



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, and, finally, ending up in prison. But with the help of music, he turned his experiences into songs and became one of country music’s best-known artists.

Haggard earned thirty-eight #1 hits and the nickname “Poet of the Common Man” for songs that give voice to the voiceless—factory workers, convicts, farmhands, drifters. He was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1994.

Born in 1937 in Bakersfield, California, Haggard was just nine years old when his father, a railroad carpenter, died from a stroke. The loss deeply hurt the boy, and he turned to crime. In 1958, a burglary and jail escape earned him thirty-three months in San Quentin State Prison.

“Unknowingly, I guess I was gathering up meat for songs,” he recalled. “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.”

Haggard loved country music and early rock & roll, and, while on parole, 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 said. “And finally with a lot of help and a lot of people who had written hit songs

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LISTEN

“Branded Man,” “Mama Tried,” “Silver Wings,” “Today I Started Loving You Again”



MERLE HAGGARD:
“POET OF THE COMMON MAN” (CONTINUED)

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 recorded more than seventy-five albums, mostly featuring his original songs. “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.”

Despite being in and out of the hospital with health issues in his later years, Haggard continued to tour until his death in 2016 on his seventy-ninth birthday.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING



1. What is Haggard’s nickname?

2. What does the phrase “fast track to a dead end” in the opening paragraph mean? Highlight the words and phrases that help you understand its meaning. Then, define the phrase in your own words.

3. Find the expression “I saw the light” in the fourth paragraph. What did Haggard mean when he said this?

