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Life has been a ragged but righteous journey for Bob Dylan and Merle Haggard. Their occasionally parallel journeys stretch back to 1969. That was the year country music really started crossing over into rock, and rock into country: Dylan released the landmark "Nashville Skyline" album, which featured Johnny Cash and delivered the hit "Lay Lady Lay." The Rolling Stones even cut a country-tinged LP, "Let It Bleed."

Haggard, meanwhile, had the biggest commercial hit of his career that year with his anti-hippie anthem "Okie From Muskogee" before moving to an edgier rock sound with "Pride in What I Am," released in early 1970.

"Everybody started swinging to the right. So I swung to the left. Or vice-versa," Haggard said recently from his home outside Lake Shasta, Calif., before embarking on a tour with Dylan, which stops April 1-3, 5 and 6 at the Auditorium Theatre. "I was looking for an opening, looking for a void. I try to be honest with my writing. I'm a guitar player. I try not to be redundant."

And also in 1969, Dylan's and Haggard's itinerant worlds first crossed when they both appeared on the Johnny Cash television show, taped at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville (the Mother Church of country music). Dylan and Cash sang "Girl From the North Country" with Cash; Haggard and Cash sang "Sing Me Back Home."

"Bob and I have rubbed shoulders a lot of times since 1969," Haggard said. "But I really don't know Bob. I am in awe of him. He's the Marlon Brando of music. Nobody knows much about him. He's busy all the time. He writes all the time."

"The last time I saw him was at Willie Nelson's 2004 'Outlaws and Angels' television show. He was over in the wings with a guitar around his neck. I walked over and said, 'hi,' and he made a grunt. I heard him mumbling. He was writing. So, hell, I got away. You don't want to bother that guy when he's got a frown on his face and singing about something. I had this soft little spring tour planned, and then Bob Dylan's people called with a solid two-month tour."

"When Dylan calls, that's a big deal."

In 1969, though, the odds of Dylan and Haggard touring together would have been as likely as a Martin and Lewis reunion. In America, the lines were clearly drawn, and Dylan and Haggard's songs were embraced, interpreted and inflated by Republicans, Democrats and in-betweeners. In truth and in time, Haggard wasn't as right and Dylan wasn't as left. Their unifying thread then, as now, was an

affinity for the common man stirred from the soul of Woody Guthrie.

Their songwriting approach is similar, too. Each writer deconstructs music to its core elements before carefully adding elements of blues, folk, jazz and honky-tonk. Dylan suggests he writes from a defined premise that is full of truth. Haggard also writes from a similar premise, as he did in "Where's All the Freedom?" or his timeless "Kern River." There's not much difference between "Kern River" and Dylan's "My Back Pages."

"There was a time when our country was not like it is now," Haggard said. "There was not a network of freeways, only two-lane highways connected people. There were only small local radio stations. This country was hooked together by railroad. The roads only ran out to the edge of town. Those were the boondocks. There were beer joints one of Haggard's favorite themes everywhere. Music was everywhere. Everybody was on Benzadrine. Even the fat women in church took bennies. Nobody thought nothin' about it. Everybody was having a great time. There was work everywhere, and people didn't mind working."

Now Haggard and Dylan don't mind working together. Haggard has asked Dylan to sing on his upcoming album, tentatively titled "Chicago Wind" and due for a late summer release on Capitol Records. Much of the record already has been cut in Los Angeles with a stripped-down band featuring veterans Reggie Young (guitar), Lee Sklar (bass), Billy Walker (rhythm guitar) and John Robinson (drums). The legendary Jimmy Bowen, who co-produced Haggard's 1979 hits "Footlights" and "My Own Kind of Hat," came out of retirement to produce the record.

This week, Haggard and Dylan are performing Monday through Saturday at the Pantages Theatre in Los Angeles. During down time in Los Angeles, Dylan may contribute vocals to Haggard's new ballad, "Where's All the Freedom?"

"It's a question of mine," Haggard said. "If we're going to die in wars somewhere every day and fight for freedom, it freedom shouldn't be some watered-down version like we're living in now. We've added so many different levels of security here at home, they're fighting with each other. We should adapt some of the arrogance of our president and stand straight up again. That's what the song is about."

Then Haggard sang, "...After a soldier fights / should we read him his new rights? / There's not that many to read anymore / Where's all the freedom we're fighting for?"

He continued, "The reason we have these soldiers dying all over the world is so we can be free here. And we're not free! There's so many different levels of police that have been added since Sept. 11 that we can't afford. Why do we want to break the airlines? Why are we so in tune with everything happening in North Korea, but nobody knows what's happening in Phoenix? There's roads and bridges to be fixed

in this country. This is a country that's worn down. This is democracy supposedly in its best form, and we're not getting that kind of reality here."

As for Haggard and Dylan singing together in concert (as Dylan and Willie Nelson did during last summer's minor league baseball park tour), Haggard said, "He invited me on this tour, so I will let him take the lead on things like that."

They haven't sung together yet, but Dylan has been encoring with a starchy version of Haggard's "Sing Me Back Home."

Haggard's return to Capitol, the scene of his 1960s glory days with hands-off producer Ken Nelson (Wanda Jackson, The Louvin Brothers), includes his current album, "Unforgettable." It's a collection of classics, such as "Pennies From Heaven" and Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust." The 12-track project finds Haggard singing in a deeper timbre and keen phrasing.

"Freddy Powers Hag's sometimes jazz guitarist, sidekick and songwriter who co-wrote 'Let's Chase Each Other Around the Room Tonight', and I have what we call The Front Room Band," he explained. "Freddy's been after me to do that kind of an album. We play those songs. I've been doing seven, eight of those songs for years. I had to learn 'Unforgettable' and 'As Time Goes By.' But the production was Freddy's. We did this before Rod Stewart," he said, referring to the British rocker's recent embrace of the standards.

"Ours was ready to come out, but we got our master tapes stolen. People offered them on eBay for \$350,000. When we were in court getting this thing back, the whole Rod Stewart thing happened. 'Unforgettable' is at least three years old. What you're getting there is Merle Haggard before three years of dental work. That's why my voice sounds the way it does."

But Haggard isn't slowing down as long as people like Dylan keep calling. The final date of the Haggard-Dylan series at the Auditorium falls on the Hag's 68th birthday. Haggard says he began to figure out life when he turned 50.

"I got a line in a song that says, 'They say life starts at 50/We've been lied to my friend/Life does not start at 50/Life starts its decline at 50,'" he growled. "Hell, I was able to run a 50-yard dash until I was 50, 55 years old. Somewhere in that decade, you start to head towards mother earth and gravity will start to take over. No one has been able to dodge it, except for Jesus Christ, and he didn't live long enough to let gravity get him."