



When Tod Met Merle

(Or, One Man’s Closure is Another Man’s Torture)



When Merle Haggard and the Strangers were coming to the Oakland Paramount in the Spring of ‘05, I asked Tod if his 11-year-old daughter might want to go. “Maybe,” he said. “She’s currently into Elvis.” Then he added, to my surprise, “I met Merle once.”

Their paths had crossed outside the Redding airport one Sunday afternoon in 1997 or ’98. “It was not long after Prop 215 passed,” Mikuriya recollected. “I was flying up there quite frequently to conduct weekend clinics in Red Bluff,” i.e. to see patients who were afraid to discuss their cannabis use with their own doctors, or whose doctors were afraid to issue approvals.

Tod recognized and introduced himself to the musician and the woman he was with, who turned out to be Haggard’s wife and manager. Tod explained what he had been doing in Red Bluff —“conferring legality on medical marijuana users.” And then, Tod said, “I asked him why he was stand-offish on the issue while his buddy Willie Nelson spoke out.”

How did the Haggards respond?
“They indicated that self-censorship was necessary in order not to endanger his career.”

Tod decided not to push it. He told the Haggards that when “Okie From Muskogee” had come out in the early ‘70s, he’d written “an answer song.”

And then, *a capella* on the sidewalk outside the terminal, Tod sang for them his old expression of outrage and retaliation:

*They rot their minds and bodies with white lightning
Strewing highways with slaughter of the drunks
While the cops are raiding bedrooms
Of the marijuana smoking leftist punks.*

*Refrain: I’m glad I’m not an okie from Muskogee
Where the mind and the conscience are asleep
Frightened and kept ignorant from childhood
Is it any wonder that they act like sheep?*

*The local campus hero is the jock strap.
Scholarship and brand new shiny car
Making business for the abortionist
who pays the sheriff who runs the local bar*

*American Legion and VFW veterans
March down the flag-draped Main street twice a year
Then sit around drinking beer and watching pornies
Just in case you’d wonder if they’re queer.*

*Nixon, Mitchell, Agnew are their heroes
And the Indo China war’s a holy cause
The widow’s flags on our sons’ pine boxes,
Repay us for a war outside the laws.*

*Sex education was sent here by the devil
We hear an aging pious preacher bray.
Keep our children ignorant as we are
And the welfare rolls keep rising day by day*

Refrain

And how, I asked, did Mr. and Mrs. Haggard respond to the sidewalk serenade? “They seemed a little taken aback,” said Tod, matter-of-factly. “Not particularly amused. But it was some closure for me.”

Although Merle Haggard may have been reluctant to talk politics outside the Redding airport with a stranger—a singer-songwriter-psychiatrist—he certainly had his own reasons for deploring the marijuana prohibition.

In April, 1999, Haggard explained to a *Boston Globe* reporter that Canada used to be part of his New England tour, but by 1990 the indignity of crossing the border had become unacceptable. “If they find a seed of marijuana in your car or bus, they’ll run it all over the news,” Haggard said.

“I’ve got 30 people working for me. There is liable to be a seed of marijuana. So it makes it very uninviting to go into Canada, knowing that the United States is going to harass you coming back.

“They snatched some buses from people I won’t name, and buses are not cheap. It costs us seven or eight years of our lives to pay for these buses, and they just take ‘em. Like I say, you can’t personally shake people down that work for you. I’m not going to do that. You don’t know who’s doing what and who isn’t, but this ‘zero tolerance’ thing they’ve got going is really amazing. They’ve got private enterprise building prisons now. It’s scary. It’s overkill.”

—Fred Gardner