

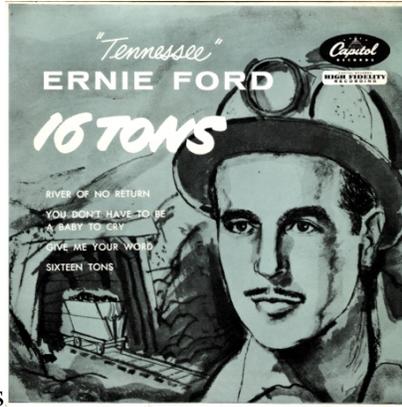
“16 Tons” --Tennessee Ernie Ford (1955)

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Essay by Ted Olson (guest post)*



Tennessee Ernie Ford



Record sleeve



Merle Travis

In 1955, Tennessee Ernie Ford (born Ernest Jennings Ford on February 13, 1919, in Bristol, Tennessee) was an established recording star who could claim several major country hits as well as a few minor pop hits to his name. Having been under contract with the Hollywood-based label Capitol Records since 1949, Ford had had a multi-faceted career, balancing recording and touring with nationally prominent roles in radio and television. By 1955, though, the demands of show business had brought him to the brink of exhaustion, and he often lamented to interviewers that his career prevented him from devoting more time to his family. During the spring and summer of 1955, Ford hosted a nationally televised daily daytime show on the NBC network and toured widely, but by September of that year, having fallen behind in terms of recording new material for commercial release, Ford faced a mandate from the Capitol management: head back into the studio or face a breach-of-contract lawsuit.

So, on September 20, 1955, Ford headed back into the Capitol studios on Melrose Avenue in Hollywood for this make-or-break recording session. While early in his career he had composed many of the songs that he had recorded, by 1955 his proverbial pen had dried up. Hence, that day Ford reinterpreted two songs that his friends had previously recorded. The first, written by Bob Merrill and Terry Shand, was “You Don’t Have To Be A Baby To Cry,” a #10 country hit in 1950 for Ernest Tubb that had also been associated with Ford’s friend Moon Mullican; and the second was “16 Tons,” a 1946 coal mining song composed by Ford’s friend and fellow Capitol label-mate Merle Travis. (Travis came from a coal-mining family and his lyrics drew upon his history, and a coal miner’s perspective--“I owe my soul to the company store.”) Under pressure, Ford delivered powerful vocal interpretations of the two songs, with chamber-pop arrangements provided by music director Jack Fascinato.

In a newspaper interview conducted during that era, Ford explained how the recording of “16 Tons”—and Fascinato’s arrangement—came to be:

I'd sung "16 Tons" years before, but it hadn't been any blockbuster, and Merle Travis, who'd written it, had put it in an album of his songs called "Folk Songs of the Hills." Nothing happened there either. Then we decided to do some of Merle's things with modern instrumentation. When Merle did them, he'd used a straight guitar-music background. When we did them, we used a flute, a bass clarinet, a trumpet, a clarinet, drums, a guitar, vibes and a piano. They gave it a real wonderful sound....

It had a good solid beat to begin with. In addition, I snapped my fingers all through it. Sometimes I set my own tempo during rehearsal by doing that. The orchestra leader asks me, "What tempo do you want, Ernie?" I'd say, "About like this," and I'd begin to snap my third finger and thumb together. After I was through rehearsing that song, Lee Gillette, who was in charge of the recording session for Capitol Records, screamed through the telephone from the control room, "Tell Ernie to leave that finger snapping in when you do the final waxing."

It certainly added to that song.... It gave an effect I hadn't heard before.

Capitol released those performances on October 17, 1955 as the two sides of a 45.

Ford had sung "16 Tons" on his TV show in August, and the positive response led him to repeat it in early September. Capitol Records was wary of the song's politically radical implications, but allowed Ford to record it. They may have felt that "You Don't Have to Be a Baby To Cry" was far more likely to be a hit in any case, but the press, radio and public decided otherwise almost immediately, and "16 Tons" was on its way to becoming one of the biggest hits of all time, while Ford's "You Don't Have to be a Baby to Cry" made only a brief and very low showing on the charts, though the Caravelles, an English girl group made it a top ten hit in 1963.

Literally within hours of the recording's release, Ford's version of "16 Tons" received a barrage of radio-play and record sales, and within a few weeks, the recording had risen, simultaneously, to the top of the country chart (where it remained for 10 weeks) and the pop chart (remaining there for 8 weeks), and also reaching #1 on the U.K. pop chart. In early 1956, newspaper reporter John Tynan wrote that Ford's "16 Tons" is "hot as a firecracker in both the pop and country fields and in a position to sashay either way with the assurance that he [Ford] can't misstep." Within a few months of its release, "16 Tons" had sold more than four million copies, and Ford soon confessed to a journalist that he did not take that record's popularity for granted: "Don't think that I'm blasé about it. Every time I think about it, I have to hold my head. It terrifies me."

As he conveyed to another interviewer at the time, Ford contended that the success of "16 Tons" on the pop chart had compelled him to consider moving away from his earlier affiliation with country music:

I may never do another country record. Practically every one of the pop records

I've made has shown up high on the c&w charts.... That's why I believe it would be a mistake for me to restrict myself to the country field.... Mind you,...I don't want to lose my c&w fans, but I realize I would be limiting myself terribly by continuing to record only country material. Did you know Mitch Miller of Columbia said that "16 Tons" was the most exciting thing he'd ever heard? Well, that's what we're aiming for...to make exciting but commercial records.

Once Ford had proven his viability on the pop chart (in the 1950s pop music commanded a national audience and thus was more lucrative than country and western, a genre that primarily targeted fans in select American regions), Capitol Records targeted subsequent releases by the singer toward pop music markets (the silky smooth arrangements on many of Ford's late-1950s recordings bear this out). Ultimately, though, Ford could not compete with the younger upstarts of the rock 'n' roll era (only two of his singles after "16 Tons" rose into the Top 40 pop chart), and Ford, after 1956, steadily gravitated back toward country music while soon becoming a leading and commercially successful interpreter of American sacred songs. Nonetheless, he had already shown all comers—including Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash, among many others—that a recording artist need not be limited by a persona shaped by previous performances and recordings. For younger artists wanting to avoid being bound by any fixed artistic identity, Ford was a worthy and proven role model.

Showing the ultimate respect to this Merle Travis song immortalized by Tennessee Ernie Ford, many recording artists have since performed and recorded "16 Tons." Tellingly, the song has inspired both live and recorded interpretations from musicians working in multiple genres, including country (Eddy Arnold, Jimmy Dean, Johnny Cash, Charlie Daniels and Willie Nelson); pop (Elvis Presley, Bobby Darin, and Stevie Wonder); rock (Bo Diddley, Eric Burdon, Joe Cocker, and Leon Russell); blues (Big Bill Broonzy); rhythm and blues (The Platters and Johnny Taylor); and folk (The Weavers). Several acts—including The Clash, ZZ Top, and Jeff Beck—have employed Ford's "16 Tons" as a theme song during tours. In 1972, celebrity DJ Casey Kasem declared Ford's "16 Tons" as the #10 hit of all-time on his "American Top 40 Songs of the Rock Era (1955-1972)" list. In 1998, Ford's version of "16 Tons" was inducted into the GRAMMY Hall of Fame, and in 2015 "The Nation" magazine declared the recording of that song as #4 on its "Top Ten Labor Day Songs" list.

In short, Ford's "16 Tons" is one of the most influential recordings of American popular music from the 1950s, and one of the major crossover hits in the history of American music. It remains one of those rare recordings that not only dominated more than one commercial music chart, but also continued to haunt the imaginations of a broad range of people for many years after its release.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.