

HAGGARD

FROM PAGE B1

he was given a guitar by a friend.

Yet the young Merle, who quit school in the eighth grade, became as adept at picking as he did breaking and entering, and stealing cars.

As one of his songs goes, "Mama tried" — but Haggard lived most of his youth in reform school and the boxcars he hopped throughout the South-west.

He was eventually convicted of burglary, spending almost three years in San Quentin State Prison near San Francisco. He was paroled in 1962.

Five years later he released his Capitol Records debut, *Branded Man*. In 1972, the year his likeness graced the cover of *Time* magazine, he was pardoned by California Gov. Ronald Reagan.

After a pair of bare-bones albums on the punk label Anti-that showcased his well-traveled voice, Haggard recently returned to Capitol for the slickly produced *Chicago Wind* (2005).

Q: Why do you keep up such a vicious touring pace year after year?

A: I watched Bob Dylan's documentary the other day (*No Direction Home*), and he took off eight years once. I might be looking at one of those periods. I'm thinking of buying a Caterpillar and a backhoe, and becoming a pond builder.

Q: When you're on the road, what does the country look like now vs. 30 years ago?

A: It looks like there's been a war here. It's pretty sad.

Wal-Mart offers America everything. They've also eliminated everything. There's no more personality to a city. When you come into a city, it's the same old thing: McDonald's, Wendy's and three or four that's always there. Every off-ramp's the same.

The only way you can see America is to take, like, Highway 50 across Nevada. Take that little road and go right through America and see what it used to be.

Q: Do you get time to take roads like that?

A: I try to — anything to miss the interstate. These interstates are in a terrible shape. Here we are worrying about fixing somebody else's country. What about us for a change?

Q: You've been outspoken about the war in Iraq, you and Toby Keith got along well enough to record together recently. Did you argue much about it?

A: We're not really on opposite ends. My brother was a Marine and fought hand-to-hand combat on Okinawa. I would have been in the Marines when I was 14, but I got caught trying to go in too young.

► Merle Haggard will perform during the third annual Country Legends-Fest, presented by WHOK (95.5 FM), on Saturday at Beulah Park, 3811 Southwest Blvd., Grove City. Pam Tillis, McGuffey Lane and Rainbow Canyon will appear first; gates will open at 1 p.m. Tickets cost \$6.95, or 95 cents for children 12 and younger, in advance; \$12.95 and \$5 at the gates. Call 614-871-9600, Ext. 1304, or visit www.whok.com.

I understand we're warriors all over the world and that we're going to be at war with somebody. The economy is set up on it. Who could hate the soldiers? We've got to be proud of them. But I hate to see the quality of freedom deteriorate inside America while we're fighting all over the world to defend it.

Q: Why have you always done what you call "ad-lib" shows?

A: That comes out of a sense of humor. I just don't want to take things too serious and have to be so perfect that they have to like me.

The show has evolved tremendously over the years. We enter the stage with the same talent and the same pile of songs and just sort of select as we go on how we're being accepted. You can't do the same songs that you do in a ball park that you do in a little bar.

Q: Where do you keep the trophy you won this year at the Grammy Awards — the lifetime achievement award?

A: I got it sitting up here where I can see it, up on top of the fireplace here.

Q: What does it symbolize to you?

A: Hopefully, not to end of it all. They keep trying to put me out to pasture. I'm not going right now.

Q: How important was it to you to get back to Capitol Records, your first label, to make Chicago Wind?

A: To be honest, we got screwed. I think that they wanted my signature on something so they could have digital rights (to the Haggard discography) they didn't already acquire so many years ago. We haven't had a great relationship. I'm fixing to go elsewhere; I'm going south with my mouth, as we say.

There's a lot of different ways to structure a record company these days. You might want to make Wal-Mart your only distributor and get them to foot the bill. You know, somebody said Sony is about to buy Wal-Mart! If that happens, I'm going to Mars — shoot my ass out in space.

Q: Speaking of marketing, I don't see many videos of you with pickup trucks and women in bikinis.

A: Maybe I ought to just get those things and have them fired up while I sing a real nice ballad. No, I don't know. I'm enjoying a good period as a

writer. George Strait has a beautiful video out on a song of mine called *Seashores of Old Mexico*. Mark Chesnut just cut one of my songs. I think that's worth more than videos as far as marketing goes.

Q: You've answered questions all your life about San Quentin, but I've always wondered what you did the first day you left there. Did you have a chip on your shoulder?

A: I was really jumpy. I was looking over both shoulders — didn't want anybody behind me — and I'd always sit in the back of the room. I went straight to a bar in San Francisco, ordered a beer. I couldn't drink the whole beer. I said, "This don't even taste good." I didn't drink beer anymore after that.

So I got me a half-pint of vodka and got on a Greyhound bus and rode to Bakersfield.

You go through a depression when you get out of a place where you've established friendships and a way of life. Even though it's behind bars, you have friends and feelings that you leave behind the walls. A lot of people wind up going back to prison almost intentionally. It's a readjustment period, and it's quite severe. You feel like everybody knows exactly where you just came out of. You do everything you can to avoid letting everybody know that you're an ex-con. That's your biggest fear, and Johnny Cash wanted to put mine on national TV! He's the one who talked me into telling people I'd been in the joint.

Q: Did you argue that, or was he persuasive?

A: He said, "Why don't you let me tell folks where you've been?" I said: "That's the last thing I want to be famous for. I'd just like to let that fade away." He said, "Well, if you let me do that, you'll be an overnight success." That Johnny Cash was probably right.

Q: Did you maintain any ties with anyone in San Quentin after you left?

A: No. You have to sever all ties. I got the full unconditional pardon from Ronnie (Reagan). In order to get that, you can't just be favored by the governor. You have 12 Supreme Court judges who make that pardon valid. That's why it's such an honor. . . . When I got it, I was the youngest man ever to be pardoned in the state of California. They sent me to Prison and made me Man of the Year (on *Time*) 10 years later.

Q: How much did your dad's death, as you look back now, affect the way you lived your youth?

A: I think he'd had a tremendous effect on me. I don't know if it would have been for the good or bad, but I was 9 years old and for 60 years I've missed him. I had a good dad. A lot of people don't have good dads. He was the hero of my life. I would have given anything for

him to see my success.

Q: All the songs you have about the way you grew up — what do you think you would have sung about if you hadn't experienced prison and everything else that happened because of it?

A: There was a lot of material there that would have been slightly different, but there was still a great well to draw from from the family that I was fortunate enough to be born into — a migrant family from Oklahoma who had come out during the Dust Bowl and the Depression and all those hard times and found this boxcar and made it into a home. Here I was, about 3 years old, sitting in the middle of an oil patch. Life, from the very get-go, has been absolutely an adventure.

Q: What did your mom ever say about Mama Tried?

A: It went to No. 1 in America, and, of course, my mom was proud. The ladies at the church really admired her.

Q: Other than Okie From Muskogee, which confused a lot of people, are there other songs that people misinterpreted?

A: It depends on who's talking about them, I suppose. There are people who'll fight for me, and there's people who hate me. Seems like if you have deep feelings about certain things, somebody's going to have a problem.

Q: You've been married, well, a lot — five times. What has been tougher, keeping a marriage together or quitting cigarettes and marijuana? (Haggard smoked the medicinal kind to fight glaucoma.)

A: Keeping a marriage together. You can quit anything: I've quit tobacco; I've quit marijuana.

I've been away from marijuana now for four or five months. I feel about the same, 'cept there ain't nothing funny anymore.

Q: What's the greatest barroom song you didn't write?

A: *Night Life or Crazy* — one of those great Willie Nelson songs.

Q: Why has your music always been such a mix of styles?

A: The influx, the migration from all over America between Los Angeles and Bakersfield — there was food, there was oil, and there was jobs. Everyone there who'd come from back East, they were all about the same broke. Some did well, some did worse, and out of that came music.

The first great prolific area of music was in the great South around New Orleans — which followed the great flood of '27 on into the Depression — and it brought about Robert Johnson and Jimmie Rodgers. You know, it always just comes out of tremendous hard times.

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DAILY SUDOKU | DIFFICULTY: 4 OF 5

Sudoku grid with numbers 3, 1, 8, 9, 2, 7, 6, 5, 4, 8, 2, 1, 3, 6, 8, 4, 1, 6, 5, 3, 1, 2, 4, 9, 7, 5.

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► How to play: Each row must contain the numbers 1 to 9; each column must contain the numbers 1 to 9; and each set of 3-by-3 boxes must contain the numbers 1 to 9.

► Today's solution | B2

WEBISODES

FROM PAGE B1

Internet videos ("all new!") that amount to promos for existing and future shows.

Even the webisodes of *The Office*, though, can be a chore to watch.

The slivers of a sitcom are overpowered by NBC's larger, moving canvas of advertising. Unlike TV commercials in the age of TiVo, the FedEx or Toyota ads that precede each webisode cannot be skipped or fast-forwarded.

And Internet commercials are more in-your-face because your face is that much closer to the screen.

Someday soon, all television will be available on cell phones, iPods and laptops, and a better balance between content and commercials will presumably be found. Right now, network Web sites are a piercing shriek of visual noise.

The *Office* vignettes are boxed on a Web page teeming with promos, pop-up ads, games and fall-season pre-views that make every viewing attempt feel like a game of Pac-Man, a race to get to the desired image and enlarge it before being bounced backward or gobbled up by a carnivorous video blob.

Broadcast television has lagged behind consumers who make their own videos and find their own hit shows on Web sites such as YouTube.com — without mass advertising or executive groupthink. NBC is trying to co-opt some of that video anarchy by forming a strategic cross-promotional alliance with

YouTube. The NBC site offers a contest, also flaunted on YouTube, for the best amateur 20-second promo for *The Office* to lure young audiences.

Now every network is racing to embrace television's new frontier — and beyond.

Even PBS has caught the bug: Its Internet site offers webisodes of its documentary series *Freedom: A History of US*. Actually, the only video on it is a brief introduction by the narrator, Katie Couric; the rest is text that is impenetrable, leading to audio snippets or letters, paintings and other primary source material.

Progress looms, but at the moment Internet programming is surprisingly unwieldy, more like the early days of radio than 21st-century television. Mac users who post complaints about the hurdles to downloading NBC's Internet videos on the network's blog make the process seem as tricky as trying to tune in the BBC from Nazi-occupied France.

Webisodes make sense for the networks — an easy, inexpensive way to promote new offerings and to keep shows in the public consciousness during the sleepy stage of summer reruns. They are intoxicatingly open territory for advertisers that fear that TV technology will make broadcast and cable commercials obsolete.

Viewers, however, may not be as excited by the hot-button phrase of Internet programming: "Your free video is loading."

Nobody expects to pay to download a sitcom, let alone a fraction of one.

OHIO ARTS COUNCIL

Glitch forces group to delay naming new director

By Barbara Zuck THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Because of a procedural error, the Ohio Arts Council yesterday postponed naming a new executive director, Chairwoman Susan R. Sofia said.

"We are very excited about our choice, and we want to get things off on the right foot," she said.

Sofia declined to name the candidate.

The search committee had selected a candidate, Sofia said Tuesday, and planned

to present the nomination at a special meeting of the 19-member board yesterday. Approval was expected but not guaranteed, she said.

Council bylaws, however, require public notice of a full board meeting, and council leaders did not follow the rules, she said.

The council began its search for a new leader shortly after Wayne Lawson, executive director for 27 years, announced last July that he would retire March 1.

A search committee chaired by Barbara Robinson, former council chairwoman,

failed to find a candidate by Lawson's last day. The council reopened the search and hired a New York professional to help. Lawson delayed his departure until March 31.

Since then, deputy director Julie Henahan has served as interim director. Lawson is now director emeritus.

Sofia said the vote on a new director would be postponed until an open meeting. Ten days' public notice is required. No date was posted yesterday. bzuck@dispatch.com

MANIA

FROM PAGE B1

comparison to the Brown original guarantee a success.

Noting a drop in demand, Barnes & Noble is taking down special display tables dedicated to *Da Vinci Code* games, puzzles and related books. Publishers also report a decline in the number of proposals that cite *Da Vinci* similarities.

Hoffman and others refer to a "maturing" of the market.

They note that *The Da Vinci Code* didn't invent the religious-historical thriller. They expect the genre to continue as it once did, with books failing or succeeding on their own, as opposed to being tied to the fortunes of *The Da Vinci Code*.

One sign of the market's maturity: a reluctance to compare a book to *The Da Vinci Code*.

Barnes & Noble's Hensley

notes a shift in the promotion of Brad Meltzer's *Book of Fate*, a thriller about a political aide that is due in the fall.

During the annual book-sellers convention, held about the time the movie was released, publisher Warner Books emphasized the novel's *Da Vinci*-like elements: ancient Masonic symbols and a code devised by Thomas Jefferson.

Now, Hensley said, Warner highlights the track record of

Meltzer, author of legal-political thrillers such as *The Tenth Justice* and *The Millionaires*.

A test for the current *Da Vinci* market will be Kathleen McGowan's *The Expected One*, a speculative thriller about Mary Magdalene released this week with a push from publisher Simon & Schuster.

The book has a special personal twist: The author hints that she is a descendant of Jesus and Mary.

might want to tout.

Her staff, Hanley said, also stays on the lookout for photogenic yards, which aren't hard to find in central Ohio.

Scotts pays homeowners whose yards are selected, but the amounts vary. Ashooh remembers it as a "couple of hundred dollars."

A regimen of watering, fertilizing and aerating keeps his lawn looking good, Ashooh said.

He has endured a little teasing and lots of compliments since revealing his lawn's cover-girl status.

One of his son's friends was so impressed that he showed up with a bag of Turf Builder and a pen.

"He asked me to sign it," Ashooh said. Of course, fame has its price.

The wet summer has Ashooh's grass a case of fungus, a problem he can't take lightly when his lawn has a gaudy reputation to protect. Treatment is under way.

"Now the pressure's really on."

Joe Blundo is a Dispatch columnist. jblundo@dispatch.com

USA WEEKEND Exclusive

A Super Legacy

How Christopher & Dana Reeve continue to make a difference in our world. Plus, personal memories from those who knew them.



This Sunday in... The Columbus Dispatch

Sports catches all the action every day.