomplishments of the flesh-and-bones performer. In terms of style and material he has brought a dimension of lyrical depth and musical sophistication to country music that was heretofore unavailable. While the bulk of country song material of his time was dealing with the pangs of lost, found or unrequited love, Haggard was digging deep within his own emotional background and setting his dark and somber experience to music. Over the years Merle has become accepted as the bard of uncommon poems of the common working man, anthems born with dirt under their fingernails.

His early years of pain and tribulation provided him with infinite raw material to be spun into the rich imagery that is now indelibly imprinted on the idiom. His days outside the law were woven into “Lonesome Fugitive,” “Sing Me Back Home” and “Branded Man,” his understanding of his mother’s torment led to “Mama Tried” and “Hungry Eyes” while his affinity for the hourly laborer produced such as “Workin’ Man Blues” and “5:01 Blues.”

Ultimately he has had scores of charted singles (mostly his own compositions), and his list of credits continued to grow:

- ▲ to date he has written hundreds of songs, including the classics “Sing Me Back Home,” “Okie From Muskogee” and “Silver Wings,” among others.
- ▲ over 40 of his singles have attained the Number One position in the major trade magazines.
- ▲ the former “B” side, “Today I Started Loving You Again,” has been recorded by over 400 artists to date.
- ▲ 56 of his songs have received awards from BMI (47 country, 9 pop).
- ▲ three of his songs have logged over a million plays (“Today I Started Loving You Again,” “Okie From Muskogee” and “Big City”).
- ▲ he has released over 65 albums, most of which have charted in the major trades.
- ▲ four of his albums have been certified gold.
- ▲ he has been nominated 42 times for CMA awards, more than any other male country entertainer.
- ▲ his honors from the major country music industry associations and trade publications include:
 - 18 awards from the ACM, including Male Vocalist and Entertainer of the Year
 - six from the CMA, including Top Male Vocalist and Entertainer of the Year;
 - eight from Cash Box; four from Record World; and five from Music City News
- ▲ he received Best Country Video in 1983 from the American Video Awards (“Are The Good Times Really Over”).
- ▲ he landed a Grammy Award in 1984 for Best Male Country Vocal Performance (“That’s The Way Love Goes”).

▲ he performed at the White House for Richard Nixon in '73 and also performed for Ronald and Nancy Reagan's anniversary celebration at their "Western White House" ranch in California.

▲ he was the first country artist ever to appear on the cover of Downbeat, one of the nation's most influential Jazz publications

▲ his music was part of the Apollo 16 mission to the moon, via a custom recording, specially requested by the crew.

▲ he's been in films, including a cameo appearance in the Clint Eastwood film Bronco Billy, and has had dramatic roles on several network TV productions.

Integrally related to all his writing and performing skills is Merle's dedication and passion for researching the history of the music that inspires him. His deep love for the roots and the development of numerous forms of music is reflected in such album releases as:

Same Train, Different Time, a tribute to his early idol, Jimmie Rodgers.

A Tribute to the Best Damn Fiddle Player in the World (Or My Salute to Bob Wills) lauding another of his major musical influences.

A Land of Many Churches, recorded with members of the Carter Family in the Nashville Union Rescue Mission as well as a number of rural churches across the country

I Love Dixie Blues, a tribute to Dixieland music, cut in New Orleans.

Singer, songwriter, remarkable musician, bandleader and historian, Haggard may well be the most well-rounded country talent ever to take the stage in front of a microphone or an audience. Over his career, he has been the pulse of an ever-lonesome fugitive, in desperate flight from the prison walls of mediocrity. His has been the voice of the Okie with an attitude, fueled by a well-stoked fire of unflinching convictions and bone-deep beliefs. In his music he has hung his soul out on the line, baring himself in those songs clawed out of the soil and bonded together with grit and spit. As a result, that music is not only resounded in such typical entertainment channels as radio, records and concert dates, but has also been integrated into the university classroom setting where students examine the sociological implications of his works.

His accomplishments would lead some to sum him up with a catchall cliché like "legend," but legends are about the past, about those who are about to be swept off into some dusty corner record bin somewhere. Haggard can't be pinpointed in the past. And he won't be found rockin' and whittlin' with a shoebox full of yesterday's memories. His music speaks to country audiences today, while his mind and talents flirt with a new millennium.

Merle Haggard's not just a legend with a P O box in once-upon-a-time; he's a permanent condition of country music's soul.

More to come...

merle haggard awards

Academy of Country Music

1995	Pioneer Award
1982	Song of the Year / Artist / “Are The Good Times Really Over”
1982	Song of the Year / Composer / “Are The Good Times Really Over”
1981	Top Male Vocalist of the Year
1974	Top Male Vocalist of the Year
1972	Top Male Vocalist of the Year
1970	Top Male Vocalist of the Year
1970	Entertainer of the Year
1969	Song of the Year / Artist / “Okie From Muskogee”
1969	Song of the Year / Composer / “Okie From Muskogee”
1969	Single of the Year “Okie From Muskogee”
1969	Album of the Year “Okie From Muskogee”

1969	Top Male Vocalist of the Year
1969	Top Vocal Duet with Bonnie Owens / Johnny Mosby & Jonie
1967	Top Vocal Duet with Bonnie Owens
1966	Top Male Vocalist of the Year
1966	Top Vocal Duet with Bonnie Owens
1965	Most Promising New Artist
1965	Top Vocal Duet with Bonnie Owens

THE STRANGERS, Merle Haggard's Touring Band, has been awarded Touring Band of the Year for 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1975, 1981 and 1987 by the Academy of Country Music.

Broadcast Music, Inc.

1988	"Twinkle, Twinkle, Lucky Star"	Country
1987	"Star"	"
1986	"I've Had A Beautiful Time"	"
1985	"Lookin' For A Place To Fall Apart"	"
1985	"Someday When Things Are Good"	"
1984	"Someday When Things Are Good"	"
1984	"Good"	"
1983	"Let's Chase Each Other Round The Room"	Pop
1983	"Reason To Quit"	Country
1982	"C.C. Waterback"	Pop
1982	"Going Where The Lonely Go"	"
1982	"Going Where The Lonely Go"	Country
1982	"Going Where The Lonely Go"	"
1982	"Going Where The Lonely Go"	"
1982	"Are The Good Times Really Over"	"
1981	"Are The Good Times Really Over"	Pop
1981	"Over"	Country
1981	"Big City"	Pop
1980	"Big City"	Country
1980	"Leonard"	"
1980	"My Favorite Memory"	"
1979	"Rainbow Stew"	"
1978	<u>BMI Cont'd</u>	"
1978	"Think I'll Just Stay Here And Drink"	"
1976	"Think I'll Just Stay Here And Drink"	"
1976	"Think I'll Just Stay Here And Drink"	"
1976	"Rainbow Stew"	"

1975	“Red Bandana”	“
1975	“My Own Kind Of Hat”	“
1975	“The Bull And The Beaver”	Pop
1974	“It’s Been A Great	Country
1974	Afternoon”	“
1974	“From Graceland To The	Pop
1974	Promised Land”	Country
1973	“Ramblin’ Fever”	“
1973	“Movin’ On”	“
1973	“Always Wanting You”	“
1972	“That’s All In The Movies”	“
1972	“Today I Started Loving You	“
1971	Again”	“
1971	“Things Aren’t Funny	“
1970	Anymore”	Pop
1970	“The Old Man From The	Country
1970	Mountain”	“
1970	“Movin’ On”	“
1970	“A Shoulder To Cry On”	“
1970	“Everybody’s Had The	“
1970	Blues”	“
1969	“If We Make It Through	Pop
1969	December”	Country
1969	“If We Make It Through	“
1969	December”	“
1968	“Grandma Harp”	“
1966	“Today I Started Loving You	“
	Again”	
	“I Wonder If They Ever	
	Think Of Me”	
	“Daddy Frank (The Guitar	
	Man)”	
	“Someday We’ll Look Back”	
	“I Can’t Be Myself”	
	“Jesus Take A Hold”	
	“Okie From Muskogee”	
	“Workin’ Man Blues”	
	“Fightin’ Side Of Me”	
	“Hungry Eyes”	
	“Today I Started Loving You	
	Again”	
	“I Take A Lot Of Pride In	
	What I Am”	

“Okie From Muskogee”
“I Take A Lot Of Pride In
What I Am”
“The Legend of Bonnie And
Clyde”
“Mama Tried”
“I Take A Lot Of Pride In
What I Am”
“Branded Man”
“Swingin Doors”

Country Music Association

1983	Vocal Duo of the Year with Willie Nelson
1972	Album of the Year “Let Me Tell You About A Song”
1970	Entertainer of the Year
1970	Male Vocalist of the Year
1970	Single of the Year “Okie From Muskogee”
1970	Album of the Year “Okie From Muskogee”

Merle has been nominated 43 times for CMA Awards, more than any other entertainer.

Music City News

1989	Living Legend
1970	Songwriter of the Year
1968	Male Artist of the Year
1967	Male Artist of the Year

Gold Albums

1989	<u>Eleven Winners</u>
1982	<u>Poncho and Lefty</u>
1981	<u>Big City</u>
1974	<u>The Best of the Best of Merle Haggard</u>
1972	<u>The Best of Merle Haggard</u>
1971	<u>The Fightin’ Side of Me</u>
1970	<u>Okie From Muskogee</u>

Nashville Songwriter's Association

1981	Songwriter of the Year
1969	Songwriter of the Year

MERLE HAGGARD has received eight Grammy Nominations and won Best Country Vocal Performance, Male for "That's The Way Love Goes" in 1984.