



AMERICAN MASTERS

Merle Haggard: Learning to Live With Myself

Johnny Cash once told me, Hag, you're the guy people think I am.

The list of included interviews in this surprisingly candid and revealing documentary begins with the obvious – old comrades and fellow musicians such as Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Ray Price, Dwight Yoakam, Lucinda Williams and Allison Krauss – and finishes with the nitty-gritty – Bakersfield, CA street locals and a former parole officer.

For this is the life of Merle Haggard. The hardscrabble people with whom he was raised – his juvenile delinquency and incarcerations – still inform his creativity and perspective. He actually lived the rambling, gambling, love 'em and leave 'em, often brutal life that remains the bedrock of country music lyrics – he hopped his first freight train at the age of 10, became a chronic truant and drinker and was locked up some 17 times as a youngster. Serious criminal charges followed – car theft, bank robbery – Haggard was, literally, in the inmate audience in 1959, when Johnny Cash gave his New Year's Day concert in San Quentin – and, as he's said repeatedly, "my life changed forever."

We have followed Haggard on camera for the past two years – at home on the ranch and on tour at concerts. A kind of wandering troubadour, who's led his band The Strangers since 1965, Haggard is known as a singer's singer and a guitar player's guitar player – his voice, his finger picking and his interpretations are like none others.

At 72, he recently survived major lung surgery and is now in top physical shape, full of creative juices and hitting new artistic and commercial highs. With a steady diet of herbal tea, yoga practice and Cole Porter, the contradictions and self-awareness are remarkable. The transformation of this former Nixon Poster Boy to outspoken critic of Bush-era America happens before our eyes. His expressed concern for keeping his music honest in a changing industry and in a changing world is palpable. This old *Okie from Muskogee* (1969) is asking *Where's All the Freedom?* and urging us to *Rebuild America First*.

I would've become a lifetime criminal if music hadn't saved my ass.