“Folk Songs of the Hills”—Merle Travis (1947)

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Essay by Deke Dickerson (guest post)*

“Albums” in the 1940s were literally albums--book-style compilations of individual 78 singles. Few today realize that this is where the term “record album” originated. In the mid-1940s, it was virtually unheard of for a new artist like Merle Travis, recently signed to the newly formed Capitol Records label, to be asked to record an album; they were usually reserved for established names with proven track records. Capitol Records’ A&R man Cliffie Stone, however, had something else on his mind. Folk music was selling well and drawing well in concert tours in the major cities and on college campuses. Artists like Carl Sandburg, Burl Ives, Josh White, Susan Reed, and others were creating a popular niche, and Capitol wanted in. The executives grumbled to Cliffie that they needed an artist to compete with Burl Ives. Hence, it made perfect sense to approach Merle, the best example of a real down-home “folk artist” they had on the label. Merle was also an artist proving himself adept at quickly writing songs on demand. Merle recalled:

Cliffie Stone was the A&R man then. He said, “We’re gonna put out an album on you.”


I said, “Well, Bradley Kincaid and Burl Ives have sung all the folk songs. I don’t remember what they even sung.” And he said, “Make up. Write some.”

I said, “You don’t write folk songs.”

He said, “Well, write them that sounds like folk songs.”

So I said, “Well, I’ll try.”
And I got to thinking about a song that Josh White sung. And I was messing around with that in a minor key, and I got to thinking about a saying around the coal mines, “I owe my soul to the company store.” And so I made up a song called “Sixteen Tons”: “Load sixteen tons and what do you get? Another day older.” So I wrote “Sixteen Tons,” just messing around. I thought, “Well, there’s one.”

And then I had a date with a girl down at Redondo Beach. To show you what inspiration will do, a lot of people think you’re inspired to write a song, and I was inspired because I had to write them. So I drove the girl home, and on the way home, it was about two o’clock in the morning, and I thought, “Boy, I’ve got to write them songs. What’ll I write?” And it was dark, and I thought, “Well, it’s dark.” Thoughts go through your mind, and I thought, well, it’s dark in the mines. I thought it’s something around that, I thought, “Dark as a Dungeon.” “There’s a good title,” I thought, “Dark as a Dungeon.”

So I pulled up under a streetlight and looked in the glove compartment and found some old piece of paper. And I sat under that streetlight and wrote a little song called “Dark as a Dungeon.”

On “Sixteen Tons,” Merle also later remembered:

Ernie Pyle was a war correspondent; he’d do human interest stories about the soldiers. My brother [John Melvin] wrote me a letter and said, “That’s a damn shame about Ernie Pyle. He went through the whole war and then got killed right at the end of it. It’s just like working in the coal mines. You load 16 tons and what do you get? You get another day older and deeper in debt.” And I said, “Hey, that’s a good line for a song.”

In the same vein as “Sixteen Tons,” the complex narrative that Merle imagined in “Dark as a Dungeon” proves his incredible skill as a songwriter. In just a few rhyming lines, those who had never ventured out of the big cities could imagine themselves working alongside the coal miner, far below the ground, “where the danger is double and the pleasures are few.”

Merle would also tell of how he attempted to make “Dark as a Dungeon” sound like an authentic Irish folk song. Son Thom Bresh recalled: “He said, ‘All the great folk songs come from Ireland.’ ‘Listen Ye Fellers’ and that sort of thing, so I started it that way, ‘Listen ye fellers so young and so fine, and seek not your fortune...’ See, it’s backwards in folk songs--‘seek not your fortune in the dark dreary mine.’”

Merle recorded the eight songs for the album over three sessions in 1946 and 1947. In addition to his own original compositions--“Sixteen Tons,” “Dark As A Dungeon,” “That’s All” and “Over By Number Nine”--Merle included several older songs that he updated with new lyrics and arrangements: “Mus’rat,” “Nine Pound Hammer,” “John Henry” and “I Am A Pilgrim.”
As gung-ho as the Capitol executives had been at first, once the songs were in the can, they seemed less enthused about releasing it. The album sat in the vaults for months before Capitol released it in May 1947. As Merle put it later: “Then Capitol let them sit on it for two years [actually one year] before they issued them and by that time the folk fad had passed and the album went nowhere.”

When Capitol finally released the album, it was a commercial failure. It did find an audience in the folk music crowd, where Merle’s authentic portrayal of life in the Kentucky coal mines endeared him to collegiate, educated music cognoscenti. These folkies, college professors, and beatniks would repay their debt in Merle’s later years when he was hired to play many folk festivals and college campuses. Merle always took the folk crowd’s attention with a grain of salt; he insisted that his folk songs were written on deadline and meant to be fun attempts at copying “real” folk songs. But he couldn’t hide the sheer excellence of his compositions, and these songs would follow him for the rest of his career. Both “Sixteen Tons” and “Dark as a Dungeon” would be included in Alan Lomax’s influential 1960 book “Folk Songs of North America.” “Folk Songs of the Hills” is also put into the Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry, cementing its importance regardless of sales. Despite his protestations, after “Folk Songs of the Hills,” the folk crowd always treated Merle like a hero.

Today, some 75 years later, “Folk Songs of the Hills” remains in print, and is considered one of the first “concept albums.” The brilliance of Merle Travis’ folk-song-writing-on-demand is undiminished, influencing younger generations of kids discovering his music through online digital media that Merle could have never imagined.

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*The views expressed by this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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i Merle Travis interview with Doug Green, October 17, 1975, CMF Oral History Project
ii Mark Humphrey interview with Merle Travis, June 21, 1979, courtesy Mark Humphrey
iii Thom Bresh Interview with the author, October 13, 2018.
iv Merle Travis interview with Lou Curtiss, “Memories of Merle” Part Two, San Diego Troubadour