

## 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, though, with the help of music, eventually pouring his experiences into songs and becoming one of country music’s giants.

Nicknamed the “Poet of the Common Man,” Haggard earned thirty-eight #1 hits and accumulated “a catalogue of work that is staggering in its size, breadth, and brilliance,” wrote music critic Peter Cooper. Haggard was the recipient of multiple Country Music Association and Academy of Country Music awards, and he was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1994.

Born April 6, 1937, in Bakersfield, California, Haggard grew up in a converted railroad boxcar during the Great Depression. He was just nine years old when his father, a railroad carpenter, died from a stroke, and the loss upended the boy’s life. Restless and unruly, Haggard turned to theft and other petty crimes. At the same time, he also learned to play the guitar and obsessively followed country music and early rock & roll. In 1958, a burglary and jail escape landed him in notorious San Quentin State Prison, and he spent thirty-three months behind its bars.

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

On parole, Haggard picked up blue-collar day jobs and at night played his electric guitar in Bakersfield’s clubs, a



hotbed of honky-tonk talent. His skill as a musician soon led to full-time work, and he concentrated on 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 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.”

Among his mentors was country singer Tommy Collins, who taught Haggard, that every line of a song “has got to make sense against your title.” Collins, recalled Haggard, “showed me little methods of proving to yourself whether the line belongs and ways of finding out whether you were able to get more out of a line if you tried.”

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### LISTEN

“Branded Man,” “Mama Tried,” “Sing Me Back Home,” “Today I Started Loving You Again,” “Workin’ Man’s Blues”

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

In his lengthy career, Haggard recorded more than seventy-five albums, mostly featuring original material that often gives voice to the voiceless—convicts, farmhands, factory workers, drifters. “He captures their dignity as they struggle to make ends meet,” country singer Vince Gill said in a tribute when Haggard received the Kennedy Center Honor in 2010. “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. And the one common thread through all of it is truth.”

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



**CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING**

1. Explain Haggard’s nickname “Poet of the Common Man.” Highlight evidence in the text that supports your answer.

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2. Did Haggard’s experiences during the Great Depression inspire his songwriting content? Explain why or why not by using evidence from the text.

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3. What advice did Tommy Collins give Haggard? Explain it in your own words.

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