

Merle Travis – A Career Overview

Merle Travis was born the son of a tobacco farmer in Rosewood, Muhlenberg County, Kentucky on November 29th 1917. He was christened Merle Robert Travis. By the time the youngster was aged four, Travis senior relinquished the farm and the family moved to the town of Ebenezer where Merle's father worked as a coal-miner. Introduced to music through his father's *spare time* banjo playing, Merle took up the instrument at the age of six, although the guitar eventually became his instrument of choice. One of his brothers built him a hollow bodied guitar when he was twelve. As Merle would recall years later, the elder Travis was prone to repeating the phrase "*Another day older and deeper in debt.*" Later, those same words became the oft repeated line in Merle's hit composition "Sixteen Tons." Speaking of song lyrics, which we were, John Prine fondly recalled childhood visits to "*Muhlenburg County*" in his 1971 song "Paradise."

By way of expanding his knowledge of guitar playing, Merle became friendly with two of his father's work mates, Mose Reger and Ike Everly. The latter, along with his wife Margaret, went on to become a professional musician working on radio stations in Kentucky, Indiana and Tennessee. Their sons, Don and Phil, would, by the late fifties, rise to national and then international prominence. We have digressed, however.

Among many things that Messrs Reger and Everly taught the young Travis, was to use his thumb on the bass strings while picking the other strings with his fingers. By the mid-thirties Merle left home, and began picking up loose change busking on street corners. For his sins, he was constantly being moved on to the next town. During his late teen years, he also worked for a time with the Civilian Conservation Corps. In 1935, when The Tennessee Tomcats heard him sing on a local radio station in Evansville, Indiana, Travis was invited to join the band. According to legend his daily wage was thirty-five cents. From the Tomcats he moved on to Clayton McMichen's Georgia Wildcats. Affectionately known as "Pappy," McMichen had formerly been a member of the pioneering Skillet Lickers. Two years later, Travis joined the Drifting Pioneers and was soon broadcasting regularly on radio station WLW's, *Boone County Jamboree* out of Cincinnati. By the close of the thirties he had also performed on the NBC Radio's *Plantation Party* and *National Barn Dance*.

In 1943 just prior to joining the marines, Merle recorded a solo single for the Cincinnati based King Records label using the name Bob McCarthy. At the same time, in partnership with Grandpa Jones [Louis Marshall Jones], the duo cut a single as the Shepherd Brothers. Years later, they reunited to record an album titled "**Merle And Grandpa's Farm And Home Hour.**" The duo had already performed extensively on radio shows together, and in partnership with the Delmore Brothers, worked as a gospel quartet, the Browns Ferry Four. Although he joined the marines and went off to fight in World War II, Merle was soon discharged.

Returning initially to Cincinnati, Travis decided to move west and settle in Southern California where he began working regularly with Cliffie Stone, Tex Ritter and Wesley Tuttle. For a number of years he appeared on Stone's television show *Hometown Jamboree*. In June 1946 Travis enjoyed his first Country Chart entry with the single "Cincinnati Lou"/"No Vacancy." Signed to Capitol Records, the A side made # 2, while the B side reached # 3. Merle was back in the charts a couple of months later with "Divorce Me C.O.D."/"Missouri." Once again it was a double sided hit single, with the A side peaking at # 1, while the B side made the # 5 spot early the following year. The next single, the engagingly titled "So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed" also made # 1 within a matter of weeks. Soon afterwards, Tex Williams took Merle's song "Smoke ! Smoke ! Smoke ! (That Cigarette)" to # 1 on the Country charts. Coincidentally, "Smoke !" became Capitol Records first million selling song. A revamped version was a hit, for Williams, nearly two decades later. The song has also been covered successfully by Commander Cody [1973], Tom Bresh [1978] and Sammy Davis Jr. [1982].

By the middle of 1947 "Steel Guitar Rag"/"Three Times Seven," became Merle's third doubled sided hit single with each song peaking at # 4. Toward the close of that year Travis enjoyed his fourth and final double sided chart entry with "Fat Girl"/"Merle's Boogie Woogie." It was also his final Top 10 single for almost a decade. "Fat Girl" made # 4, while the B side peaked at # 7 early the following year. 1948 and 1949 proved to be lean years for Travis' single releases, with "Crazy Boogie" only reaching # 11 and "What A Shame" peaking at # 13.

Although he was enjoying hit singles, Travis is probably best remembered as being an innovative guitarist. In partnership with Paul Bigsby, he developed the first solid bodied electric guitar. Leo Fender subsequently

asked to borrow Merle's guitar, refined the design, and the rest as they say, is history. Travis' idea had been based on the steel guitar, since he felt a solid guitar body would give each note more sustainability. In addition, his was the first guitar to have a head-stock where the string keys were fitted on one side only. By way of further confirming his status as a highly regarded guitarist, those equally famous string pickers Doc Watson and the late Chet Atkins, respectively, gave a son and a daughter the same christian name as Travis. Pursuing that vein of esteem, his 1960 album of acoustic guitar solos "**Walkin' The Strings**" became a highly influential recording for generations of guitar players.

Aware of his family background, in 1947, Lee Gillette, a producer at Capitol Records asked Travis for an album of Kentucky folk songs. Not knowing any, Merle wrote some instead and the results were released as the eight song collection, "**Folk Songs Of The Hills.**" Those songs included "Nine Pound Hammer" – a reworking of a traditional song, "Dark As A Dungeon" and probably his best known number, the aforementioned, "Sixteen Tons." As the winter of 1955 approached, Tennessee Ernie Ford took the latter song to # 1 on the Country Singles Charts where it remained for ten weeks, and it stayed on the chart for a total of five months. The song also reached # 1 on the US Pop Charts, where it stayed for eight weeks. Spike Jones subsequently released a parody version - "Sixteen Tacos," while in the UK family entertainer/comedian Max Bygraves cut a song titled "Seventeen Tons." Although Travis always maintained that it was meant to be a fun song, it dealt with the *poor working class* reality that he had known only too well as a child. Mine workers were constantly in debt, after purchasing goods from the company store.

Travis gave a creditable performance as a young GI, a role with which he was already familiar, and also performed the song "Re-enlistment Blues," in the 1953 movie "**From Here To Eternity.**" The Hank Thompson and Merle Travis duet of the A. P. Carter penned standard "Wildwood Flower," reached # 5 on the Country Singles Chart in the summer of 1955. During the fifties, he also appeared on the barn-dance styled radio show, *The Home Town Party*. Proof that life is full of strange coincidences, came in 1961 when Merle's arrangement of the traditional song "Muskrat," became a hit single for the Everly Brothers. In the UK it peaked at # 16 on the Pop Charts, while in the USA it only reached # 82. By the mid-sixties, Travis had relocated to Nashville, where he began appearing regularly on the Grand Old Opry. He moved back to Southern California in the early seventies. In 1972 he was a prominently featured guest player on the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's triple album and country music tribute, "**Will The Circle Be Unbroken ?**" Merle took the lead vocal and played guitar on his songs "Nine Pound Hammer" and "Dark As A Dungeon," plus "I Am A Pilgrim." Merle's instrumental "Cannonball Rag" was also included in the collection. Travis enjoyed his final Country Chart entry in 1966 when "John Henry Jr." reached a meagre # 44. Among his other skills, he was a talented cartoonist and for a time was a scriptwriter on Johnny Cash's television show. Teaming up with Chet Atkins to play on the burgeoning college music circuit, their 1974 collaboration "**The Atkins-Travis Travelling Show**" went on to pick up a Grammy. Merle was back on a movie set, playing one of the Texas Playboys, in the 1982 Clint Eastwood film "**Honkytonk Man.**" The movie tells the story of *imaginary* country singer named Red Stovall, who is hell bent on performing at the Grand Old Opry before he dies.

There was a dark side to Travis however – his addiction to *alcohol and pills*. As a performer he gained a reputation for being unreliable and his private life was far from stable. Married first to Bettie Morgan, Travis eventually had four wives, producing one son and four daughters. After Merle's death, his daughter Pat [Eatherly] wrote the book "**In Search of My Father**" [1987 - Baptist Sunday School Board - Baptist Book Stores; ISBN: 0805457275]. She subsequently produced another publication titled "**A Scrapbook Of My Daddy.**" In 1977 Merle was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame. Merle Travis passed away in Tahlequah, Oklahoma on 20th October 1983 at the age of 66, following a heart attack.

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