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ST. LOUIS--- Merle Haggard's silver bus is parked on the outskirts of this city, the only place in America where the Mississippi River meets Old Route 66. Which path would Haggard choose?

Haggard seems to like the challenge.

"The road," he says after a sly pause. "Because the river goes to the ocean. And then you have to go around the world again to get back on the road."

Haggard, 63, has lived his life in such a circular way.

His bus is parked at a Ramada Inn between Belleville, Ill., and St. Louis. Haggard is in town to play at Mississippi Nights, a rock club along the Mississippi River in St. Louis. Mississippi Nights is better known for booking rock acts like Gravity Kills and Better Than Ezra.

In the spirit of alternative rock, Haggard is in a feisty mood. It is Friday the 13th. A full moon illuminates the Mississippi River. Haggard loves to talk about rivers, roads and trains. He likes to keep moving, but he disdains change.

"Kern River" is one of the most poignant songs Haggard has written. Haggard grew up in a converted refrigerator boxcar in Oildale, Calif., just across the Kern River from Bakersfield. These days the Kern River is as thin and drawn as the lines on Haggard's face.

"I was at a truck stop in Bakersfield when I wrote that," Haggard says of the 1984 ballad. "We had been there two days. It had been 22 years since I fished Kern River. I woke up that morning. I didn't know anybody in town. The whole place had changed. I wondered if I could fish Kern River again."

Haggard wrote about the seeds of the Dust Bowl in the San Joaquin Valley and in his aching, curling baritone he sang, "I may drown in still water/but I'll never swim Kern River again. . . ."

"I was a stranger in my own hometown," he says. "I'm a time traveler. I was around in 1964 and '65 and I'm still here. We travel these outskirts of town all over the world. We have an interesting view of things."

Although Haggard stays close to the ground, he is promoting "If I Could Only Fly," his first album for the Los Angeles-based punk label Epitaph, which has released the record on its Anti imprint. Epitaph is best known for jump starting the careers of

Rancid and the Offspring.

After St. Louis, Haggard is off to non-punk outposts like the Station Casino in Kansas City, Mo.; Stubbs BBQ in Austin, Texas, and the Tumbleweed Dance House in Stillwater, Okla. They're all better places than Branson, down the road on Interstate 44 where Haggard and Willie Nelson shared the Ozark Theater in 1992.

"I felt like I was under more scrutiny in Branson than when I was in San Quentin," Haggard says. "You couldn't go anywhere. The traffic was so bad you couldn't move. If you were sick, you'd have to puke in the parking lot. Willie and I agreed it was absolutely the worst year of our entertainment lives and we should have been given purple hearts for our contribution to Branson."

Nelson and Haggard first recorded "If I Could Only Fly" in 1987 for their duet album "Seashores of Old Mexico." (They were the Country Music Association Vocal Duo of the Year in 1983.) "If I Could Only Fly," which was written by the late Blaze Foley, was a staple of Haggard's live shows throughout the 1990s. Haggard also sang the ballad at Tammy Wynette's funeral in Nashville.

Epitaph president Andy Kaulkin approached Haggard late last year. Haggard recorded for Curb Records between 1990 and 1996, but left the label on bad terms. Haggard says Curb dropped the ball on his records. In fact, he held back some of his songs during his tenure with Curb. Some of the songs on "If I Could Only Fly" date back to the early 1990s. He has a backlog of more than 100 unrecorded tunes.

"He (Curb president Mike Curb) used me as a billboard for younger acts," Haggard says. "He got people like LeAnn Rimes and Tim McGraw. He didn't do anything to promote my records. I'd like to publicly challenge him to a boxing match."

Curb is out of the country, but a label representative says, "We released three albums on Merle and all three albums hit the charts. When he was going through bankruptcy he asked for a release from his contract and that was granted. Mike still has a great amount respect for Merle."

In 1993 Haggard was \$5 million in debt and he filed Chapter 11. By 1997 Haggard was without a record deal. Kaulkin figured he could have the same left field success with Haggard at Epitaph as he did with Tom Waits' "Mule Variations." Haggard says, "They have a rebellious nature, which is a lot in line with my way of thinking. If country radio doesn't like what I'm doing, maybe somebody else will."

In the early stages of assembling "If I Could Only Fly" there was talk of hooking Haggard up with an all-star producer such as Steve Earle or Pete Anderson. "I'm not interested in that this late in the game," he says. "Nothing against those two guys, but I'm not into something I'd have to learn how to do. I don't want to worry

about rehearsals again."

Haggard recorded "If I Could Only Fly" in his Tally Studio at the foothills of Mt. Shasta in the Sacramento Valley. Haggard has been making records out of his home studio since 1985. "I believe in trying to reproduce honesty, what really exists," he says. "I give them the bad with the good, which is against the grain of technology. Everybody's temptation is to perfect everything, and that makes everything bland. It's refined to the point it's boring.

"Everything is controlled to where it can't get out of line. Nobody can get too close to the mike. You're not going to hear somebody's lips pop. You won't hear a guitar scratch, no human noises at all. If everybody's 8 feet tall, then basketball don't mean much anymore.

"There's nothing as boring to me as perfection."

Haggard cruised to stardom on a similar loose ship. He had his first success with Capitol Records producer Ken Nelson (Gene Vincent, Wanda Jackson, the Louvin Brothers), who basically left Haggard alone. "He sat there and diddled on a piece of paper while I recorded," Haggard says. "He made me feel like I had some wisdom, some information to give. But he also wanted to make sure we didn't offend anybody. One time, he says, Merrrle, do you suppose we should say anything about this interracial love affair?" Nelson was referring to Haggard's 1969 ballad "Irma Jackson." Haggard wrote the song about society's intolerance of interracial relationships at the same time he wrote the right-wing hit "Okie From Muskogee."

"I said, 'You're the publishing house,' " Haggard says. "I'm just the writer. You make the call.' So they didn't put it out. I'm just giving the news. Don't kill the messenger." A few years later Capitol Records finally released "Irma Jackson."

Nelson discovered Haggard in 1963 when he traveled to Bakersfield from Los Angeles to record a live album for disc jockey-comedian Herbert "Cousin Herb" Henson's television show. Haggard was a guitarist in Henson's band. In the mid-1940s, Henson hopped on a boxcar from East St. Louis, Ill., to work in the cotton fields of the San Joaquin Valley near Bakersfield.

Not much remains from Haggard's Bakersfield days. The Blackboard beer joint where Haggard and Buck Owens cut their chops is long gone. Joe Maphis wrote his 1952 hit "Dim Lights, Thick Smoke (and Loud, Loud Music)" after playing with Owens at the Blackboard. Haggard's longtime manager Fuzzy Owen had a recording studio on the east side of Bakersfield. Today it is an abandoned auto-upholstery shop.

"We go through Bakersfield once in a while," Haggard says. "We've played Buck's place (the Crystal Palace). We're due to play there again, but he's awful

gosh darn cheap," Haggard says with a cackle. "Buck's a real tough businessman.

"But it's a totally different world. Its almost like we're living under martial law. I read where you can't travel one city block in New York without being filmed 27 times. Las Vegas don't even stay open all night long anymore. There's no night life in the United States. There's no beer joints. Everybody's totally sober and boring."

When Haggard gets worked up like this, he likes to talk about hanging it all up and going fishing. Sometimes he is serious, other times he is not.

"Aw, I've been talking about that for 15 years," he says. "As long as my health lasts . . . I'm a sissy. If I get to hurtin', I'll go home. It gets lonely out here. The fucking law is laying everywhere, waiting for you to make a mistake so they can come in, look at this bus and see if they can find something. If I quit it won't be because I don't want to travel anymore. It'll be because I found some way to play music, stay in the same place and let people come to me. And I've been thinking about that because I don't want to put up with this new police state in which we live."

Haggard looks out the window of his bus. He calls for a bottle of George Dickel Tennessee Whiskey. The renegade time traveler takes a swig straight out of the bottle and smiles. It is a familiar tonic for an ever-changing world.