Merle Haggard reflects on hopping freight trains and becoming a musician

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Before he became a musician, Merle Haggard lived the kind of life that's often mythologized in song: Hopping freights and doing prison time. When he became a star, he acquired his own observation car. Now that coach is part of the Virginia Scenic Railway. Terry Gross spoke with Haggard in 1995.

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Stealing the show at that very first Farm Aid concert in April 1985 was Merle Haggard singing his then-new song Natural Hut.

Today, we're going to listen to our 1995 interview with country music star Merle Haggard. John Caramanica in the New York Times once described him as, quote, the country music titan who most resists easy categorization. He was a wildly versatile singer, songwriter and performer with an affinity for a variety of styles, outlaw country, ballads, the Bakersfield sound, western swing, jazz and more, unquote.

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From Fresh Air: Merle Haggard On Hopping Trains And Doing Time, Apr 25, 2025
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DAVID BIANCULLI, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm David Bianculli. This week marks the 40th anniversary of Farm Aid, the country music concert founded by Willie Nelson as a fundraiser to benefit farmers. Held in Champaign, Illinois, this first gathering featured not only Willie Nelson, but such other supportive performers as Bob Dylan, Billy Joel, Bonnie Raitt, Tom Petty, B.B. King, Loretta Lynn and Roy Orbison. Farmers still need aid, and Farm Aid has been staged annually ever since. Stealing the show at that very first Farm Aid concert in April 1985 was Merle Haggard, singing his then-new song "Natural High."

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MERLE HAGGARD: (Singing) You stayed with me through thick and thin. You watched me lose; you watched me win. You picked me up off of the ground. You never one time let me down. And you put me on a natural high. And I can fly. I can fly. I was drowning in a sea...

BIANCULLI: Today, we're going to listen to our 1995 interview with country music star Merle Haggard. Jon Caramanica, in The New York Times, once described him as, quote, "the country music titan who most resists easy categorization. He was a wildly versatile singer, songwriter and performer

with an affinity for a variety of styles - outlaw country, ballads, the Bakersfield sound, Western swing, jazz and more," unquote. Haggard was inducted into the country Hall of Fame in 1994 and was awarded the Kennedy Center Honor in 2010. He died in 2016 on his 79th birthday. When Haggard was young, he hardly seemed destined for success. He spent time in and out of reform school and prison before he found his way back to music. Haggard's best-known songs include "Mama Tried," "Okie From Muskogee," "Today I Started Loving You Again" and "The Bottle Let Me Down."

Merle Haggard had a lifelong fascination with trains. After he became a star, he acquired his own railway observation car. And that railway car, on which you can book passage, is now part of the Virginia Scenic Railway. When Terry spoke with Merle Haggard in 1995, he had reissued an album he recorded in 1969 featuring the songs of Jimmie Rodgers. They began with Haggard's recording of the Jimmie Rodgers classic "Waiting For A Train."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "WAITING FOR A TRAIN")

HAGGARD: (Singing) All around the water tank, waiting for a train - a thousand miles away from home, sleeping in the rain. I walked up to a brakeman to give him a line of talk. He says, if you've got money, I'll see that you don't walk. I haven't got a nickel, not a penny can I show. Get off, get off, you railroad bum. And he slammed that boxcar door.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

TERRY GROSS: Did you hop freights when you were young?

HAGGARD: Yeah, sure did.

GROSS: We would you go?

HAGGARD: Well, I lived in an oil community called Oildale, and there was a daily train that went into the oil fields. And it was a steam train back in those days. And I actually grew up every evening, you know, kind of looking forward to seeing that old train pull out of there with about 40 or 50 oil tankers back during the war, you know? And so I was - it was less than a stone's - well,

maybe 150 feet from my back door to where the railroad track ran, and I actually grew up right next to it. My dad worked for the Santa Fe Railroad. And he only lived - I was 9 when he passed away. But railroads were, you know, very influential in my life. And there was enough of it in the songs that I admired to get me on the freight myself. I thought, well, this is something I got to do. If they're going to write songs about it, I got to go see why. So I did, and I rode freights wherever they took me. I rode them for a block, or I'd ride them 200 miles. Or I think the longest trip I ever took was from San Antonio to El Paso - I think, was the longest one.

GROSS: Was it hard to learn how to hop a freight?

HAGGARD: No, I learned that probably - I think, probably the first time I ever jumped on that old oil tanker was probably - I was about about 5 years old. My mother would have died if she had known I'd been up there. We used to put pennies on the track, you know, and we'd hop that old train, ride a block or two and jump off. So it was something we learned to do young, and we'd watch the brakemen and the trainmen do it. You know, it wasn't really all that hard.

GROSS: What's the worst or the most surprising experience that you had on a freight train?

HAGGARD: The worst? There was a lot of bad experiences. I got on a freight in Oregon one time, and it was leaving out of Eugene, and it went up into the into the Cascades into a snowstorm. And I was in - traveling in the ice compartment. And it - me and two other hoboes was in there, and it got really cold in that metal. And I remember they stopped up in the mountains, and then climbed up out of that ice compartment, and I'm shaking so bad that I dropped my suitcase off the top of the freight, and I had to get off for a while and gather up my clothes.

GROSS: Gee, it sounds awful. Did you have frostbite?

HAGGARD: Somehow or another, somebody watched out for me. I didn't get anything like that.

GROSS: Were there ever traveling musicians on the trains, and did you feel you learned anything about a musician's life?

HAGGARD: I didn't run into any players on the freight, just people traveling and, you know, and you - for different reasons, I'm sure. I don't know. Most of them probably for the same reasons. I think they were probably hoboes, you know. And I remember one time, I stole a can of beans out of a refrigerator car and threw it up in into this flat - into this box car where all the rest of the hoboes were riding, and boy, they got really upset. They said, oh, we're going to get 50 years into penitentiary, you know? You must be really green, guy, you know, and there was nobody would share that box of green beans except one old man. And he was about 80 years old. And he threw a spoon and a can opener across the boxcar to me. He said, I'll help you eat them, son (laughter).

Merle Haggard speaking to Terry Gross in 1995. More after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to Terry's 1995 interview with country star Merle Haggard. We'll dive back in with a taste of one of his biggest hits, "Mama Tried."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "MAMA TRIED")

HAGGARD: (Singing) The first thing I remember knowing was a lonesome whistle blowing and a young'un's dream of growing up to ride on a freight train leaving town, not knowing where I'm bound. And no one can change my mind, but Mama tried. One and only rebel child from a family meek and mild. My mama seemed to know what lay in store. Despite of all my Sunday learning, towards the bad I kept on turning till Mama couldn't hold me anymore. I turned 21 in prison doing life without parole. No one could steer me right, but Mama tried. Mama tried. Mama tried to raise me better, but her pleading I denied. That leaves only me to blame 'cause Mama tried.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

GROSS: Merle Haggard, is this song autobiographical?

HAGGARD: Well, it really is very close, at least. There's some things we fudged on slightly to make it rhyme, but majority of it - I'd say 97% of it's pretty accurate, I guess.

GROSS: Your father died when you were 9. Is that right?

HAGGARD: Nine, right.

GROSS: So your mother had to raise you alone after that.

HAGGARD: She - yeah. And I was, to say the least, probably the most incorrigible child you could think of. I was just - I was already on the way to prison before I realized it, actually. I was just - I was really a - kind of a screwup. But - and I really don't know why. I think it was mostly just out of boredom and lack of a father's attention, I think.

GROSS: I think you were 14 when your mother put you in a juvenile home.

HAGGARD: No, she didn't put me in a juvenile home. They - the authorities put me in there for truancy, for not going to school. And that - they gave me six months in, like, a road camp situation, and I ran off from there and stole a car. And so then the next time I went back, it was for something serious. And then I spent the next seven years running off from places. I think I escaped 17 times from different institutions in California. And all it was was just a matter of the authorities running me off, and, you know - and they - and drumming up business for themselves. I really feel sorry for the way they do some of the kids, you know? And I was one of those kids. I'm going to snitch on them if I get a chance.

GROSS: (Laughter) How would you escape from reform school and youth institutions?

HAGGARD: Well, there was different institutions and different methods. There was - some of them were minimum security. Some were maximum security, and some of them were kid joints, and some of them were adult jailhouses. And I just didn't stay nowhere. I was just - I think Willie Sutton was my idol, if you don't know - you know him. At the time, I was in the

middle of becoming an outlaw. And escaping from jail and escaping from places that they had me locked up in was part of the thing that I wanted to do.

GROSS: No - was there an outlaw mystique that you wanted to have?

HAGGARD: I guess. I don't know. I was - you know, I admired people like Jesse James, you know, along with a lot of other kids. But I guess I took it too far, you know?

GROSS: So what was your most ingenious escape?

HAGGARD: Probably the one that was the most ingenious is - was one that I didn't actually go on. I was - San Quentin. I was all set to go with the only completely successful escape out of San Quentin, I think, in 21 years. But the people that gave me the chance to go were the same people that talked me out of it because they felt like that I was just doing it for the sport of it, and then it was a very serious thing to the other fellow that was going. And they had a big judge's chambers sort of desk that they were building at the furniture factory in San Quentin.

And I had a friend who was building a place for two guys to be transported out. That was before they had X-rays and things of that nature. And they just - and I could've gone, and I didn't go. And the guy that I went with wound up being executed in the gas chamber. He went out and held court in the street, killed a highway patrolman. And so it was really good that I didn't go.

GROSS: Was that a real sobering experience for you?

HAGGARD: Yeah. I've had a lot of those things in my life. And, you know, those are the sort of things that a guy, unknowingly, like myself - I guess I was gathering up meat for songs, you know? I don't know what I was doing. I really kind of was crazy as a kid. And then all of a sudden, you know, while I was in San Quentin, I just - I one day understood that - I saw the light, and I just didn't want to do that no more. And I realized what a mess I'd made out of my life, and I got out of there and stayed out of there - never did go back. And went and apologized to all the people I'd wronged and tried to pay back the people that I'd taken money from, borrowed money from or whatever. I think

when I was 31 years old, I'd paid everybody back that I'd ever taken anything from, including my mother.

GROSS: What did you say to your mother when you changed your life around?

HAGGARD: It was just obvious. I mean, there was no - I don't think there was ever any time that anybody in my family was worried about me staying with this. It was just the way that - you know, some people grow up in the Army, and, you know, it's hard to be 18 years old. And, you know, they send 18-year-old boys to war because they don't know what to do with them. And I was one that - I wound up going to prison rather than war. And instead of growing up in the middle of a battlefield with bullets flying around me, I grew up on the isolation ward on death row. And that's where the song "Mama Tried" gets close to being autobiographical.

GROSS: You were on death row?

HAGGARD: Yeah. I was - I got caught for making beer (laughter). I was making some beer up there, and I got too much of my own beer and got drunk in the yard and got arrested. It's hard to get arrested in San Quentin, but I did. And they sent me to what was known as the shelf. And the shelf is part of the north block, which share - you share with the inmates on death row. And it's kind of like the - there's not too many more stops for you, actually, you know? And that was the, as you put it, sobering experience for me. I wound up with nothing to lay on except a Bible and an old concrete slab and woke up from that drunk that I'd been on that day. And I could hear some prisoners talking in the area next to me. In other words, there was a alleyway between the back of the cells, and I could hear people talking over there, and I recognized the guy as being Caryl Chessman, the guy that they were fixing to execute. And I don't know. It was just something about the whole situation that I knew that if I ever got out of there, if I was lucky enough to get out - I made up my mind while I still had that hangover - that I was all finished.

GROSS: How were you lucky enough to get out?

HAGGARD: Well, I went back down on the yard and went down and asked for the roughest job in the penitentiary, which was a textile mill. And went down

and just started building my reputation, you know? Just started running in reverse from what I'd been doing and started trying to build up a long line of good things to be proud of. And that's what I've been doing since then.

GROSS: Back in the days when you were in prison, was music a big part of your life then? Were you singing, playing, writing songs?

HAGGARD: Yeah. Yeah. I was already into doing that. I really didn't - I don't think - believe that I sincerely had a future in it. I think I was just kind of like doing what I thought was probably a waste of time or a hobby, at the very most, and maybe some extra money on the weekend sort of thing. But that's - you know, that's when I was in San Quentin. I still didn't really thoroughly realize that I had to do this the rest of my life and that it was going to be this successful for me and I was going to, you know, have all the things happen that have happened. I had no idea that - you could never have convinced me of a minute amount of the success I've had. I would never have believed it.

GROSS: Did your musical ability have anything to do with people noticing you in prison and thinking that you could make it when you got out? I mean, did that help you at all in the war in your eyes?

HAGGARD: Yeah. That was the basic reason I think that these friends of mine talked me out of going on that escape. I mean, they felt that I had talent, and they felt that I was just a ornery kid and could probably make something out of my life. And, you know, believe it or not, in the penitentiary, just some pretty nice people - and very unfortunate people. And they love to let somebody, so to speak, get up on their shoulders. You know, they like to boost somebody over the wall, if they can. If they can't make it themselves, they, I think, sincerely love to see someone else make it. I finally made a successful escape, you might say.

BIANCULLI: Merle Haggard speaking to Terry Gross in 1995. After a break, we'll continue their conversation. And Lloyd Schwartz reviews two collections of music by Paul Robeson. And Justin Chang reviews "The Shrouds," the newest movie by David Cronenberg. I'm David Bianculli, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "SING ME BACK HOME")

MERLE HAGGARD AND THE STRANGERS: (Singing) The warden led a prisoner down the hallway to his doom. And I stood up to say goodbye like all the rest. And I heard him tell the warden just before he reached my cell, let my guitar-playing friend do my request. Let him sing me back home with a song I used to hear. Make my old memories come alive. And take me away and turn back the years. Sing me back home before I die. I recall last Sunday morning a choir from off the street came in to sing...

BIANCULLI: This is FRESH AIR. I'm David Bianculli, professor of television studies at Rowan University. Let's continue with Terry's 1995 interview with country music singer, songwriter and guitarist Merle Haggard. He spent years in and out of prison as a young man before finding his way back to music.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

GROSS: Tell us a story - how you got your first guitar.

HAGGARD: My first guitar.

GROSS: Yeah, or how you started to play guitar.

HAGGARD: Well...

GROSS: Whose ever's it was (laughter).

HAGGARD: I have an older brother named Lowell, and Lowell had a service station at the time. And there was a guy who came in and wanted a couple of dollars' worth of gas and didn't have no money, and he left a little Bronson, sort of a Stella Sears & Roebuck-type guitar and - as collateral, and he never did come back after it. And that old guitar is sitting in the closet there for a couple of years. And finally, I think my mother showed me a couple of chords. My brother didn't know how to play, and my dad had passed away. He was the musician in the family. So Mama showed me C chord that daddy had showed her, and she didn't know how to make C chord very good. But I went - took it

from that, and I beat around on that old Bronson. I think it was a Bronson guitar.

GROSS: I imagine when you first got the guitar, you were playing songs that you heard on the radio. How did you start writing songs yourself?

HAGGARD: Well, I - about the same time that I discovered Jimmie Rodgers - I was about 12 years old - I discovered Hank Williams. And I remember seeing on the yellow MGM records there was a - the artist's name. And then there was another name underneath that artist. It was a small - very small letters, and it said composer. And I didn't know what a composer was. My - I asked my mother. I said, what does this mean? She said, I don't know. And she called the record store and they told her. That's the writer. That's the guy that writes the songs.

And it seemed to me that it was very important to have your name in both places there. I noticed that Hank Williams had a little extra clout because he wrote his own songs. Jimmie Rodgers, the same thing, you know? And so I felt it was just as necessary to become a songwriter as it was to try to learn to play the guitar or - you know, it was certainly a tool that most people, I think, in the business would like to be a singer-songwriter, if they could be, because it is in some way your retirement. You know, you can have a great career. And if you don't write songs, or have a publishing company or something to lean back on when it's all over, it's a pretty hard drop back to reality, you know? And once you've learned to live and under the conditions I've learned to live on, you better have yourself a publishing company, or I'll have to go back to being an outlaw.

GROSS: (Laughter) When you started writing songs, did you realize that you could write autobiographical songs from your own life, or did you think you had to copy other people's songs?

HAGGARD: Well, I really didn't realize what method to take at first. I must have wrote maybe 1,500 songs that weren't any good. Or at least I - you know, I never kept them. And finally, with a lot of help and a lot of people who had written hit songs who I'd become friends with, such as Fuzzy Owen, who became my personal manager, it - was a songwriter. And he helped me - he

taught me how to write songs, and finally, I wrote one that was worth keeping. And I think I've written about 300 keepers or so, maybe 400.

GROSS: Do you remember the first one that you felt, this is worth keeping?

HAGGARD: Yeah. It was sort of a rock and roll song, a Elvis-type rock and roll thing. It called "If You Want To Be My Woman." And Glen Campbell opened his shows with it for years, and I still do the song. And I wrote it when I was about 14. But I didn't keep very many. That was probably one out of that 1,500 that got kept.

GROSS: Could you sing a couple of bars of it?

HAGGARD: (Singing) You like riding in the country in my Cadillac. And you keep - I keep pushing - you keep pushing me back. Something about, (vocalizing) all the money that I earned, but you refused to give me something equal in return. Don't look at me like maybe you don't understand. If you want to be my woman, you know, you got to let me be your man.

GROSS: Now, during all the years that you were in and out of prisons and reform schools, did you ever think I can make a living with music?

HAGGARD: No. I - very best I counted on extra money, as I was saying - you know, like - you know, maybe a hobby. You know, I figured I was going to have to have some of the means of employment, you know, or support.

GROSS: So what made you think, well, I can make a living out of this?

HAGGARD: Well, I - when I came out of the penitentiary, I went to work for my brother digging ditches and wiring houses. We had - he had electrical company - Hagg Electric (ph) - and he was paying me $80 a week. This was 1960. And I was working eight hours a day there. And, I got me a little gig playing guitar four nights a week for 10 bucks a night. And there was a little radio show that we had to broadcast from this little nightclub called High Pockets (ph). And it just all started from that.

Some people that had - that was local stars around heard me on this radio program and came down and offered me a better job in town. And it was in just a matter of weeks till I was part of the main click in Bakersfield. And it was hard to get in that click. There was a lot of people like Buck Owens. And there was people that were really good and proved how good they were later on with their success. And Bakersfield was some sort of a - I don't know. It was like country music artists found their way to Bakersfield and then had their success out of there. I don't understand why, actually - maybe because of the migration that took place in the '30s or whatever. There was a lot of people that came out there from Oklahoma and Arkansas and Texas that had a lot of soul. And this thing we call country music kind of came out of those honky-tonks, you know, and some of the same area that a lot of other things came out of.

GROSS: Was it hard for you to adjust to success and stardom, having come from poverty and, you know, having lived in prison off and on for so many years? I think it's hard for a lot of people to adjust to that.

HAGGARD: Well, you know, a lot of people may or may not understand how hard it is for a person coming out of an institution, you know, whether it be a prison or whether it be some sort of a mental institution, whether it be the Army or whatever. There's a thing that happens. Like, when you leave the penitentiary and you've been there for three years, you have friends and you have a way of life. And you have a routine and a whole way of life that you just give up all of a sudden. One day, you're there and you're - next day, you're not there. And you don't have anymore friends from the outside 'cause things went on when you left and you can't find anybody there. And the people you left behind in prison are your really - are really your only friends and there's a period of adjustment that took me about 120 days. I don't know, about four months. A couple times I really wanted to go back and it's really a weird sensation. It's the loneliest feeling in the world about the second night out of the penitentiary.

BIANCULLI: Merle Haggard speaking to Terry Gross in 1995. He died in 2016. Coming up, classical music critic Lloyd Schwartz reviews two albums featuring Paul Robeson. This is FRESH AIR.