



Merle Haggard

In Concert 1983 [DVD]

(MVD)

US release date: 15 May 2007

by **Dan MacIntosh**
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In 1983, the new British Invasion of synth-pop was sweeping the radio airwaves and all the latest haircut bands were jamming MTV. But you'd never guess that from watching this Church Street Station concert DVD. Merle Haggard is categorized as a country music artist, but a fine singer / songwriter with a deep understanding of music history is a far better description of what he's all about.

It's sometimes difficult, in spite of the title, to tell what year this DVD showcases in Haggard's career. But because The Hag's hair is not yet grey, it can't be too modern. But the lines on his face reveal he's certainly not a kid anymore, either. He introduces "If You Want to Be My Woman", which eventually made it onto the 1989 5:01 blues release. So yep, it's the '80s alright. This approximately hour-and-a-half DVD has almost everything you truly need to see and hear Haggard perform, and then some. Too bad it's not more inspired.

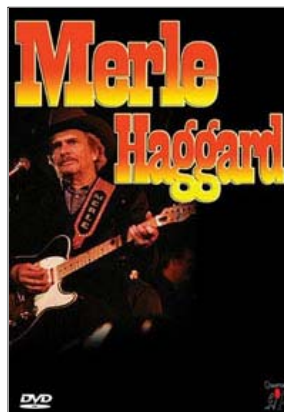
Haggard sings plenty of covers, and does so respectfully, in addition to his own repertoire. He gives Jimmie Rogers' "TB Blues" a go, as well as Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues" (misspelled "Fulsom Prison Blues on the DVD package), and Bob Wills' "San Antonio Rose", to name some noteworthy examples.

But it's Haggard's own songs that make him so special. He can muse about romance with works like "Twinkle Twinkle Lucky Star" and "Today I Started Loving You Again". But he's even more effective when being topical. "Workin' Man Blues" opposes the welfare state while it salutes hardworking blue collar employees. Similarly, "Big City" speaks about that illusive social security system, but mostly focuses on escaping the rat race.

Haggard also gets personal with his lyrics. This ex-con did some time in prison, which is why he can bring "Mamma Tried" to life. And his reflection on aging gracefully in "Footlights", is a most illuminating song, indeed. It was almost certainly inspired by Johnny Cash's experiences, as he was thrown off the Grand Ole Opry for literally kicking out that stage's footlights. But for Haggard, the song represents his desire to retain that rebel spirit, which keeps him alive and vital. One of the song's lines talks about how he sometimes must force himself to flash "that instamatic smile", even though he doesn't really feel like smiling.



Haggard fits in just as well at a dancehall as he does in a honky-tonk. Hot-steppers like "Ida Red", and "Take Me Back to Tulsa", are rhythmic exercises, which bring back to life Bob Wills' jazzy fiddle workouts. It's hard to listen to these tunes without at least tapping one's toes. But when he performs the confessional "The Bottle Let Me Down" kind of song, one cannot picture anything other than a forlorn loser on a barstool, at a bar, with a beer.

This show closes with "Okie from Muskogee" and "The Fighting Side of Me", which are two songs that have given Haggard a reactionary conservative


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Merle Haggard

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reputation. But much of his more recent work is far less John Birch Society-esque. Take, for example "That's The News", from his *Like Never Before* release. Instead of taking any specific political side, this track somberly looks at the unappealing state of our modern political system. Haggard may have railed against hippies in the '60s, but he's since mellowed considerably with age. Much like the hippies of past years, all he wants now is the truth.

As good as this performance is, Haggard is not captured at his best. Despite the protestations of "Footlights", one gets an impression he is just going through the motions much of the time. Maybe I feel this way because the performer doesn't sing my favorite Haggard song, "Silver Wings". "Silver Wings" is a thoughtful, ruminative song about a man watching his woman leave him while she boards a plane. There are plenty of rousing musical moments in this concert, but not nearly enough thoughtful sections, as "Silver Wings" surely would have provided. And it's these more thoughtful sections that bring out the best in Haggard's flexible voice. When he's singing these kinds of songs, it's as if he's having an intimate conversation with his audience.

There is little in the way of bonus material added to this DVD. It includes a "Fanzone" section, which lists links to a biography, discography, and weblink. Although the "Interactive Quiz" page, another bonus feature, incorporates a Merle Haggard photo, the quiz itself is about country music in general, rather than Haggard in particular. Lastly, there is "Quantum Leap Propaganda", which displays promos for other studio DVD releases; ones that have nothing to do with Merle Haggard.

The combination of Haggard's relatively lackluster performance, along with bonus material that only has slight information about the man and his music, leads you to believe that the makers of this DVD were merely trying to capitalize on this musical legend's reputation. I'm sure there's a great Merle Haggard concert DVD out there somewhere, but this release is not it.

Merle Haggard - Austin City Limits

RATING:
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— 26 June 2007

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Jason MacNeil

16.Mar.06

Merle Haggard is still going, and it is on the strength of his timeless country songs. A select cache of numbers is showcased from this memorable '85 date for the legendary PBS program.

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27.Jan.04

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