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Merle Haggard

In Concert 1983 [DVD]

(MVD)

US release date: 15 May 2007

by **Dan MacIntosh**
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In 1983, the new British Invasion of synth-pop was sweeping the radio airwaves and all the latest haircut bands were jamming MTV. But you'd never guess that from watching this Church Street Station concert DVD. Merle Haggard is categorized as a country music artist, but a fine singer / songwriter with a deep understanding of music history is a far better description of what he's all about.

It's sometimes difficult, in spite of the title, to tell what year this DVD showcases in Haggard's career. But because The Hag's hair is not yet grey, it can't be too modern. But the lines on his face reveal he's certainly not a kid anymore, either. He introduces "If You Want to Be My Woman", which eventually made it onto the 1989 5:01 blues release. So yep, it's the '80s alright. This approximately hour-and-a-half DVD has almost everything you truly need to see and hear Haggard perform, and then some. Too bad it's not more inspired.

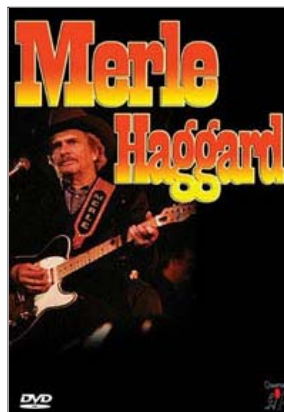
Haggard sings plenty of covers, and does so respectfully, in addition to his own repertoire. He gives Jimmie Rogers' "TB Blues" a go, as well as Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues" (misspelled "Fulsom Prison Blues on the DVD package), and Bob Wills' "San Antonio Rose", to name some noteworthy examples.

But it's Haggard's own songs that make him so special. He can muse about romance with works like "Twinkle Twinkle Lucky Star" and "Today I Started Loving You Again". But he's even more effective when being topical. "Workin' Man Blues" opposes the welfare state while it salutes hardworking blue collar employees. Similarly, "Big City" speaks about that illusive social security system, but mostly focuses on escaping the rat race.




Haggard also gets personal with his lyrics. This ex-con did some time in prison, which is why he can bring "Mamma Tried" to life. And his reflection on aging gracefully in "Footlights", is a most illuminating song, indeed. It was almost certainly inspired by Johnny Cash's experiences, as he was thrown off the Grand Ole Opry for literally kicking out that stage's footlights. But for Haggard, the song represents his desire to retain that rebel spirit, which keeps him alive and vital. One of the song's lines talks about how he sometimes must force himself to flash "that instamatic smile", even though he doesn't really feel like smiling.

Haggard fits in just as well at a dancehall as he does in a honky-tonk. Hot-steppers like "Ida Red", and "Take Me Back to Tulsa", are rhythmic exercises, which bring back to life Bob Wills' jazzy fiddle workouts. It's hard to listen to these tunes without at least tapping one's toes. But when he performs the confessional "The Bottle Let Me Down" kind of song, one cannot picture anything other than a forlorn loser on a barstool, at a bar, with a beer.

This show closes with "Okie from Muskogee" and "The Fighting Side of Me", which are two songs that have given Haggard a reactionary conservative


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Jason MacNeil

16.Mar.06

Merle Haggard is still going, and it is on the strength of his timeless country songs. A select cache of numbers is showcased from this memorable '85 date for the legendary PBS program.

Seth Limmer

08.Apr.04

Will Stenberg

27.Jan.04

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