



MERLE HAGGARD

March 31, 1991---

There's no mistaking Merle's people.

The almost mythical Merle Haggard was the headliner of last weekend's Reba Aid concerts at the Pheasant Run Resort in St. Charles, outside of Chicago. The shows were held to benefit the families of the eight Reba McEntire band members killed in a March 16 plane crash near San Diego. More than \$143,273 was raised in a series of three shows. After the tragedy, McEntire canceled her Pheasant Run engagement.

It's appropriate that most of the 2,500 fans were Haggard's. Merle's people are the kind you can count on.

Halfway through a resplendent opening set from singer Lorrie Morgan, a gentleman walked up to the stage and gave Morgan a red rose. With one hand, he removed his black cowboy hat, and with the other hand, he gently turned over the fresh rose to Morgan.

Obviously, he was one of Merle's people.

Then, halfway through a post-concert breakfast a few days earlier at a 24-hour North Side diner, you see Marie, your favorite waitress. Marie is the best because she loves Merle. She reminds you about the double shifts she works on Sunday, shifts that run like dust bowl trails from 8:15 a.m. until 11:15 p.m.

Merle's people work that way.

You mention this stuff to Haggard before he hits the stage. Haggard's personality seems to be chisled from individualistic traits that are fading out of contemporary American society. During an era of blanket conformity, Haggard represents a bitter loyalty to self-direction and self-reliance. One proud ribbon clearly binds Merle's people with Haggard.

They are American originals.

"I think you phrased that correctly," Haggard said, somewhat subdued in a yellow sweater, gray tweed jacket and pressed blue jeans. "Whatever I've come to be is truly an American original, because of the mongrelism of my music and my personality. And I think you can blame fate.

"I was at the right place at the right time in history. I picked up on certain people. My intent was brought on by Jimmie Rodgers, yet Bing Crosby. Chuck Berry, yet

Elvis Presley. Jimmy Reed, yet Junior Bernard. Those people fed information into my soul.

"There was always a button. It's like jazz guitar players who have this little button - if they get too close to the melody, they go in another direction. My character has always been just enough rebellious. . . . Well, to tell you the truth, if I felt like I was conforming just a little bit, I'd do something wrong. Anything to change the pace. I hated to be someone you could count on to do a certain thing. I hated to be anticipated, and I didn't realize how important that was to me."

That's what's so precious to Merle's people. Long before flag waving was in fashion, Haggard was singing pro-America songs like "Okie From Muskogee" and "The Fightin' Side of Me," both recorded in 1970. Long before the Persian Gulf crisis, Haggard was singing "Me and Crippled Soldiers."

"We just passed a long, lasting period in America where it was not the coolest thing to be patriotic," said Haggard, who will turn 55 on Saturday. "You weren't considered to be a very bright person if you agreed with the president. I started writing those songs because I had just come out of a period where I had a lot of turmoil in my life. I did some time."

Haggard landed in San Quentin between 1957 and 1960 for a second-degree burglary conviction. After an all-night drinking bout in October, 1957, Haggard and a buddy tried to rob a roadside restaurant. They thought it was 3 in the morning, when on the sober side of life, it was 10:30 p.m. The restaurant owner found the two trying to pry open a back door with a crowbar. He asked them why they didn't go through the front door like everyone else. Haggard was arrested, was sent to the Bakersfield jail, escaped and was arrested again.

"So I was real happy to be free in America, because I had experienced some of the opposite," Haggard said. "I wrote those songs because I felt there were a lot of spoiled brats bitching about things they knew very little about. I still believe a lot of people agree with that. Hey, I'm an ex-con. I'm just real happy to be on the streets and happy to be an American. Now all of a sudden, it's like the whole country is standing up and saying, 'Hey, Hag, we finally agree with you.' " And Haggard laughed.

But it was no laughing matter that Haggard detoured his tour with Morgan and Clint Black from Wichita through St. Charles en route to a March 23 show in Minneapolis.

"We live under a different statistic than the average (person) because of our excessive travel," Haggard said. "So it hits home when you hear about something like this with Reba's band. Lynyrd Skynyrd. Ricky Nelson. Those are eventful days in my life, and they've caught me in different moods. Ricky's caught me in the worst mood. I just went down. I couldn't understand it."

Country music underscores the potential romance of travel more than any other form of popular music. And country musicians come to more of America's outposts than other commercial artists. That's also what brought Haggard together with the likes of Kathy Mattea, Janie Fricke, Charlie Daniels and Lee Greenwood, who also donated their time for the Pheasant Run shows last weekend.

"It's a uniquely American music that talks about the guy with the white hat and throws flowers in the right direction," Haggard said. "So when something goes wrong, this (benefit) is something you would expect would happen."

About an hour later, Haggard strolls onstage in front of the Strangers, his glorious nine-piece country swing band. They break into "Think I'll Just Stay Here and Drink." Haggard is wearing a white cowboy hat, and Merle's people are throwing flowers in the right direction.