



50 Years After His First Album, A Feisty Haggard Still Charts No. 1

Written by: Tom Roland

When Merle Haggard headlines the first two nights of Ink- N-Iron Nashville on Aug. 6-7, he'll do so in a rare manner. It's a significant anniversary year for him — 50 years since he released his first album and started a band, **The Strangers**, that still backs him today — and this deep into his career, he's still at the top of the bill, though in a recontextualized way.

Haggard spent more than two decades as a peak country hit maker, but his appearance at Ink-N-Iron is more of a lifestyle booking. He's featured along with Americana act **Hayes Carll** and western-swing outfit **Asleep at the Wheel** in a musical cauldron that also stretches to rockabilly and hard rock. The festival isn't programmed around genres, but around tattoo artists and pre-1969 automobiles.

“Merle is an anomaly,” says Ink-N-Iron promoter **Trace Edwards**, who held the festival in Long Beach, Calif., for 13 years before moving it this year to Music City. “There's only one other guy that can do what Merle does, and that's Willie Nelson. My clientele love Willie as much as they love Merle. He has that same ‘I-don't-give-a-dot-dot-dot kind of attitude,’ and that attitude is really what cements them to my core customer base.”

Haggard's own customer base is still intact, though it's perhaps a different animal now. The Ink-N-Iron booking demonstrates how his different constituencies overlap. Older country fans who have grown up with Haggard identify with the former hits, a crowd with eclectic tastes appreciates the rough-hewn authenticity that he represents, and Haggard sees a budding younger demographic in his fan base, though he's not completely certain why it's following him.

“I've noticed a change,” he says from his home in California. “Everything just feels different in the last six months or so.” Part of that feeling derives from a No. 1 album: Haggard and Nelson recently teamed up on *Django and Jimmie*, which debuted at the top of the Country Albums chart dated June 20.

“That hasn’t happened in 32 years,” says Haggard. “That’s a pretty good change.”

But Haggard also feels different on a personal level. In November 2008, a lemonsized cancerous tumor was removed from his lung, and only in recent weeks were doctors able to correct a side effect from that surgery.

“They had damaged my esophagus a little bit,” says Haggard. “I was able to go in a couple or three weeks ago and have that ballooned out, so I’m able to breathe and eat better than I have in a lot of years.

If I hadn’t have found that I might have been gone here in a few months.”

Haggard’s impact on the genre can’t be overstated. He first made some noise with a small label — Tally, owned by manager **Lewis Talley** — but it was his 1965 signing to Capitol that rocketed Haggard to national prominence. The Capitol relationship, which lasted nearly a dozen years, ranks in influence among such important country artist/label associations as **Hank Williams** and MGM, **Taylor Swift** and Big Machine, **Jimmie Rodgers** and Victor, and **Garth Brooks** and Capitol.

Each of those deals drove the genre forward, stylistically and/or monetarily, and in Haggard’s case, the Capitol catalog cemented country’s blue-collar roots. That was particularly true in ’69 and ’70, when he released three anthems back to back to back: “Workin’ Man Blues,” “Okie From Muskogee” and “The Fightin’ Side of Me.” Plenty of artists have had three or more consecutive successes, but it would be tough to find a trio of *anthems* released in succession, and they’re at the core of his ability to still resonate with multiple fan bases.

“Those are the songs,” says Edwards. “The music speaks volumes, but the personality behind it is really the cementing factor, the connecting tissue.” There’s a consistency to that personality, too. Haggard’s just as feisty more than five decades into his career as he was when he signed the deal with Capitol executive **Ken Nelson** in 1965. Asked what newer country artists he admires, he names **Sturgill Simpson** as “about the only one that I can tell you I’m excited about.” “You hear a lot of **Waylon [Jennings]**, a lot of **George [Jones]**,” explains Haggard. “He’s got something going energy-wise that I haven’t seen in a long time.” Then there’s a new recording, “The Cost of Living,” that Haggard cut on **Don Henley**’s album *Cass County*, due Sept. 25. A noted perfectionist, Henley got an excellent performance from Haggard, but the process tested the latter artist’s patience.

“I was just about ready to tell him to go get f—d,” says Haggard, “but we got it.” He recounts that last part with a hearty laugh. Part of his amusement likely resides in the knowledge that country artists don’t usually talk that way publicly.

But Haggard has never been one to withhold his evaluations — of others, or himself. Early in his career, he came clean about his prison record. He has spoken at different times about his gambling period and about his use of alcohol and marijuana. And when he hit his 40s, he wrote honestly about the aging process in such titles as “Big City” and “My Favorite Memory.”

Haggard doesn't find singing about touchy subjects to be a particularly remarkable accomplishment. But there were female artists during that same period who declined to record **K.T. Oslin**'s “Come Next Monday” because singing the line “goin' on a diet” might suggest to the audience that the vocalist was fat. Those artists weren't willing to be that forthcoming.

“We don't remember their name either, do we?” asks Haggard, laughing again. “Well-behaved country music artists seldom make history.”

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