

# Time Out

## HAGGARD:

'Never been nobody's idol...'



Merle Haggard & Faron Young play at AUC Sept 24th.

Americans seem to have a curious knack for avoiding their own identities and searching for heroes to give them one. Moreover, once they think they've found one, they try to mold him into a comfortable image, one that satisfies both their boldest fantasies and their need for security. Popular music has always been rampant with such images, as in the '60's, when people were turning to such diverse personalities as Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash to express for them a commitment or truth that was beyond the realm of their own dull and sheltered lives. Rarely however, is there as much "congruence" between the image and the reality, as there is in the case of Merle Haggard. The son of a dustbowl Okie migrant, Haggard is as fitting yet reluctant a hero as you will find -- his songs reflect a unique vision of America, and they ring with the truth, integrity and independence that so personify the man who writes and sings them.

Merle's childhood was destined to be a rugged one, and the death of his father when Hag was only nine signalled a period of drifting, and an open hostility toward the restrictions of authority. Not wanting to be a burden to his widowed mother, he was constantly running away from home for the lure of freight trains and big cities, as his "Mama Tried" tells us:

"The first thing I remember knowin', was a lonesome whistle blowin'. And a young 'un's dream of growin' up to ride On a freight train leavin' town, not knowin' where I'm bound, No one could change my mind but mama tried."

From the time Merle was 14 until he was almost 20, he wandered -- mostly in and out of trouble -- reform school, stolen car, truck-driving, pitching hay, suspicion of armed robbery, bogus checks, hopping freights, picking grapes, petty theft, working oil fields and honky tonks -- Hag was making it around the Southwest pretty good for awhile, having his kicks, not really hurtin' anybody though. But meantime he was getting pretty popular with the Law too, and in 1957 his nomadic spree came to an abrupt end. --

"Me, two three other guys got to drinking. Couple of us had been out of work for a few weeks, we were talking about how hard it was to get a job. Well we decided to burglarize this cafe. We were kinda juiced up or we wouldn't have even thought of it. - Problem was, we went up there and the place was still open. Here we were getting the back door off its hinges, and this guy comes out and asked did we want to be served or what . . ." Hag and his buddies jumped back in the car

and started to pull away, when the police stopped them. The subsequent search revealed a check machine they'd picked up on a previous safe job, and it was for this that Merle landed in San Quentin with a one to fifteen year sentence.

It was here that the meaning of freedom started to hit home for the 20 year old Haggard. "Life can be a long time when it's not yours to do what you want . . . And you learn about authority when its abused -- a lot of the convicts are better people than the guards." -- In his two years and nine months at San Quentin, Merle worked a stint at the textile mill, got himself a high school equivalency diploma, and played in the warden's country band to boot. When he was paroled in 1960, he made his way back to Bakersfield -- "a better man because of it. I wouldn't trade the experience."

Merle soon drifted into the only serious interest that allowed him the self-expression that had been suppressed for so long -- country music. His father and grandfather had been great honky-tonk fiddlers back in Oklahoma, and Merle had spent countless hours beside the radio listening to Jimmy Rodgers, Bob Wills, and Lefty Frizzell. Bakersfield was beginning to evolve into a west coast country music center, and after doing some time digging ditches for his brother, Merle started playing the local saloons and dancehalls that catered to the ranch hands and oil workers. Hag entered the entertainment business with a wealth of genuine experience to draw on, and for the next nine years he did just that.

Through a friend of his, Fuzzy Owen, Merle started out on Tally Records, a small country label. In 1965 his "All My Friends Are Gonna Be Strangers" fared well on the national charts, and landed him a contract with Capitol Records.

Around the same time, Haggard formed two other partnerships that were to become crucial to him. In order to achieve a consistency of performance and creative rapport, he assembled his own band, the Strangers. And 1965 was also the year he met and married Bonnie Owens. Within a year they had released an album together, "Just Between the Two of Us," that signalled the start of one of the best male/female combinations in country music. On his own, Merle was writing and singing material like "Mama Tried" and "Hungry Eyes", from his depression childhood, "Branded Man" and "Sing Me Back Home," from his years in prison, and "Workin' Man Blues" and "White Line Fever", from the times he spent on the road and breaking his

back on tough jobs. Almost all his single releases reached number one on the country charts, album sales were skyrocketing, and in every sense of the word, Merle Haggard had "arrived" as a star.

And yet it was not until 1969 that America woke up and really listened to Merle Haggard. It was a year of violence on campus and in the streets -- when the six o'clock news was dominated by massive antiwar demonstrations and stories of hippies "spaced out" on grass or acid. It was also the year of "Okie From Muskogee" -- "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee, we don't take our trips on LSD..." What had started out as essentially a joke on a bus ride, erupted into a national furor. After its initial performance at a military base, the stir it created caused Hag to concede, "I had more than a song on my hands."

Haggard had already established himself as a working class hero to some, and a latter-day Woodie Guthrie to others. At the same time he had become a symbol to a growing youth cult who saw him as a rebel, a wandering alienated outcast, perhaps even America's lone proletarian folk poet, preaching his hard learned truth from years of experience. It was to these people that "Okie" and his subsequent "Fightin' Side of Me" came as such a shocking revelation. What had happened to the rebellious and untamed son of the Dustbowl? Was he feeding the passions of the American redneck and channeling his rage toward those who were now feeling the alienation he once knew?

There are those who would shy away from a political discussion of Haggard, for again his elusiveness and independence challenge us to think and project. But telling it like it is has become an academic point for Hag, because there's just no other way for him to tell it. -- First of all, the pedestal he had been placed upon was one where he had never really belonged. In an attempt at casting Haggard into their own heroic mold, both sides had constructed an "image" that existed solely for them quite apart from the real and unconstrained man that Merle has always been. Moreover, Hag's politics are above parties and personalities -- they are the politics of humanity, the strained foundation of the American spirit that an entire nation, regardless of ideology, is searching for.

In an epoch of technology that saps the true dynamism from our existences, Haggard has captured the poetry of what American life can be. He feels and understands the rhythm of work and sweat -- of the millions of common people who struggle for simple things. That's what "Okie's" about, and

that's what Haggard's about. Rather than feeding people dreams and fantasies, he instills pride and self-respect in them just because they're good, decent people. -- Listen to the words: "I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee, a place where even squares can have a ball . . ." Sure Haggard loves America, but it's the spirit of a dream he's reaching for, because that's the America he knows and believes in. The anger of "Fightin' Side" is an honest response to what he perceived as a violation of that dream. Looking back, Merle is not so sure that everything he said was "correct", but it's not an issue of right or wrong. What is at issue when you talk about those who respond to "Okie" and "Fightin' Side" are the feelings, the frustrations, and the pride of people who must be reckoned with and respected -- these aren't the ones who make profit off the work and sweat of others; these are the people who do the working and the sweating, the living and dying -- the "real people" as Steinbeck's Ma Joad called them.

Haggard could have exploited the enormous commercial potential of "Okie" and "Fightin' Side" and yet his subsequent albums reflect an almost intentional divergence from this direction. For Haggard is above all, an artist of self-determined direction and unquestionable integrity. Rather than seeking to re-enforce a commercial or aesthetic image, his songs represent a challenge that Haggard poses to himself and his audience to better understand the changes that he and the world around him are going through.

Songs like "They're Tearin' The Labor Camps Down," depicting the plight of the displaced migrant worker, and "Irma Jackson," a sensitive account of the pain and problems of an inter-racial love affair, "in a world that draws a line," demonstrate that Hag says what has to be said. For this frankness he has alternately gained and lost popularity with fans who fall on radically differing points along the cultural spectrum. Merle's "I've Done It All," comes off as a direct response to Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" -- When he sings "Have you ever spent a Christmas inside Dentention Hall," you know he's been there. And finally perhaps, is "I Take a Lot of Pride In What I Am," a virtual summation of the character of Merle Haggard -- a man who sets his own course and judges himself on his own standards, and no one else's.

The point is that if Haggard is any kind of spokesman at all, it is for himself alone, and his songs should be accepted as personal and individual statements. He has

resisted the more ambitious and pretentious role to preserve his independence; and it is this independence that makes possible the expression of legitimately individual statements, for neither they, nor Haggard are bound to a stationary image, but reflect the growth of the man.

Integrity however, is but one factor in the artistry of Merle Haggard. At a time when country music is struggling for an identity, Hag provides the key link between the past and the present. His keen insight into where the music is going is founded on a deep respect and love for where it has come from. Merle's smooth and soulful voice is in a class with all time greats like Jimmy Rodgers and Hank Williams. In addition to the genuineness that comes through in his own songs, there is incredible love and skill evident in his albums devoted to the works of Jimmy Rodgers and Bob Wills. For the former, Haggard shows a great deal of understanding of the conditions that spawned a talent like Rodgers, and his mastery of the "Singing Brakeman's patented "blue yodels" is superb. On his Bob Wills tribute you can hear the spontaneity and energy inherent in "Western Swing." Merle learned to play the fiddle in six months for this album, reassembled some of Wills' old Texas Playboys, and put together a rousing 30 minutes of "wholesome, good-time music."

As musicians, Hag and the Strangers produce one of the cleanest and most innovative sounds in country music. Their onstage performances are tight, almost to the point of being slick, but 200 days on the road produces that kind of professionalism. Haggard's appeal is familiar and honest; he is singing and talking to the people out front, not at them. This directness, which is such an integral part of the private Merle Haggard, is what elicits the respect of audiences who see him as more than just a performer.

It is Haggard's ability to communicate his integrity as an artist and as a man that makes him so accessible to such a large cross-section of American society. And yet, he retains his independence by refusing to be a hero to any one segment of that cross-section. He demands acceptance as the original and unique individual he is, and we all should be. --

Whatever it is about the man, whatever "aura" he seems to convey, you can't come much closer to the truth than Merle Haggard and as always Hag tells it best -- "Never been nobody's idol, but at least I got a title and I take a lot of pride in what I am." --