

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 754

By Crowe

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of country music legend Merle Haggard.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly were greatly saddened to learn of the passing of Merle Haggard, the voice of America's blue-collar working class, a founder of the Bakersfield Sound, and a fiercely independent visionary who, along with Hank Williams, influenced modern country music more than any other artist; and

WHEREAS, during the course of his half-century career, Mr. Haggard recorded forty number-one country singles and wrote some of the genre's most revered classics, which have been recorded by Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, The Byrds, Vince Gill, The Grateful Dead, and countless others; and

WHEREAS, Merle Haggard so embodied country music that the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's core exhibit, *Sing Me Back Home*, takes its title from a chart-topping song he released in 1968; and

WHEREAS, born to Oklahoma migrants James and Flossie Haggard on April 6, 1937, in Bakersfield, California, Merle Ronald Haggard was the youngest of three children in a poor family who lived in a converted railroad car; and

WHEREAS, after his father died in 1946, Merle Haggard entered a rebellious phase that resulted in his spending time in juvenile facilities and reform schools, but he also fell in love with music and began playing guitar, captivated by country artists such as Lefty Frizzell, Western Swing pioneer Bob Wills, and The Maddox Brothers and Rose; and

WHEREAS, his youth of petty crime, financial insecurity, and truancy eventually informed his songs that spoke plainly, but eloquently, about social outcasts, blue-collar concerns, and persistent restlessness; and

WHEREAS, he was eventually incarcerated for two and one-half years at San Quentin State Prison for a burglary attempt; when The Hag sang "I turned twenty-one in prison" in "Mama Tried" there was no poetic license involved; and

WHEREAS, while imprisoned at San Quentin, he saw Johnny Cash's famous performance for the inmates, played in the prison band, and worked in the textile mill; and

WHEREAS, Merle Haggard was paroled in 1960, and then-California Governor Ronald Reagan granted him a full pardon in 1972; and

WHEREAS, determined to set his life straight upon his release from prison, Mr. Haggard performed physical labor during the day, but his nights belonged to music; and

WHEREAS, alongside up-and-coming artists such as Buck Owens and Wynn Stewart, Merle Haggard began shaping the Bakersfield Sound, which was lean, hard, and twangy as opposed to the Nashville Sound's lush string arrangements; and

WHEREAS, even after he achieved great fame, Mr. Haggard didn't move to Nashville, preferring to stay in California, and he often recorded at Capitol's Hollywood studios; and

WHEREAS, Merle Haggard's second single, "Sing Me a Sad Song," became his first top-20 hit; while working the bar and club circuit, Mr. Haggard recorded "Just Between the Two of Us," a duet with Bonnie Owens, and "(My Friends Are Gonna Be) Strangers," both of which captured the attention of Capitol Records, and he was signed to the label; and

WHEREAS, from the mid-1960s through the 1970s, Merle Haggard released one great song after another, songs that are now an integral and beloved part of the country music canon, including "Sing Me Back Home," "Hungry Eyes," "Workin' Man Blues" and "Mama Tried"; his first number-one single was "The Fugitive" in 1965; and

WHEREAS, although he modestly stated that the English language was not his specialty, "Today I Started Loving You Again" (perhaps the Haggard song most covered by other artists) and "Irma Jackson," about an interracial romance, display his depth as an artist and his poignancy as a lyricist; and

WHEREAS, as the optimism of the 1960s was overtaken by the hard realities of the 1970s, Mr. Haggard released two signature songs: "Okie From Muskogee," a protest song about the values of small-town life that spent four weeks atop the country charts, and the hard-nosed anthem, "The Fightin' Side of Me"; Nashville's Country Music Association and the Los Angeles-based Academy of Country Music both honored "Okie" as country music's top single of the year; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Haggard wore his influences on his sleeve by releasing tribute albums honoring two of his favorite artists, Jimmie Rodgers and Bob Wills; his 1983 version of "That's the Way Love Goes," which was co-written by another artist he admired, Lefty Frizzell, spent twenty-one weeks on the charts and earned him a Grammy for Best Male Country Vocal Performance; and

WHEREAS, he was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1994, and as the new millennium dawned, The Hag reasserted his relevance by releasing a bluegrass record, "Kickin' Out the Footlights...Again," with George Jones and "Last of the Breed," a double-disc album with Willie Nelson and Ray Price; and

WHEREAS, after being diagnosed with lung cancer in 2008 and recovering from surgery, Merle Haggard resumed playing 100-plus shows per year; performing was where he felt most at home, and he once told *Country Music Magazine*: "Probably the happiest moments of my life have been on a stage"; and

WHEREAS, in 2010, Mr. Haggard traveled to Washington, D.C., to receive the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors, which are given to those in the performing arts in recognition of their contributions to American culture; and

WHEREAS, his last solo album, 2011's *Working in Tennessee*, included a reworking of "Workin' Man Blues" recorded with his teenage son, Ben, and Willie Nelson; and

WHEREAS, in 2015, he released two more collaborative albums, one with legendary country/bluegrass singer Mac Wiseman and the other with old friend and duet partner, Willie Nelson; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Haggard passed away on April 6, 2016, his seventy-ninth birthday; he is survived by his wife of twenty-three years, Theresa, and his children, Dana, Marty, Kelli, Noel, Ben, and Jenessa; and

WHEREAS, Merle Haggard possessed a fine classic country voice, but he is perhaps the greatest country songwriter of all time; combining simplicity with emotional resonance, he crafted realistic portraits of the American experience, some enriching, some devastating, and he always displayed the courage of the true artist in looking in the mirror to discover the truth; and

WHEREAS, he has left an indelible mark on subsequent country artists, including Randy Travis, Emmylou Harris, Alan Jackson, and Dwight Yoakam, so his sound will truly live on; and

WHEREAS, a unique American success story, Merle Haggard was a product of the Dust Bowl, was molded by the California sun, and changed country music from Bakersfield to Nashville and beyond; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED NINTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, that we celebrate the life of Merle Haggard, even as we mourn his passing, and reflect fondly on his indelible legacy as the greatest and most enduring country music artist of his generation.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we express our sympathy and offer our condolences to Mr. Haggard's family, friends, and legion of fans.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.