

“Mama Tried”--Merle Haggard (1968)

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Essay by Rachel Rubin (guest post)*



“Mama Tried” original LP cover

When Merle Haggard released “Mama Tried” in 1968, it quickly became his biggest hit. But, although in terms of broad reception, the song would be shortly eclipsed by the controversies surrounding Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee” (released the next year), “Mama Tried” was a path-breaking song in several significant ways. It efficiently marked important, shaping changes to country music made by the generation of musicians and audiences who came of age post-World War II (as did Haggard, who born in 1937). “Mama Tried,” then, encompasses and articulates developments of both Haggard’s career and artistic focus, and the direction of country music in general.

Indeed, Haggard’s own story usefully traces the trajectory of modern country music. Haggard was born near the city of Bakersfield, California, in a converted boxcar. He was born two years after his parents, who were devastated Dust Bowl “Okies,” traveled there from East Oklahoma as part of the migration most famously represented by John Steinbeck in “Grapes of Wrath” (1939)--an important novel that presented and commented on the class-based contempt that “Okies” faced in California. Haggard confronted this contempt throughout his career (and even after his 2016 death, the class-based contempt continues). His family (including Haggard himself) took up a range of jobs, including agricultural work, truck-driving, and oil-well drilling. Labor remained a defining factor of Haggard’s music until he died in 2016, and he frequently found ways to refer to his musicianship as work (making a sharp joke on an album, for instance, about the connection between picking cotton and picking guitar).

Even beyond the exploited labor Haggard’s family performed, the young Merle had it quite hard. He was first incarcerated at 13, moving from detention homes to reform school to several local jails and finally to San Quentin Prison, where he was in the audience to hear a performance by Johnny Cash—the son of Arkansas tenant farmers. Later, Haggard would point to his prison time as a period that introduced him to multiple forms of music, many of which he worked into his own compositions and performances in ways that resulted, among other things, in Haggard being referred to by the significant

jazz magazine “Down Beat” as a “country jazz messiah.” (He was, by the way, the first country musician ever to appear on “Down Beat’s” cover.)

After getting out of jail, Haggard played around in California, and got breaks from established musicians, but the title song of a 1966 album, “I’m a Lonesome Fugitive,” marked when Haggard started treating his own past in his music—and was his first number-one hit. It is important to note that several other country musicians also went autobiographical at this moment—Loretta Lynn, most known for “Coal Miner’s Daughter” (1969), Dolly Parton’s “In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad) [1969],” and so on. Although there are certain earlier glimmers of this tendency (Jimmie Rodgers, known as the “singing brakeman,” wrote several songs about the tuberculosis that later killed him), the importance of autobiography (and biography) is a defining characteristic of post-migration country music.

Country musicians emerged as group representatives in ways that were not important before, back when country music was a regional phenomenon. Following geographical shifts—such as the one made when Haggard’s parents moved from Oklahoma to California—musicians began consciously doing the work of representing a newly-defined listening base, in both problematic senses of “represent”: that is, to depict and stand for. In short, in “Mama Tried,” Haggard is performing a version of himself.

“Oh, they say that country music’s gone to town,” sang Porter Wagoner in 1965. Wagoner goes on to joke about how “Old Joe Clark’s done put on a cap and gown,” but he is describing a moment that is actually the birth of modern country music following the Great Migration, when droves of black and white Southerners left their rural homes for jobs in the cities, frequently moving into industries that boomed during wartime. Wagoner’s song describes, then, the birth of modern country music, and Haggard’s song “Mama Tried” is a prime example of how it grew up from there: how the music itself changed after the Migration and especially how the music itself (for better *and* for worse) contributed to various people’s notion of what it meant to be a Southerner now that the sense of place, or the supposed crucial connection to land or region, was so disrupted or even gone for good.

While it is very clear that this function of music—as group biography—was historically very useful for Haggard’s generation, that does not mean it was necessarily an easy move for the artist. Haggard in particular felt a great deal of humiliation about his past, including the class-based contempt his family faced when he was young (in one of his autobiographies, he comments on their being seen as “red-neck Okies”), and the shame he felt about his incarceration. Haggard long stated that he tried to hide his prison time until a conversation with Johnny Cash—in which it came out that Haggard was in the audience when Johnny Cash famously played at San Quentin Prison—convinced him that he should come forward with his personal history. Not only did he and Cash restage the conversation later on television, but Haggard began to write many very popular songs about incarceration, social rejection, and being on the run.

Of course, as with all art, these songs are aestheticized. In “Mama Tried,” for instance, the narrator is serving a life sentence without parole (which clearly Haggard didn’t), but the song does represent a serious turn in Haggard’s music as well as in country music generally. On the album that introduces “Mama Tried,” there are four songs about incarceration out of album’s 12 selections —dramatically, that is a third of the songs. (Haggard also uses “prisoner” metaphorically in a fifth song.) He includes on the album many songs about traveling as well—again, metaphorically invoking geographical population shifts. Before long, on the live album that introduces the notorious “Okie from Muskogee,” the announcer would declare that Haggard “has written his life into the songs he sings”—and then the band launches into “Mama Tried.”

In addition to its focus on autobiography and movement, “Mama Tried” is a very compelling example of the musical sophistication of what came to be called Bakersfield country music. The incredibly urban instrumental introduction, for instance, pushes back against the cleaned-up, polite, softened, “cosseted with strings and soft harmonies” (as Nicholas Dawidoff efficiently put it) Nashville sound. Certainly, in “Mama Tried,” Haggard includes occasional careful use of the vernacular (“young’un,” for instance) as a statement of class identity. (In an efficient indication of the importance of such uses of vernacular—who is using them and why--the Grateful Dead, big Haggard fans, in their recording of “Mama Tried” carefully put a “T” that Haggard drops back at end of “kept,” avoiding the class minstrelsy that Jon Smith identifies with impressive efficiency in writing about Neko Case’s version of “Long Black Veil” and how, like no other version of the song, she sings, “if you were somewheres else” instead of “somewhere else.”) But Haggard also fills the song with incredibly sophisticated artistic structures: internal rhymes, feminine (i.e. not on the last syllable) rhymes, non-colloquial vocabulary—“meek and mild,” “her pleading I denied.”

“Mama Tried” is also quite admirable in that it presents a working woman, a mother described as “working hours without rest.” (Haggard himself was quite young when his father died.) Such class-based feminism played a hugely important role in 1960s country music, with Haggard taking it on in multiple songs, including ones in which housework is presented carefully as labor. Other examples from the genre include Loretta Lynn’s 1975 “The Pill”—an early celebration of birth control availability—and Dolly Parton’s 1967 “Dumb Blonde,” which she introduced on her debut album, clearly indicating that self-definition and pushing back at gender-based contempt was a huge part of country’s female empowerment.

“Mama Tried” is also impressive in how historically layered it is. For instance, the album it is on presents several connections to Jimmie Rodgers, one of Haggard’s musical heroes, and the whole 1930s “hoboes” trope that Rodgers represented. In fact, on the original album cover, “Hag” is dressed to invoke Jimmie Rodgers, whom he often covered. “Mama Tried” is a good reminder that popular music is not only an excellent historical source, but is also a seriously important way that people who are not filling the halls of higher education tell and write their own history.

Rachel Rubin is director of the Center for Humanities, Culture, and Society at University of Massachusetts Boston. In 2018 Rubin published two books--one a collection of interviews (“Creative Activism: Conversations on Music, Film, Literature, and Other Radical Arts”) and an entry in Bloomsbury’s “33 1/3” series on Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee.”

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