

## Merle Haggard: Poet of the Common Man

Merle Haggard started life on a fast track to a dead end, dropping out of school, running away from home, turning to crime, bouncing from juvenile halls to jails and finally to prison before he turned twenty-one. He turned himself around with the help of music, pouring his experiences into songs and becoming one of country music's giants.

Haggard has earned thirty-eight No. 1 singles and the nickname "Poet of the Common Man" for songs that give voice to the voiceless—factory workers, convicts, farmhands, drifters.

Born on April 6, 1937, in Bakersfield, California, Haggard was just nine years old when his father, a railroad carpenter, died from a stroke. The loss crushed the boy, and he turned to theft and other petty crimes. But he also was learning the guitar and becoming obsessed with country music and early rock & roll. In 1958, a burglary and jail escape earned him hard time in San Quentin State Prison, and he spent thirty-three months behind its bars.

"Unknowingly, I guess I was gathering up meat for songs," he recalls. "While I was in San Quentin, one day I saw the light, and ... I realized what a mess I'd made of my life. I got out of there and stayed out of there."

On parole, Haggard picked up blue-collar day jobs and at night played his electric guitar in Bakersfield's clubs. His skill as a musician soon led to full-time work, and he developed his songwriting as his career took off.

"I must have wrote maybe fifteen hundred songs that weren't any good," he says. "And finally with a lot of



help and a lot of people who had written hit songs who I'd become friends with ... I wrote one that was worth keeping, and I think I've written about three hundred keepers or so."

In his lengthy career, Haggard has recorded more than seventy-five albums, mostly featuring original material. "Through words and music, he tells his life story, which is in many ways America's story—a quest for the simple things: a decent job, self-respect, a place to call home," country singer Vince Gill said in a tribute when Haggard received the Kennedy Center Honor in 2010. "And the one common thread through all of it is truth."

Merle Haggard was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1994.

Sources: *American Songwriter*, *The Boot*, *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, *Fresh Air* (National Public Radio)

### LISTEN:

"Big City"

"Branded Man"

"Hungry Eyes"

"If We Make It through December"

"Mama Tried"

"Silver Wings"

"Sing Me Back Home"

"Today I Started Loving You Again"

"Workin' Man's Blues"