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GOSHEN, Ind. The trouble with talking about Merle Haggard's new beginnings is determining where to start. The most ashen voice in contemporary country music has weathered more entrees than a roving pack of Weight Watchers.

Haggard tasted three years of life in San Quentin on a burglary rap and repatterned his life in the prison textile mill. Haggard has been married at least four times and has at least five children. Haggard has recorded 66 albums, which cover 574 songs. He has had 38 No. 1 country hits, which is more than Hank Williams Sr. and Johnny Cash combined. Haggard's confessional "Today I Started Loving You Again," has been covered by more than 400 artists.

New beginnings are old hat for Haggard.

A couple of weeks ago, he concluded a monthlong tour at the Elkhart Country 4-H Fair in Goshen. Haggard was bouncing around the country in his silver Chief Santa Fe tour bus with 8-month-old daughter Jenessa and his girlfriend Theresa, who is Jenessa's mother.

Haggard should have been promoting "Blue Jungle," his fine new album for his new label, Curb Records, but his hourlong set focused on hits such as "Mama Tried," "Silver Wings" and "Are the Good Times Really Over for Good," to which the crowd cheered the lyric, ". . .when a girl could still cook and chop wood." The Miss Elkhart County 4-H Poultry Queen watched with a one-out-of-two-ain't-bad look in her eyes.

The only new song Haggard and the Strangers played was "Me and Crippled Soldiers," which he wrote in response to last year's U.S. Supreme Court decision permitting the burning of the flag as a form of protest. As the Strangers launched into the song, Theresa proudly stood backstage with Jenessa cradled in her left arm. Theresa held a flickering match deep into the Indiana night with the hand of her right arm.

Seconds after Haggard concluded "Me and Crippled Soldiers," he hit the first chords of "Okie from Muskogee," before being interrupted by backing vocalist and ex-wife Bonnie Owens. She pointed out five disabled veterans who were marching onstage, accompanied by the Goshen VFW color guard.

Haggard removed his big white cowboy hat and placed it over his heart. The veterans gave Haggard a neatly folded American flag. Humbled and surprised, Haggard accepted the gift and told the overflow crowd, "We can't follow that up. The show is over. Thank you for coming and good night."

It was a moment that was uniquely Merle.

All of these moments have combined to make for one of the most individualistic stories in country music history. I had two separate conversations with Haggard a couple of hours before his show.

I sat in on a mini-press conference Haggard decided to give to representatives of the Elkhart Truth newspaper, the Goshen News and the Media Club of the Elkhart County 4-H Club. I was surprised at this accessibility from a country legend, but then maybe I've been hanging around rock 'n' roll press agents too long (. . . Mr. Joe Perry can talk to you from his health club by cellular phone for 12 minutes and 30 seconds . . .). I later spent time with Haggard on his tour bus, which is blessed by a brown and white portrait of Hank Williams Sr. as well as Gussie, a hefty little mutt who "hasn't missed many meals," according to Haggard.

Each time the 53-year-old Haggard talked about new beginnings. He said the lack of promotion Epic/CBS Records lent to the single "Me and Crippled Soldiers" was the impetus for him to jettison the label, for which he recorded since 1981. Before that, Haggard was with MCA Records between 1977 and 1980. And between 1965 and 1977 he recorded for Capitol Records.

Moving around is the American thing to do.

"When it gets to where you can't put out a patriotic song that needs to be out," and Haggard ended his thought with a off-key groan. "Sometimes country music is the only forum to talk about some events. I wrote a song about it (flag burning) and they acted like it was an imposition to put it out. It's real simple. Nothing against the Japanese people, but they bought CBS. Columbia Records. Tree Music (publishing). I just wonder how much they really care about crippled soldiers."

"So it really is a clean start. It feels great to be free from that organization. It's just too big for me. You call Epic/CBS, who do you talk to? Hell, it's been sold three or four times in the last week. It's real simple with Curb. We have a six-album deal. He has the artist. He either does the job or he don't.

"If he don't, I'll go and retire."

The modest atmosphere at Curb has had a positive effect on Haggard. A key aspect of Haggard's contract with Curb Records is that he deals directly with chairman and owner Mike Curb, a former producer who is almost as unusual as his artists. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Curb was California's Republican lieutenant governor under Democrat Jerry Brown.

The result of the Curb-Haggard affiliation is that "Blue Jungle" is the best thing Haggard has done since 1987's sparse "Chill Factor." There is a reflective sociological bent to "Blue Jungle," framed by Haggard's truthful baritone. It is a soul-deep record.

Besides "Me and Crippled Soldiers" (the rights to which Haggard purchased as part his \$500,000 buyout of his Epic/CBS contract), the album includes two ballads about the homeless - the Johnny Cash-tinged "My Home Is in the Street" and "Under the Bridge," which has almost childlike tones about "a place to be when you got no place to go." Only Haggard would be able to weave mournful lyrics within the hopeful horn-tinted melody of "Under the Bridge." Haggard wrote the song three years ago, but held out on Epic/CBS.

What makes Haggard's music as poignant as it was 30 years ago is his ability to maintain empathy for the underclass. His father was a worker for the Santa Fe Railroad (thus, the logo on his bus), and when Haggard was born, the family was living in a converted boxcar in Bakersfield, Calif.

With a distant twinkle in his dark blue eyes, Haggard explained, "Some people in this business may not have ever been as poor as I was, I don't know. But I've actually lived a couple of times under the bridge. I can still see people there who probably weren't there last year, who might have been a normal, middle-class family. That is disturbing enough to write about, especially when our government finds it more important to take care of other people. We're a troubled country and nobody seems to care! CNN worries more about an earthquake in Manila than what's going on here.

"Also, I'm a listener as well as a writer. I try to stay abreast as to what's happening musically. I think the desire to be a good musician is what keeps in touch and what allows me to have a well to write from. Jack Nicholson watches movies, I guarantee you."

What is also uniquely Merle is how the same album can also carry the blind optimism of the ballad "Sometimes I Dream," whose slow cowpoke rhythms are peppered by the gentle lead guitar playing of Stranger Clint Strong. Haggard's new 8-month-old daughter is listed as the song's co-writer.

"That was more of an attempt for me to write a song than anything I've done in years," he said. "It's a line I heard Katharine Hepburn say in a movie, and the way she said knocked me out. My daughter was just born in December. Over the years I've given each one of my children a song. It's something that will make them money the rest of their lives. I gave her half of it to get her started in life. She'd been around two months and hadn't written anything yet."

One of the few covers on "Blue Jungle" is Jimmie Rodgers' saucy "Never No Mo Blues." Rodgers' up-tempo country blues had major impact on Haggard, which is also heard on "Under the Bridge."

"We had other songs we could've put on the album, but there is some significance to that Rodgers tune," Haggard said. "I had some serious dental work done and

that was the last song I performed before the dental work. (Last summer, Haggard said he hadn't been to a dentist in 27 years and had to have all the teeth pulled that anchored his bridges.) Now, there is some difference in the acoustics and tone quality of my mouth. I've listened to myself sing for 30 years and my voice has become something I know very well. I can tell some difference. So I just wanted that to be on this album, if for nothing else but historical filing."

Haggard, who has the reputation of sometimes being cantankerous, was clearly in a good mood. After the Goshen gig, he was flying home for some rest on his Troubador houseboat at the Silverthorn Resort on Lake Shasta, Calif. I decided to ask Haggard about the definitive Haggard anecdote, which he rarely tells. I first read about it in a comprehensive Haggard profile in the New Yorker, which, in itself, is a unique place for the Hag to wind up.

"Awh, they had it wrong," Haggard grumbled. "What happened is that Minnie Pearl, Jeannie C. Riley and I were booked on the first worldwide 'Ed Sullivan' telecast. They had me in for the part of Curly in Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'Oklahoma!' So I learned all that stuff and sung all them songs. As the week progressed and we got closer to the time of broadcast, they kept working these dance steps in for me. Now, I told them at the beginning, I don't dance, I don't do choreography and that I don't want to. I might later on in my life, but not right now."

Haggard threw out a crooked laugh.

"Well, they just kept shoving in a little more dance and a little more choreography and pretty soon I was dancing around this big set with each of those girls (Minnie and Jeannie) on my arms, when one of them fruiterers (backup dancers) pinched me on the a - - ! That's just the truth. I went around the circle and Fuzzy (Owen, his manager) was standing in the wings, and I said, 'Fuzzy, I'm heading for the bus after this next circle.' So we went around the circle and I waltzed right behind the curtain on to the bus.

"Jeannie C. Riley came out to the bus and cried for the next three hours trying to get me to come back in. She said I was going to ruin my career, and I said, 'Maybe so, but I'd rather do that than embarrass myself in front of all the truck drivers and people that I've built up for years.' About 10 years later, I was on a talk show with Minnie Pearl and she said, 'I've always loved you, but the thing I love the most about you is the night you walked out on Ed Sullivan.' Ha ha ha! I'm not afraid of gay people or nothing . . . I just didn't want to dance around."

Johnny Mathis replaced Haggard.

Haggard began to talk about some of his favorite country singers. One of the best Haggard albums I own is a two-record English import where he passionately covers tunes from the cornerstones of his musical evolution - Hank Williams Sr., Bob Wills, Jimmie Rodgers and Lefty Frizzell. As for contemporary country singers,

I said Randy Travis was little more than a polished Haggard knock-off.

"That is not an irritant with me," he said. "As long as my company gives me a chance to do my own thing. It's when they sit there and watch the guy using my thing that bothers me. It seems people pay more attention to him just because he is younger, and I don't think it is fair. I'm glad to see Randy Travis coming up and one day he will wear my shoes. It would be stupid of me not to appreciate youth.

"But there is no way some of these young ballplayers can play as good as someone who has been there 20 or 30 years," he said. "They might outrun the bases, but they don't know as much about it as the old pros. And they know it. I want to have as much chance to win as Jack Nicklaus has to win the Masters again. I've got enough competitive nature in me that I'd like to win everything again, too. And that's the least of the reasons."

There are many more new mornings to attend to.