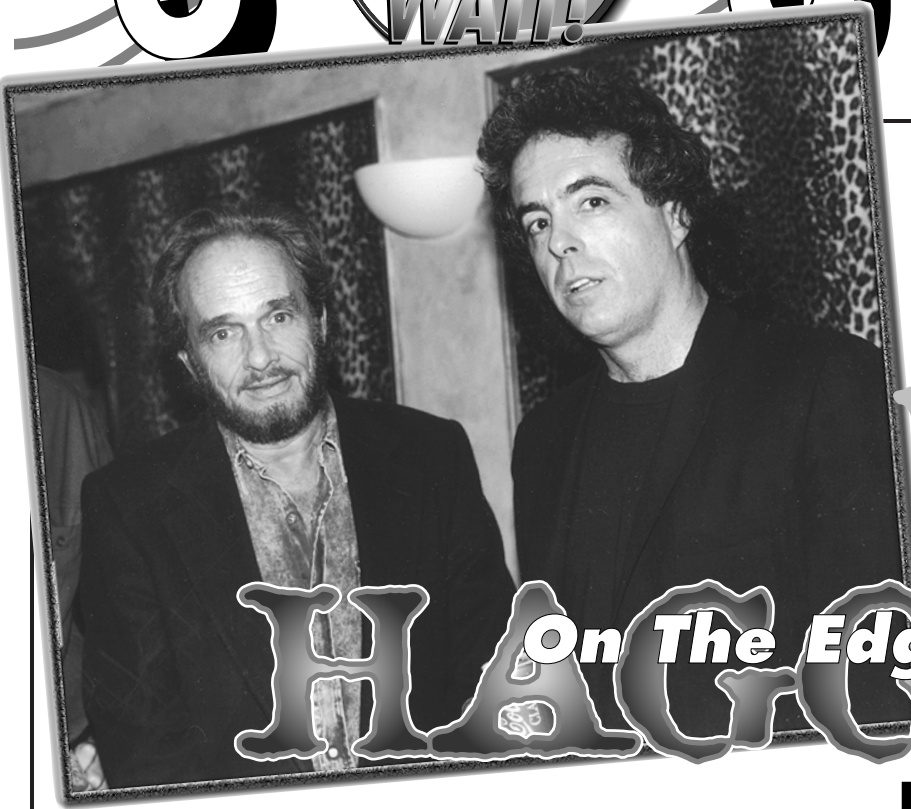


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"I started out even, you know. Now I'm five million in the hole . . . forty-one number one records and five million dollars down. How does that compute? If I thought we could get wealthy enough that you could beat cancer and AIDS and all the other things that are after our asses, then I'd be worried about finances real seriously. I don't really care if I'm broke or not because I can walk down the street and get me a goddamn hamburger with a song."

—Merle Haggard, *Journal of Country Music*

"I'm very country influenced, from quite young . . ."
Merle Haggard."

—Mick Jagger, *Guitar Player*

HAGGARD

On The Edge of Extinction

by **TOM RUSSELL**

THREE YEARS AGO I SANG with Dave Alvin at the Ritz in New York when he opened for Merle Haggard. Merle performed for over two hours; a flawless waltz through his catalog. No bullshit. No set list. He picked out a song, counted it off, sang soulfully and pointed out all of the solos. I'd grown up listening to Merle on the West Coast in the 60s. I was struck again by the quality of the material and the depth of that singing voice. The audience, mostly under thirty, seemed to be discovering Haggard for the first time. They'd discovered Johnny Cash a few years before.

Merle did an encore and packed up. The audience wouldn't leave. They kept stomping. The roadies had to set up the drums again and bring Merle off the bus for another encore. He seemed genuinely moved and amazed that anyone in New York really gave a shit. Here was a man caught up in that legendary rut Johnny Cash had experienced: what does a legend do in the later years? You're still

writing, performing, and singing up to snuff—but radio ignores you. The business folks in Nashville act like they'd be happy to embalm and box-up Merle and George Jones and Cash, and put them away on a shelf in the Hall of Fame.

I talked to Haggard for a minute before the show. He looked past me with that hundred yard stare. The death row smile. He warmed up when he found out I was from California. He started in on some blues stories about Johnny Cash and the Collins Kids. He was just getting into it when the road manager pulled him away. They handed him his telecaster and pointed to the stage.

Two years later he returned to New York. I took a girlfriend to see him at Tramps. She was a big Lefty Frizzell fan; I knew she'd love Merle. Tramps is a loud, obnoxious New York "roots" bar with inflated drink prices, wired waitresses, and a fifty thousand dollar sound system that feeds back all night. It was a step down for Haggard. Merle stumbled on stage, wavered, slid into "Misery and Gin," and tried to find

his footing, like Archie Moore in his two hundredth fight. The yuppies and drunk lawyers began shouting requests half way through the second song. Haggard looked baffled and twenty years older than at the Ritz show. Another night, another bad gig.

I thought of Lefty Frizzell playing out his final years, drunk, on Army bases in Greenland and Guam. The Tramps gig was like seeing Mozart playing piano in a border whorehouse . . . something like that. Pick your own metaphor. Haggard is the one believable heir to Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell; so here's Haggard at Tramps and Garth Brooks is playing stadiums. I'm not out to demean hard working artists, but Brooks, in the interviews I've read, seems more concerned with the quality of the t-shirts he sells than actually crafting lasting country songs. (Haggard: "I don't really understand the Garth thing . . . he's a nice kid, but he's not turning my crank." Amen.)

A few weeks later, I talked to Dave Alvin about co-producing a Haggard tribute record. A group of roots writers singing Merle songs. It would have to be a good one, with believable artists. The tribute record concept has been done to death and

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ONE MORE ROUND**

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most of those records are inconsistent. Dave liked the Haggard idea, and he recorded for an appropriate roots label, Hightone Records. The owners of Hightone, Larry Sloven and Bruce Bromberg, were major Haggard fans. They supported the project from the start.

A few months later I got a call that there was news about the project in *Billboard*. A pro-

If I don't get the respect and airplay that

I think we deserve with this album (1994), I'm going to make one more. I'm going to call it *On The Edge of Extinction*.

It's going to be an environmentally oriented album. And then I'm going to do something else with my life."

—Merle Haggard, *New York Times*

ject on Arista. Wrong project. We found out there was another Haggard tribute record happening in Nashville. I got a hold of the producer, Bruce Bouton, who used to play steel with Ricky Skaggs. Bruce said he was recording "the stars doing Merle's hits," but our album and theirs would be compatible. He was right

... there is probably enough great Haggard songs to fill ten tribute records. We agreed to go ahead.

We wanted Merle on the record, but it was difficult to penetrate his fortress on Mt. Shasta; the headquarters of "Hag, Inc." He had his hands full. He was five million dollars in debt and hadn't been played on country radio in five years—yet folks were doing tribute albums and movies on him, and the CMA was inducting him into the Hall of Fame. In addition to all that, he had to stay on the bus and make a living.

We began recording in L.A. with tracks by Katy Moffatt, Rosie Flores, Peter Case, Dave Alvin, and myself. David Lindley, Butch Hancock, and Ian Tyson were supposed to be on the record, but it never worked out. Others recorded on their own and sent the tracks. John Doe from X cut a track in California and Robert Earl Keen was working on the play "Chippy" in Philly and got the band (Lloyd Maines and crew) to back him on "Daddy Frank." Joe Ely finished his track at his ranch in Austin. Steve Young recorded his track solo in Nashville: the heart breaking, bluesy, "Shopping For Dresses."

There's the guy I'd love to be and the

guy I am, and I'm somewhere

in between. In deep water, you know.

Swimming to the other shore."

—Merle Haggard, *Journal of Country Music*

Dave and I kept working on persuading Lucinda Williams to cut a song. She'd moved to Nashville and got a deal with American Records. We *had* to have Lucinda on this record. I was also thinking of Billy Joe Shaver, and kept trying to contact him. No luck. I went out to work a rodeo in Innisfail, Alberta, rounded a corner of the arena, and ran into Billy Joe and his band. He said he'd love to be on the album. Watching Shaver that night was akin to seeing Hank Williams backed by the Stones. Raw and direct. We cut his track, "Ramblin' Fever," in Nashville.

Marshall Crenshaw cut his track in Woodstock, playing all the instruments himself. Dave Alvin had the idea of Barrence Whitfield performing "Irma Jackson," reversing the color scheme in this song about a mixed-race relationship. (Merle wrote the song in the early 60s and didn't record it for a few years, feeling it was "controversial.")

At this time, I was on the road in Canada and read an interview with Iris Dement where

she named Haggard's "Big City" as her favorite song. I called and left her a message, and she cut the track with Jim Rooney in Nashville. It was coming together. Near the end, Dave Alvin

On modern country: "Some of this stuff

I hear sounds like rock and roll strained through milquetoast. Everything sounds like the same line-dance tempo.

I don't give a damn about line dancing.

There's no soul, there's no feel, there's no story. I'm just a little blacker than that.

In fact, I'm thinking of doing some tours through the South for black people."

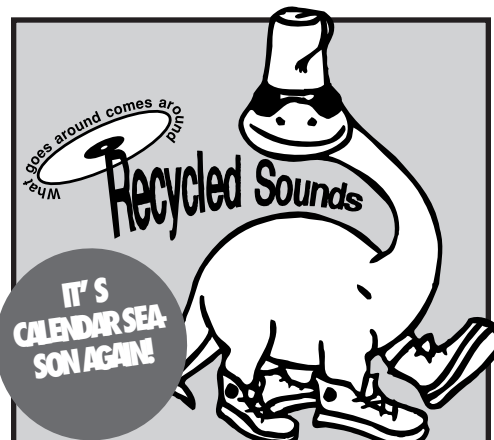
—Merle Haggard, *New York Times*

ran into Dwight Yoakam in a clothing store in L.A. Dave told him about the record and Dwight was into it. He cut his track in Venice, California, at Mad Dog. Just Dwight and his guitar.

Lucinda Williams likes to work against the final deadline. Her track was complete the day before the mastering. The cover art was put together by the same artist who worked on Dave Alvin's *King of California*. Photos were culled from the Bakersfield archives, and Bruce Bromberg found a pair of Haggard tickets from the 60s that appear on the sleeve. There's also a shot of the old Blackboard Lounge where Merle and Buck Owens and Tommy Collins jammed on Saturday afternoons in Bakersfield.

Besides the artists and great songs, there's a lot of legendary guitar players on the record: Eddy Shaver (plays with "Shaver" and has toured with Yoakam), Amos Garrett, David Grissom (Joe Ely and Mellencamp), Andrew Hardin (who's played with me for a decade or so), Gurf Morlix (Lucinda Williams), Greg Leisz (Matthew Sweet, k.d. lang), Rosie Flores, Barry Tashian (Barry and the Remains, Gram Parsons), Lloyd Maines, and Dave Alvin.

We opened the trap door of Haggard's catalog and rediscovered a hundred great songs, and each artist on the record sang as if they'd written the song they covered. I'm confident this record goes beyond the boundaries that cripple most tribute records. You can listen to this album more than once, and it might prompt you to search out those old Haggard LPs and remember the days when "country" wasn't an embarrassing word. Haggard and Billy Joe Shaver are the last of a rare breed of country songwriters. Let us now praise famous men.



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Post Script

Editor's Note: Two Merle Haggard tribute recordings have, conincidentally, been released within weeks of each other: one, a "Nashville" pop country styled hits package, *Mama's Hungry Eyes*, and the other a singer-songwriter interpretation disc, *Tulare Dust*. On *Crook and Chase's* "Nashville Tonight," the former was the main topic, with the latter only getting a brief mention. However, Merle chose to perform "Tearin' The Labor Camps Down," the song Tom Russell recorded on *Tulare Dust*. Then, during a recent press conference, Merle was asked, in reference to the Nashville disc, which was his favorite track. In a brilliant faux pas, he chose Iris Dement's rendition of "Big City" from the singer-songwriter collection.

Merle was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in October, so we decided to give him his due. When we approached Tom to write our cover story, he asked if we could reprint the original *Tulare Dust* liner notes he had written with Dave Alvin, which had been edited on the disc booklet because of space limitations. Anyone who knows me could guess how appalled I was at the idea of editing any artists' written word, so I immediately agreed. Here they are:

Merle Haggard was born April 6, 1937, in a converted boxcar on the outskirts of Bakersfield, California. His family had migrated a few years earlier from Checotah, Oklahoma, during the Great Dust Bowl period chronicled in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and in the songs of Woody Guthrie. After his father's death in 1946, Merle spent his childhood hopping freights up and down the San Joaquin Valley, pursuing a reckless track through reform schools and labor camps, dead-ending in a fifteen-year sentence for burglary in San Quentin in 1957.

After parole in 1960, Haggard turned to music. He played with California country legends Tommy Collins and Wynn Stewart before landing his first record deal with Tally in 1962. In 1965 he moved to Capitol Records and racked up twenty-five number one hits. In 1976 he changed to MCA Records and charted seventeen top twenty hits before moving on to Epic and eventually Curb. Most of the hits were Haggard originals. Along the way, he recorded two outstanding tribute albums to Jimmie Rodgers and Bob Wills, teaching himself fiddle for the Wills project.

Haggard's classic songs have encompassed all styles and topics, from early California dust bowl stories ("Tulare Dust," "Hungry Eyes"), prison songs ("Sing Me Back Home," "Branded Man"), drinking songs ("Swingin' Doors," "The Bottle Let Me Down"), road songs ("White Line Fever," "Ramblin' Fever"), work songs, blues and swing tunes, and at least a hundred great love songs.

Detractors often dredge up "Okie From Muskogee" or "The Fightin' Side of Me" as evidence of exaggerated patriotism, but they've missed the point. Haggard's songs are the work of an uncompromising, honest writer. He may be the last of a breed of great country songwriters that began with Jimmie Rodgers and continued through Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell.

This project wasn't "the stars doing Merle's hits," just a group of acclaimed roots performers singing their favorite Merle song. We mentioned the name "Haggard" and these writers said they'd love to be involved. As we listened back to the performances, we were moved by each singer's ability to get "inside" the Haggard song and make it their own.

Merle Haggard's recorded work and song catalog insure his position as the most important country singer-songwriter of the last thirty years. Go out and find the records. Listen to the songs. His kind ain't comin' 'round again.

—Tom Russell and Dave Alvin

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formidable seductress because it:

1. Ensures you'll never have to keep track of one of those peculiar little HMO I.D. cards. (See 'Victoria Williams').

2. Is way up on the list of wild things you gotta do at least once: i.e., Modeling center runway at the fall Harley Wear showing in Sturgis, South Dakota; wrestling six-year olds to the pavement for John Goodman dabblooms in the middle of Canal Steet; biting into a Quick Trip blueberry muffin.

3. Dress code is optimal: You can dismiss any major embarrassments as gimmick, attitude or bad management—goes without saying to the hair thing (see 'Flock of Seagulls').

4. Speech impediments welcome: A buddy of mine was convinced Trip Shakespeare was singing "Vasserettes!" (a low-end line of loungerie) for sometime before she read the *Lulu* tape cover. And it always confused me why Johnny Fever couldn't say "booger" on the air but DJ's everywhere blared "So come on get nude, little girl!" by .38 Special.

6. "As they shouted out with glee, Rudolph, you'll go down in history." Whereas, I do have acquaintances capable of quoting sweeping passages from Hemingway, John Cheever and *The Outsiders* on command, my power of recall is limited. (But I guess that Ralph Machio was about thirty-two when they made the last sequel to *Karate Kid* and posed the question: "did they really call her 'Cherry' because she had red hair?") The preamble to the Constitution, however, is always fresh in my mind (though I'll have to hum it), and I am very secure in the whereabouts of Lolly Lolly Lolly's adverbs. I think the majority of us out here are Potsies (*Happy Days* as opposed to garden variety.) If you want your ideas to outlast cola freshness-dating, don't assign them in English Lit 3, set

'em to music. (See 'Schoolhouse Rock').

7. Complete thought is not a prerequisite: Lyrics can be nonsense. There's an entire population out there that thinks *the music* takes precedence! So you (as the one group member who can spell "precedence") feel free to jump from one lane of thought to another without bowling shoes and leave chunks of unrelated images lying around like day-old trout in the cereal aisle 'cause this is poetry and listeners should fill in gaps the guitarist doesn't cover.

For instance, one of my favorite Evan Dando lines: "Mortar, bricks and alumnium, step one figure two / I know it's probably not my place, watch the water drain a different way." Powerful, brief, obvious—and no one has to delve any deeper than Hurricane toiletbowl imagery. But peek under the floorboards of those words and you might re-imagine your entire perception of reality, go stag to the prom, carve Devil's Towers in mashed potatoes and never, ever shake the Ben & Jerry's mailing list. (See 'USA Up All Night').

8a. Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em, Tell 'em, Tell 'em what you told 'em: Concentrate on that tambourine solo 'til your writings reach speed, but find at least one killer phrase and work it, work it, work it! (See 'Joe Cocker,' 'KC and the Sunshine Band,' 'Kiss,' 'the Police,' 'the Jayhawks,' that German band, 'Trio' ("Da Da Da . . ."), etc., etc.

8b. Stop, Drop & Roll: One song per killer phrase, please. (See 'Sting').

Stephen King, Amy Tan, and Dave Barry have already formed a rock band to promote literacy, but rumor has it they've been stiffed at every gig. So there's little need for panic. Besides, if a mass publishing exodus has occurred, there are still enough old comic-books to keep Hollywood afloat until John Gresham and Bob Vila finish their greatest duets album.

I just pray that if Jay Farrar of Uncle Tupelo stabs at noveldom before making it big with his new band, he remembers the importance of scrawling "Final Casting Approval!" all over the contract when the book sells to script. (See 'Anne Rice,' see 'Tom Cruise'.)

—Terie Clement

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