

> WAYLON'S GONE. CASH HAS BEEN LAID TO REST. BUT **MERLE HAGGARD** STANDS AS COUNTRY'S REMAINING **BLACK-HAT REBEL**, THE LAST MAN SINGING FOR THE UNDERDOG. AT 68, AS HE READIES HIMSELF FOR A NEW RECORD AND A DATE WITH THE STONES, HE IS STILL PROUD AND PISSED OFF BY CHRIS HEATH PHOTOGRAPHS BY KURT MARKUS

The LAST OUTLAW



MERLE HAGGARD DOESN'T WANT TO TELL HIS STORY anymore. "They don't want to hear about the easy part, the good days that you did," he says. "They want to hear about the places they haven't been. The pain they haven't felt."

And if he should be persuaded to share himself one more time...well, in his sixty-eight years he has never been the kind of man to approach anything with half a heart. But it hurts. On the third morning I've made my way to the modest hillside house in the idyllic Northern California countryside near Lake Shasta, where he lives on 200 acres with his fifth wife, Theresa, and two teenage children, it turns out that he has tried to cancel my visit, but the message hasn't reached me. He invites me in anyway.

"This is why I don't do these things," he says. "It's like revisiting an old wound and pulling the bandage off and scraping the scab off. It's too emotional. When you ask about a man's leg and then you ask about his dick...it's like squeezing an orange."

"It gets highly emotional for him," Theresa explains.

"God, highly emotional is not the word," says Haggard. "It's something else besides emotional. It's deeper than that.... Fuck, yesterday evening when I got done, man, I felt like I'd fucking been in jail again."

THIS FALL MERLE HAGGARD WILL RELEASE a new album. I don't think anybody is quite sure how many have come before it; his first came out in 1965, and by 1974 he was already releasing the thirtieth (called, with delightful insouciance, *Merle Haggard Presents His 30th Album*). Within them, he has laid down one of the last great living catalogs of country-music song. Most of the best he wrote himself, songs that did perhaps the hardest and most wonderful thing a song can do—join together a handful of simple, commonplace words in a way that somehow makes them new and true and eternal, their wisdom and poetry hidden in plain sight.

Not all of his greatest songs dealt with troubles—he has written with majesty about love and dignity and gratitude and pride and standing up for what you believe in—but trouble and heartache certainly felt like his most natural neighborhoods: how life is hard, how hearts break easier than they mend, and how it sometimes seems as though everything but loneliness will abandon you, of anger looking for its rightful home, of wanting to stay but knowing there's something just as deep within a certain kind of man that forever tugs at him to leave.

When Haggard first became famous, in

the '60s, he was best known as the man who sang songs about wanderers, fugitives, and the terminally luckless.

"I hate to be that easy to figure out," he says now when reminded of this. "But it's probably true.... I sometimes feel like I'm standing up for the people that don't have the nerve to stand up for themselves. I just enjoyed winning for the loser. I'd never been around anything except losers my whole life."

I ask him whether he wrote so many sad and angry songs because he was sad and angry or because that's what he was good at.

"I had been sad and angry," he reflects, "and now I was composed and in a position to do good for the sad and angry."

AS MERLE HAGGARD SITS THERE IN HIS favorite rocking chair, facing a giant flat-screen TV silently showing the news, it is stirring to think how far he has traveled, not just through time but through history. When Merle Haggard's parents moved from Oklahoma to California in 1935, two years

> "I JUST ENJOYED WINNING FOR THE LOSER. I'D NEVER BEEN AROUND ANYTHING EXCEPT LOSERS MY WHOLE LIFE."

before his birth, they were part of the great Dust Bowl migration westward. They settled into a converted railroad boxcar on the outskirts of Bakersfield, and his father got a job on the Sante Fe railroad. The first thing of consequence Haggard remembers is going to choose a puppy for his third birthday—a fox terrier called Jack, who would live nineteen years and die while Haggard was in San Quentin prison. From early on, he liked music. He remembers noticing that his mother didn't approve of the people close to the family who played music. To her, entertainers were rebels and heathens. His father didn't approve of entertainers, either, on the surface, but in his expression young Merle sometimes detected another story: maybe that of a would-be musician and rebel who had been steered straight by a strong, sensible woman. "I think they were interesting to me because I'd seen that look in his eye," says Haggard. "I didn't know what it was about."

When he was 9, the life he knew and loved crumbled away. That Wednesday



night, Merle had been to a prayer meeting with his mother. He was annoyed that his mother was with him, because he liked turning over garbage cans with his friends on the way home. Near the house, he went ahead of her, and so it was Merle who found his father in his big chair, tears on his cheeks, half paralyzed from a stroke. By June he was dead.

Haggard has always identified his father's death as the event that set him on a different path, the one that would first lead him to prison, but he says that only just recently did it strike him exactly how it has shaped his life since then. It came to him while he was watching a TV documentary about Kirk and Michael Douglas. "I think what I've always looked for in life is my father's approval," he says. "I think that was the biggest thing I was robbed of. And it took me down many paths. It motivates you to do what I did...whatever you have to do, looking for approval. Always making a new record, always writing another song. Who knows? It may have inspired everything."



> HAGGARD AT HOME IN CALIFORNIA, 1979. OPPOSITE, A PUBLICITY SHOT FROM 1964. BELOW, HAGGARD ON THE JOHNNY CASH SHOW IN 1970, ON WHICH HE BROKE HIS SILENCE ABOUT SERVING TIME IN SAN QUENTIN, WHERE HE FIRST SAW CASH PLAY.

ON A SHELF IN MERLE HAGGARD'S LIVING room is an Amtrak conductor's cap. On other flat surfaces are old model trains. Haggard spends a little time one morning discussing a boxed model train with his 13-year-old son, Ben, in technical terms that leave me behind in seconds. Trains have long been an obsession of Haggard's, in life and in song. In the '70s, he had a model train set reputed to be worth a quarter of a million, which still exists somewhere on this property. He even released an album in 1976 called *My Love Affair with Trains*, which included the song "No More Trains to Ride":

*Born the son of a railroad man
Who rode 'em until he died
I'd like to live like my daddy did
But there's no more trains to ride.*

It was the first sign that there was something within Haggard that would have to bust out. "I was 11 years old when I first hopped a freight train," he recalls. "Didn't go far. Went about a hundred miles, and they arrested me in Fresno." He soon was off again. "I grew up beside the railroad track," he says, "and the way to leave town was on a train. All we knew was that there was something out there that was intriguing about being on your own. And it was really calling to me at an early age. I had excuses—I could say, Well, my mother was left with me to raise—but that wasn't the reason. It was just some inner yearning, that I didn't really understand then and probably can't explain now, caused me to jump those freights in search of something."

The irony was that he was allowed to ride for free on the Santa Fe railroad after his father's death, but whenever the spirit took him to ride the rails, that never crossed his mind as an option. "I never really enjoyed those rides I took on the passenger train," he says. "They were just: So what? Ho hum. What I was after wasn't on those passenger trains."

I MET MERLE HAGGARD FOR THE FIRST time this April, backstage at the Beacon Theatre in New York. He was on tour with Bob Dylan and had just played a sprightly set of old and new songs in the swinging country jazz style he now favors, spiced with banter, much of it alluding to the passing of time. "We've been on the road for forty years," he tells the audience. "We're the only band I know that uses nurses instead of roadies." (Such things are jokes and not jokes, too. His editorial page on merlehaggard.com has a spirited defense of the Dixie Chicks' freedom to say what they want, even if he doesn't agree with it, followed by a note of thanks to his dentist.)

Any chance I might have to speak properly with Haggard at the Beacon disappears when, thirty seconds after I have introduced myself, I am followed through the door by the 89-year-old guitarist Les Paul, who, understandably, takes preference. As Haggard picks at some raw vegetables and dip off a plastic plate, they talk about Oklahoma in the oldest of days. There's something greatly touching in the way Haggard, now the senior of nearly everyone he meets, defers to Les Paul as his elder. (He'll later describe this meeting as "like finally getting to meet one of your favorite uncles.") They huddle close, speaking quietly. Haggard nods, and the next thing I hear him say is, "By the time you get close to the answers, it's nearly all over."

> "YOU START OFF WITH A TRUANCY PROBLEM, AND THEY SEND YOU TO JAIL WITH BIG-TIME CRIMINALS. PRETTY SOON YOUR IDOLS BECOME JESSE JAMES AND JOHN DILLINGER."

WHEN HE WAS 14, A TEXAS LADY INTRODUCED Merle to life at its fullest. He had hitched there with a friend. At a brothel in Amarillo, he was turned down because of his youth, until an older, more stately woman in an electric-pink dress stepped forward. She announced, "I'll babysit with him," and soon it was done.

"It's a fond memory, it is," he says. He reminisces how before he and his friend went to the brothel, they'd been shopping: "I went to a hockshop and bought some secondhand cowboy boots—figured if I'm in Texas, I'd better put on some boots. That was 1951, and I've been wearing cowboy boots ever since." (Today's are faded green ostrich. "The ostrich don't like it," he says, "but everybody else does.")

"It was an interesting day. A lot of people say, 'I can't remember anything anymore,' and really I can't, but there are certain things that you can't get out of your mind. I guess they're there because you want them there. Exquisite times."

I ask him whether he was a different person when he walked out of the brothel than he had been when he walked in.

He considers this a moment. "Not really," he decides. "I think the cowboy boots



affected me more. I mean, the gal just affirmed what I already knew, but the cowboy boots made a new man out of me.”

THE WAY MERLE HAGGARD HAS ALWAYS told it, his rebelliousness and slippage into teenage criminality and the escalating punishments he received formed a kind of toxic spiral that dragged him deeper into trouble. He says that it was the correctional facilities he was sent to as a youth that really sent him in the wrong direction: “You start off with a truancy problem, and they send you to jail with big-time criminals. Pretty soon your idols become Jesse James and Bonnie Parker and John Dillinger, rather than Babe Ruth and Muhammad Ali.” When he describes the horrors of these places in detail, I remark that it’s surprising he’s not more angry. “Oh, I’m pretty angry, Chris,” he says. “I’ve always been angry.”

Not long after the young Merle Haggard started being locked up, he started escaping. In total, he says, he would escape seventeen times from various institutions. At times he jumped fences, broke through doors, risked his life leaping farther than men should leap. But sometimes he simply picked a moment when he could just go. “I noticed early on that people looked right at you and didn’t see you,” he says. “If you just walked the right speed, you could almost walk right through them.”

Perhaps that’s how he imagined it could continue: mess up, be sent away for a bit, escape, be sent away for a bit longer, get out, repeat. But then, right before he reached 21, after an incident where he drunkenly tried to break into a restaurant that was still open and the arresting officers also found a stolen check-printing machine in his car, after which he compounded everything by escaping from the local jail, he discovered that this time he had messed up badly enough to be sent to San Quentin.

His offense carried a sentence of between six months and fifteen years inside, but Haggard says that in those days they didn’t tell you how long you would serve, and that was the worst thing of all. As he put it in his first autobiography: “God, that does something to a man’s mind that never heals up right.” He was there for three years. In the same book, he referred to witnessing “horrors too terrible to think about, much less talk about,” though in his writings he has given enough detail—“I watched one man kill another over a simple insult”; “sometimes when I lay in my bunk I could hear men crying out in pain from being raped by other inmates”; “I saw a black man burned to death on a ladder.... The five-hundred-gallon vat of starch he was checking boiled over on him, burning his black skin completely white”—that you pray there was little more.

During his stay, he was sent to solitary for seven days when he was found drunk. Luckily, the guards didn’t seem to realize that it was Haggard who had been brewing beer from oranges, sugar, and yeast and

selling it around the prison for cigarettes. “We called it orange beer,” he says, “and it tasted like orange beer.”

Maybe his time in solitary, where a Bible offered itself as consolation by day and a pillow by night, was the saving of him, and maybe it wasn’t. While he was in prison, he was given a chance to be smuggled out inside a desk that had been made by inmates for a judge’s office in San Francisco. No one had slipped from San Quentin for many years, but the escape was a successful one. Haggard, though, had the sense not to go—the sense to know that this time, running might close down his options for good. When Haggard was released, it was with at least two ambitions: to make something of music, and to never go back to prison.

Many of his biggest early hits, like “Branded Man,” “Sing Me Back Home,” and “Mama Tried,” alluded to a criminal past, but Haggard maintains that the real-life backdrop to these songs was unknown to the public until he appeared on Johnny Cash’s TV show. Cash tried to convince him that people should know and would like him more if they did. Haggard wasn’t sure. Cash at least had a good if hokey way of bringing up the subject. On camera he suggested to Haggard that he felt he had

and thieves alike, you know.” Then, in 1969, came the song that would become Haggard’s biggest pop hit, “Okie from Muskogee,” and that would change his career once more. “It probably set it back about forty years,” he mutters.

There are, says Haggard, “about seventeen hundred ways to take that song,” and over his career he has alternately endorsed and sidestepped most of them. In it, the narrator he was thinking of—*I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee*—was some version of his father. On the surface, and to some extent beneath it, the song was a celebration of traditional conservative American values at a time of great turbulence—of short-haired, drug-free Americans who believe in the flag, don’t burn their draft cards, and are proud to be square if square is what they are.

But Haggard says he regretted the song almost immediately. He feels, with reason, that it pushed away a part of his audience and that it brought him attention he never wanted; the segregationist presidential candidate George Wallace, presumably sniffing a kindred spirit, made overtures to him, albeit ones that were rejected. If there were two paths his career could have taken from there, the one he had chosen was cemented by his next single. He had suggested a song



> MAY 1979: BACKSTAGE AT THE HEADLINER ROOM AT HARRAH’S IN RENO.

seen him before, and the conversation naturally led to the first time they had been under the same roof. When Cash had first played in San Quentin on January 1, 1959, Haggard had been in the audience.

Though Haggard would briefly go back to jail—for five days the press never found out about, in Sacramento in 1967, for driving without a license, which he remembers felt “like five years”—once the hits started, these were golden years. “All I had to do was pay attention, you know,” he recalls. “Show up and sing. All the doors were open. Everyone had a smiling, agreeable attitude. Friends

called “Irma Jackson,” a thoughtful tale of an interracial romance, but he was argued out of it. Instead, he released “The Fightin’ Side of Me”—a wonderful, defiant roar of a song, but one that helped fix him in the public imagination as the champion of angry, proud conservatives who had had enough:

*When they’re runnin’ down our country, man,
They’re walkin’ on the fightin’ side of me.*



that he's ever said anything to. He does not let anybody see his hold cards. He has his hold cards close to his chest."

I tell Haggard that I read on the Internet how, on Haggard's birthday, Dylan walked into his celebration and handed him a present in a crinkled Whole Foods grocery bag. This, it turns out, is true.

"He said, 'Happy birthday,' placed it in my hands very carefully, and turned around and walked off. That was it."

Haggard's recollection of what was in the bag is that it was a fifth of Crown Royal whisky and something like a Bob Dylan T-shirt. "It was very nice, the gift," he says, "but the presentation was worth a million dollars. It was like Marlon Brando walking in and saying happy birthday."

Haggard shouts toward the kitchen to confirm the contents of the bag with Theresa. A good thing he does; her memory is somewhat different.

"He gave you a sheriff's badge," she says. "He gave you a lure about this big"—her fingers are far apart—"and a copy of his book, signed..."

"Wasn't there a T-shirt and a fifth of Crown Royal or something like that?"

"No."

"Who gave me that? Someone gave me that."

"I don't know. He signed the book, a really nice thing it says in there. A really great compliment. And that lure—I don't know if he knows anything about fishing, but it's about this big, for pike fishing."

"There's some connotation about that lure, I think," says Haggard.

"Oh, and then he gave you some cowboy chocolates," says Theresa. "It was original. Oh, and I know what else he gave you. He gave you two magazines. One for real old antique classic cars."

These days, Haggard seems to reduce much of the fuss about "Okie from Muskogee" to its position on marijuana, perhaps because it is the part of the song his subsequent life most completely disavowed. *We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee*, the song begins, and at the time, this was true for Haggard: He had smoked it neither there nor anywhere else. He didn't until he was 41, when he was advised to do so by a physician. "I didn't like the way it made me feel at first," he says, "so they coaxed me and showed me." Soon the cure took hold. "The only thing they didn't tell me," he says, "was how habit-forming it was."

OFTEN, RETURNING FOR AN ENCORE on that recent tour, Bob Dylan would lean down to the microphone above his keyboard and sing these words:

*The warden led a prisoner
Down the hallway to his doom...*

The song, "Sing Me Back Home," is one of Haggard's—perhaps his finest. It draws

> "I'M TIRED OF SINGING 'OKIE FROM MUSKOGEE.' I'M TIRED OF THE WHOLE GIG. SOMEWHERE AROUND MY AGE, PEOPLE BEGIN TO FEEL INSIGNIFICANT AND UNNECESSARY."

on his time in San Quentin and his experience with death-row prisoners: a dark and beautiful hymn about the power of song to release you from even the most awful and unavoidable here and now. Haggard says that Dylan asked him before their first date together, "I've got it in my show—do you do it every night?"

"I said, 'I don't do it at all when Bob Dylan's doing it,'" says Haggard. "It's hard to sing, anyway. It's hard for me. It requires you to go there in your mind, to get there—and to be part of what you're singing about is somewhat painful. You've got to climb inside it all."

Haggard laughs wryly when I ask whether Dylan explained anything about why he had chosen the song. "Not only did he not tell me anything," says Haggard, "I don't know of anybody that's ever met him

"I didn't remember what was in there," says Merle to Theresa. "Thank you for your mind." He turns to me, smiling, and says, mock-apologetically, "I may not know anything, Chris."

MERLE HAGGARD REMEMBERS THE '70S, in a fashion. "God," he sighs, "it went by like it was about two weeks long.... Then it was the '80s, and the '80s flew by..."

When I ask him about partying too much along the way, he swiftly corrects me. "I never did party too much," he says. "There were periods of my life where I was in between wives, when there was a flamboyant lifestyle that was debatable as to whether anybody should have had that much fun. And you know, the Lord knows all about it, and I'm sure that *(continued on page 278)*

in a hundred articles worldwide—the more so when anything kindles (or is stanch) with the dazzling Kate Bosworth.

That said, he's not entirely allergic to Hollywood tricks. For instance, when celebrities stay at hotels, as most people know, they check in under false names, like Fred Flintstone or Jay Gatsby. Billy Bob Thornton, for instance, sometimes uses the name of a certain writer. For her part, Kirsten Dunst uses a musical reference.

"I'm not exactly sure what name Orlando goes by," Dunst says, "but I bet it's something sexual. He's very flirty. And that's easy to understand. You should have seen them in Kentucky: Girls lined up holding signs with his name on them. He was very gracious."

Typically, Bloom regards most attention as a fleeting thing. And he's not interested in spending precious time on fleeting things. Especially tabloid attention.

"That stuff is not a part of my daily life," he says. "Most of it is bullshit. It even becomes hard to have a casual friendship, because suddenly you're 'linked to' that person.... I guess there's got to be a cost. You can't live the spoils without having the flip side of that coin. So you learn to live with it."

Curiously, Bloom is so famous in costume that until recently he was able to blend in when he moved around in public. Cameron Crowe recalls that when the cast of *Elizabethtown* was shooting and living in Kentucky, girls were lining the streets just to catch a glimpse of Orly Bloom. (Though no one except the tabloids actually calls him Orly.)

"He was incredibly famous, but no one really knew what he looked like," Crowe says, still amazed. "In Lexington, there was a girls' national soccer championship team in the hotel. These girls were actually walking the halls—they were roaming in packs—looking for him. I heard them saying things like, 'He's on the seventh floor!' And he was standing right there. Right there. He just disappeared into the culture."

That air of mystery is attractive to film directors. Crowe recalls reading something Warren Beatty once said—that 75 percent of what people bring to a movie is their perception of the actor. "In that sense, it's great

to have a fresh guy to put in the center of a movie," Crowe says. "We don't really know who he is. Orlando is a clean slate. Since Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*, very few guys that age have been able to do a comedy or drama and be that interesting to look at—and to really hold the center of a movie."

These days, Bloom's mother more than compensates for his aversion to tabloid press. (And of course, when it comes to propriety and accuracy, British tabloids make their American cousins look like Huxley's *Illustrated History of Gardening*.) She clips it all, keeps track of his status as "the most downloaded human on earth," and shuffles through the bags of fan letters he receives. Bloom recoils. "I keep saying, 'Mom, I don't want to know,'" he says. "I don't want to see whether I'm on some chart. There will be a time when I won't be. That doesn't mean I'm not grateful. But I keep telling her, 'They keep building me up, so they're going to tear me down!'"

"I keep getting asked what it's like to be a heartthrob," he adds, much amused by the unspoken joke: *Tempus fugit*. "There's that next kid, believe me, who's right there on my tail—and if he's not right now, he's gonna be!"

Bloom is convincing when he says things like this: offhand remarks a modest person would say so as not to seem like a preening, self-absorbed ass in a magazine article. When he says he has too much self-doubt to believe the hype, there's not a trace of posturing. A casting agent once told him that a little self-doubt will get you a long way: It makes you work harder, keeps you sharp. "If you think you can do it all," Bloom says, suddenly showing some heat, "you're just gonna sit back. Whereas I'm constantly working at it: doing more sword training for *Pirates*, getting coached on dialect to make sure it's as good as it can be for *Elizabethtown*. I'm always working, because the one time I don't, I guarantee, is when I'll end up saying 'D'oh!'"


He looks at his enormous wristwatch somewhat worriedly, for he actually has a dialect session in an hour or so, and more than once he has registered that it's a real

concern for him. (It was also the sole doubt Cameron Crowe had in casting him, though that one doubt was quickly put to rest.)

"Look, I just want to stay normal," Bloom says, very normally. "That's the biggest challenge: being able to sit in a café and watch the world go by."

Granted, wide is the road to temptation and—at least until that next kid catches Orlando Bloom—his world is a sea of temptations. But he prides himself on learning lessons, even other people's life lessons. "My dad once told me that one of his dreams was coming to Los Angeles, getting a Mustang, and driving it down Sunset Boulevard," he says, beaming at the memory. "One day, it came true. And he got pulled over by the police. Know why they stopped him? Know why? He was driving too slowly! That's a great story for me. He was soaking up the environment and he got done! 'Sir, you got done!'"

In more than one sense, Bloom isn't finished. Even at the outset of his career, he's ever flickering with a Buddhist tendency here or there. He chokes at the fact that he's in an industry where it's a virtue to label its products (including actors). Because he has no idea what his label should read. "I'm still trying to formulate the idea of who I am—and part of the problem of having these ideas and images projected on you is that it's hard enough really figuring that shit out!"

Even in the Shangri-la confines of Bloom's temporary home, time does not stop, and the hour is running late. At a dialogue coach's office across town, there's a new identity to burnish: some "R" sounds to harden, a few "A" sounds to flatten out. Orlando Bloom shakes his head and eats one last bad blueberry. "There's only a story in success so far," he says, refusing to descend from the philosophical level before he flees the hotel out his private exit. "That's why Cameron made a movie about failure—about fiasco. Because we all meet in the dirt. That's where we meet." 

MARSHALL SELLA wrote last month about Cameron Diaz.

I'll have to pay for it all. But there was a period of time that went by in my life that I doubt that there were many people on the face of the earth in any period of the past or in the future that enjoyed their life much more than I did."

That having been said, there were five months in 1983 when Haggard, as he puts it, "spun off pretty bad." He had been jilted by a woman who he thought loved him, and his response was to buy \$2,000 of

cocaine and retire hurt to his houseboat. "For about five months there, man, I had quite a party," he recalls. "And different famous people came in and out of that party and saw the condition of it, and I'm sure a lot of them figured I'd never survive." Haggard says he snapped out of it when he realized that he had been on his houseboat naked with some good-looking woman for five days and had yet to have sex with her, though that was what they were both there

for. He says he never did cocaine again.

He mentions a few things he considers to be mistakes over the years. He thinks he shouldn't have walked out of rehearsals for *The Ed Sullivan Show* just because they kept making him dance through tulips and look gay. Maybe he shouldn't have turned down a series of six movies with Burt Reynolds, one of which was *Smokey and the Bandit*. He certainly shouldn't have accepted the advice (*continued on page 280*)

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www.niketown.com

Nitro

www.nitrousa.com

Oakley

800-414-5215
www.oakley.com

Outdoor Research

www.orgear.com

Paul Smith

212-627-9770
www.paulsmith.co.uk

Paul Stuart

800-678-8278

Polo by Ralph Lauren

See Ralph Lauren

Polo Ralph Lauren Hosiery

800-398-1331
(Hot Socks)

Prada

888-977-1900

Quiksilver

www.quiksilver.com

Ralph Lauren

888-475-7674
www.polo.com

Ray-Ban

www.ray-ban.com

Ride Snowboards

800-972-4067
www.ridesnowboards.com

RLX Ralph Lauren

See Ralph Lauren

Salomon

www.salomonsports.com

Scott

800-292-5874
www.scottusa.com

66° North

www.66northus.com

Sorel

877-508-6050
www.sorel.com

Swany

www.swany.com

Tommy Hilfiger

888-TOMMY4U
www.tommy.com

Truzzi

212-582-0042
(Glazer Imports)

Tumi

800-299-TUMI
www.tumi.com

2(x)ist

www.2xist.com

Under Armour

888-4-ARMOUR
www.underarmour.com

Van Heusen

212-381-3500
www.vanheusen.com

Victorinox

www.swissarmy.com

Z Zegna

See Ermegildo Zegna

MERLE HAGGARD CONTINUED

he was given in the early '70s to sell the twenty-five burger franchises he owned from a chain expanding out of Ohio for the \$265,000 he had paid for them; Wendy's ended up doing pretty well after that.



IN THE MIDMORNING of the second day, members of his band start drifting into his living room, where they rehearse, forming a circle that curves outward from Haggard and his favorite chair. Haggard tells one of them that he had a cigar yesterday, his first tobacco in nearly fifteen years. He had been listening to *Coast to Coast AM*, where a guy was talking about the medical benefits of tobacco in a good cigar without pesticides. Haggard thought he and Theresa should test whether it was true. It tasted good and gave them both a little lift, and he's been hankering for it today. "It opened up a whole old can of worms," he says. "Old friend was trying to get back in. Like an old donkey coming through a new door again."

Haggard first came through this part of California in 1953, when he was 16, running away to Oregon with a girl he had met that day, making love all the way on the train. He saw Lake Shasta in the moonlight, and it stayed with him. Haggard

settled up here in 1977, but for most of the next ten years he lived on his houseboat on Lake Shasta. He and Theresa moved off the boat in 1989 because their daughter had started to walk and the water worried them. At first they moved into a cabin on the back end of the property—a cabin Haggard didn't even know he owned; the first time he went to see it, there was a cow standing in the front room.

They've had trouble with mold over the years at various houses on the property, but he clearly loves it here and talks passionately about how he has fashioned the land as a sanctuary for animals and birds. It is also the home of his inspiration, as he explained to a visiting IRS agent. He says that after he walked the agent around and detailed how each bit of the landscape had fed into his songs, the IRS agreed it should be a tax write-off and told him that their visit had cost them \$93,000.

Today, Haggard asks the band to listen to a scratchy old Bob Wills boogie tune from the 1940s, and then they try to duplicate it, his eyes lighting up whenever they come close. After a few more songs, they break. We talk about UFOs; Merle is a firm believer in these and in various conspiracy theories, and he espouses a kind of random, angry libertarian politics. Eventually, I

ask what is the most important thing aliens might learn if they listened to Merle Haggard records.

"That I'm a contrary old son of a bitch, I guess," he says.

He, in turn, has a question for me.

"Do you like peach pie?" he asks. "Let's have peach pie."



HAGGARD WAS MARRIED for the first time before he went into San Quentin. It was a marriage full of tempestuous incidents, including the time his wife Leona jumped out of the car at fifty miles an hour after he moved to hit her. The marriage didn't survive a terrible day that ended with Haggard choking Leona after she'd taunted him in front of a new boyfriend. ("I remember thinking in my mind: *Well, I know where I'll be going—I'll be going to death row, San Quentin.* But I was so upset with her.... Then I came back to reality.") He was married three more times before he met Theresa. She was dating his guitarist at the time, Clint Strong, but Haggard says that Strong was rude to her, and so he felt justified in asking Theresa to meet him in his hotel room after a show and telling Strong to go away when he came banging on the door. If his behavior was poor, his

instincts were good—it is a night that has lasted twenty-one years so far.

I ask Haggard what, over the years, five marriages have taught him.

“It’s kind of like the study they did on the largemouth bass,” he replies. “Some students from a university put 140 largemouth bass in a lake down in Southern California and had an implant in each one of them, and they tracked their habits for one year. And, for example, they had this big roped-off cove just to the right of the launching ramp, and this big fourteen-pound largemouth stayed in there six days a week and on Mondays, when there was no traffic, came out to feed. Then most of the fish stayed along the shore, like most people live in New York, but some bass went straight out into the middle of the lake and lived about seven feet underwater their entire lives. So what it showed was absolutely nothing. That bass are like people, and what makes them so interesting to fish for in America is because they’re unpredictable. I don’t know any more about women than I did to begin with.”



OVER THE YEARS, San Quentin has returned to him—and he to it—in his nightmares. For a while, he had thought he was finally past them, but he had another about fifteen months ago. “It was always the same dream,” he says. “I was back in jail, and I really didn’t know what for. But I was back there again, and I knew nobody would understand why I was there. I had known the taste of freedom, and now I was back again. I had somehow stumbled.”

Was the dream really specific?

“Oh, it was an *awful* feeling. It’s like being lost, like being in a railroad station with your parents and being 4 years old, and you look around and they’re not there. It can’t be described—it’s the most horrible feeling in the world. You, without any help. No one can help you. Once again you’ve screwed up, and you’re behind bars, and anybody that cares can’t get to you.... That incarceration, that awful feeling that comes from losing one’s freedom. Not having the right to be heard. You can scream all night and beat on the walls and rack the bars with a tin cup...and nobody will come.”



THAT LAST MORNING, it is a more fragile Haggard who sits with me. Some of it is my fault, churning up the sediments he would rather have stayed settled. “When you become my age, hopefully your life will be worth as much to someone else—they’ll come and ask you the things you’re asking me,” he says. “And only then will you know what I’m going through.” Some of it is the way he has been feeling. Yesterday, in the middle of a meal, he began to notice

something he has felt seven or eight times before in recent years, a kind of stomach disorder that makes him shake inside and his eyes twitch.

I don’t ask many questions today. I think he figures that as I’m here, he might as well explain how it really is.

“You know, I woke up this morning in a wimpy mood,” he says. “Men don’t like to be wimps. But I have reached the point, it’s really sad to mention, I have reached the point where... They always say you’ll know when it’s time. Speaking of the place in your life when you finally say: Do you want to die on a highway or do you want to die in bed? I’m tired of it. I’m tired of it. I’m tired of singing ‘Okie from Muskogee.’ I’m tired of the whole gig. Somewhere around my age, people begin to feel insignificant and small and unnecessary and not so much in demand.” There is plenty of work out there for him, but its attraction is waning. “I guess I’ve come to a point in my life where... I hate to admit fear. I hate to even admit fear’s part of my reasoning. But I have some dementia that’s coming around, and there’s a bit of a nervous tic—I don’t know what that’s about; I guess it’s growing old. And I don’t feel as bulletproof as I should feel.... I’ve traveled all over the world without a seat belt for forty-two years. Forty-three. And I’m a bit of a gambler and have a feel for odds. The odds are really against me.”

He says nearly all his heroes are dead. He tried to call the remaining two—Johnny Gimble and Gordon Terry, both fiddle players—this morning, but he couldn’t get hold of either. He says he feels like a guy who just watched the *Titanic* sink, and almost everybody he knows is dead. And he’s asking himself, Why should I swim anymore?

I ask what he most cherishes the idea of doing if he stays at home.

“*Doing* is out of the picture,” he says. “When you get to a certain age, you reach a place where you say, Look, I’m all right. I’m not in pain unless I have to do something. Anything I do—if I have to get up and walk over there—it hurts. When you get old, everything that you take for granted goes away, and it’s not by choice. And it finally boils down to how much pain can you stand?” He says that it has hurt onstage for a while now. “I could probably let my hair fall out, and quit dyeing my hair, and just go on out there and look stupid and finally fall onstage. The only thing is, I’d be the one who loses. If I go ahead and stay onstage until I become totally senile, well, I don’t know, it seems to me somewhat silly. Why not stop when you’re still knocking people out? Why wait until you get knocked out? The last few years, I’ve been faking it. I’ve been in pain. The pains of growing old, I guess. The only thing I

can attribute it to.”

I say that surely he’ll carry on making records, but he says he needs to stay in shape to do that, and that he’s hardly written any songs this year. “I’ve recorded an album that I’ve put forth my very best on, and it’s truly good,” he says of his latest, *Chicago Wind*, “but I don’t think there’s a hit song on it. In fact, I’m sure there’s not. It’s all good, but I don’t believe they’re of the quality to pull me out of the aging slump. I thought maybe there would be a song like ‘All of Me’ for me, coming in the later years like it did for Frank Sinatra. I’m beginning to doubt that’ll happen. I spent just about all the extra energy I had on this last project.” His voice cracks. “These are very sad words. But they’re honest.” This is what he wants to say. “You know, I’m not young anymore. And I don’t like it. I don’t like it.”

There’s a steel and sadness in his face, a proud combination of force and frailty; whatever the gracious opposite of serenity is, that is what Merle Haggard oozes. He smiles. “There comes a time when you can’t do it anymore. It’s a double-edged sword: If I can manage to get over the wimpiness and continue to go, I’ll probably live longer and probably enjoy it. But I’m at that pivot point in my life where I can swing that way and give my last bit of strength to the music of my life, or I can give it to my little family here.” He gestures toward the open kitchen, empty now, but through which his wife and children are constantly flowing, past the post on which their heights over the years have been marked. “And music has supported my little family; my little family knows what music means to me. I am music. Music is me, and I am music. But which one is which? Which one do you favor in the latter moments?”



ONE OF THE BAND members wanders in. “We’re doing the last of the article here,” Haggard tells him. “It’s maybe the article that’ll put me on the goddamned shelf.” He laughs. “They’re gonna jump on Chris, say, ‘What did you do—kill fucking Haggard?’”

It is as the random business of the day encroaches upon him that his mood seems to lighten, or at least to leave wimpiness far behind. First there’s a fuss about a fence being cut and some building being done on the property—“If you want to bust somebody’s head, go ahead,” he encourages a man who works for him—and then some concern about the 1,200 crawfish being delivered to his ponds this morning. The phone rings. He is being asked to do something for those who suffered in a local fire. “Well, I don’t do autographs,” he tells the caller, “but I will play and sing and try to raise some money for you—that’s what I do.” He hands the call over to Theresa. His attitude seems to be that he doesn’t much

want to play an extra concert but that he wouldn't dream of not doing it. When Theresa is done on the phone, Haggard tells her, "Satan is in charge of fires, he's in charge of harming those people up there, and he's in charge of that call. We're gonna surprise his ass. What an asshole. God-damn the Devil in Jesus's name."

The news that really gets him going is that his goats have been at the outside of his tour bus overnight, ripping the rub rails off. He's out of his chair. Those goats have picked the wrong man on the wrong day. "The sun won't set on the same problem," he says. "These goats will be out of our life. I'm tired of that fucking shit."

As I prepare to leave, Haggard's son is putting gel in his hair, and somehow Haggard gets encouraged by his son and wife to join in. Soon his hair is spiking outward in every direction, and he sits in a rocking chair with a goofy grin, like some kind of hillbilly Einstein. More band members walk in, each offering a double take and then looking bemused. "We're going punk rock," he announces. That is how I leave him: his hair heading to heaven, a wink in

his eye, and a final word of explanation. "I am not an ordinary man," he declares.



WHEN I ARRIVE this last morning, there is a sheet of paper lying by Haggard's chair. It is the lyric to one of the songs he has written this year, a song to which Toby Keith, the current superstar of country, will be adding his vocal alongside Haggard's this afternoon in Nashville. Haggard wrote it quickly this spring with Bob Dylan in mind: "He was on my mind. I'd just met him. We'd just gone into the first venue, and I asked him for a song. I wanted a great Bob Dylan song to record myself. And he said to me, 'I don't write anymore—I don't have any more songs.' And in some strange way that inspired it. I thought, Well, I'll go write the song that I wanted him to write."

He lifts his guitar onto his lap and starts. It's a song of measured hope, humility, and the inevitable:

But there's one common thread in the scheme of it all.

Some of us fly, all of us fall.

Afterward, he will ask me whether I think this song could be a hit. It's the only one he thinks might have a chance. There's nothing I know about how the country charts work in 2005, but I hope I know a little bit more about songs and about beauty and about honesty, and about why this one has played over and over in my head ever since.

Some play it smart.... I had a ball. Some of us fly, all of us fall.

"I looked at it," he tells me, "and I couldn't tell what it was about."

For now, Merle Haggard is still flying. Sure, it gets harder to stay aloft. And sure, he can see the ground below, a little clearer and closer each year, patiently waiting for him. But long may it have to wait. Long may we hear the cantankerous flapping of his wings, and the whisper of truth he gives to the wind. And long may it be before even Merle Haggard has to fall in final, glorious protest. 🌈

CHRIS HEATH is a GQ correspondent.

DUBAI CONTINUED FROM PAGE 277

escort me down to the lobby ATM (an ATM about which I expect I'll be having anxiety nightmares the rest of my life), which would once again prominently display the words PROVIDER DECLINES TRANSACTION. It's true what the Buddhists say: Mind can convert Heaven into Hell. This was happening to me. A headline in one of the nine complimentary newspapers read, actually read: AMERICAN JAILED FOR NONPAYMENT OF HOTEL BILL.

Perhaps someone had put acid in the complimentary Evian?



MON PETIT PATHETIC REBELLION

On one of my many unsuccessful missions to the ATM, I met an Indian couple from the UK who had saved up their money for this Dubai trip and were staying downtown, near the souk. They had paid \$50 to come in and have a look around the Burj (although who they paid wasn't clear—the Burj says it discontinued its policy of charging for this privilege), and were regretting having paid this money while simultaneously trying to justify it. Although we must remember, said the husband to the wife, this is, after all, a once-in-a-lifetime experience! Yes, yes, of course, she said, I don't regret it for a minute! But there is a look, a certain look, about the eyes, that means: Oh God, I am gut-sick with worry about money. And these intelligent, articulate people had that look. (As, I suspect, did I.) There wasn't,

she said sadly, that much to see, really, was there? And one felt rather watched, didn't one, by the help? Was there a limit on how long they could stay? They had already toured the lobby twice, been out to the ocean-overlooking pool, and were sort of lingering, trying to get their fifty bucks' worth.

At this point, I was, I admit it, like anyone at someone else's financial mercy, a little angry at the Burj, which suddenly seemed like a rosewater-smelling museum run for, and by, wealthy oppressors-of-the-people, skills for the new global economy, membership in which requires the presence of A Wad, and your ability to get to it/prove it exists.

Would you like to see my suite? I asked the couple.

Will there be a problem with the, ah...

Butler? I said. Personal butler?

With the personal butler? he said.

Well, I am a guest, after all, I said. And you are, after all, my old friends from college in the States. Right? Could we say that?

We said that. I snuck them up to my room, past the Personal Butler, and gave them my complimentary box of dates and the \$300 bottle of wine. Fight the power! Then we all stood around, feeling that odd sense of shame/solidarity that people of limited means feel when their limitedness has somehow been underscored.

Later that night, a little drunk in a scurvy bar in another hotel (described by L, my friend from Detroit, as the place

where "Arabs with a thing for brown sugar" go to procure "the most exquisite African girls on the planet" but which was actually full of African girls who, like all girls whose job it is to fuck anyone who asks them night after night, were weary and joyless and seemed on the brink of tears), I scrawled in my notebook: PAUCITY (ATM) = RAGE.

Then I imagined a whole world of people toiling in the shadow of approaching ruin, exhausting their strength and grace, while above them a whole other world of people puttered around, enjoying the good things of life, staying at the Burj just because they could.

And I left my ATM woes out of it and just wrote: PAUCITY = RAGE.



LUCKILY, IT DIDN'T COME TO JAIL

Turns out, the ATM definition of *daily* is: After midnight in the United States. In the morning, as I marched the 2,500 dirhams I owed proudly upstairs, the cloud lifted. A citizen of the affluent world again, I went openly to have coffee in the miraculous lobby, where my waiter and I talked of many things—of previous guests (Bill Clinton, 50 Cent—a "loud-laughing man, having many energetic friends") and a current guest, supermodel Naomi Campbell.

Then I left the Burj, no hard feelings, and went somewhere even better, and more expensive.