

Country Superstar Rouses White House

*Ex-Convict Invited
by Nixon to Stand
in Reception Line*

By ANTHONY RIPLEY
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WASHINGTON, March 18 —Merle Haggard, the country music superstar whose troubled background includes car theft, bad checks, armed robbery, burglary and San Quentin prison, entertained more than 250 guests at the White House last night.

His appearance came three days after President Nixon sent to Congress a message asking harsh steps "without pity" in attacking crime in the United States.

But no mention of either fact was made as Haggard and his wife, Bonnie Owens, backed by 13 musicians, played in the East Room under the chandeliers on a stage backed by portraits of George and Martha Washington.

It seemed another of those small coincidences in the sometimes quixotic nature of public events that surround the President.

The affair was "An Evening at the White House," and Haggard, who has risen well above his past troubles, was chosen to perform because of his "all-American type of music," said Mrs. Nixon's press secretary, Helen Smith.

The audience was reserved as the Osborne Brothers four-piece bluegrass band came on with a full country sound, playing such songs as "Rocky Top" and the old Hank Williams song, "You Win Again."

But the reserve melted as Haggard's group, mixing country, swing and Dixieland, replaced the Osbornes.

And it fell to pieces when the lights suddenly went up. A giant American flag rose from the back of the stage, seemingly unsupported like the finale of a magician's act, and Haggard swung into the song that had changed his life and brought him to the White House: "Okie From Muskogee."

Song of Patriotism

It is a song of country patriotism and decency—suggesting that football, moonshine whisky and the flag are better than drugs, hippies and dissent.

The applause was loud and sustained from the now-animated audience in evening clothes, and Haggard followed



Associated Press

President and Mrs. Nixon and their daughter, Julie, at a celebration of Mrs. Nixon's birthday Saturday night at the White House. Mrs. Nixon was 61 Friday.

with another, "Fightin' Side of Me," attacking dissent.

Haggard had already been a star when the song came out in 1969 but it made him "Entertainer of the Year" in country music and shot his fees on one-night stands from \$3,500 to \$9,000 and beyond.

Such rawboned patriotism, however, has not been the central theme of his music over the years. Much of it has been highly personal, drawn from his life as the son of Oklahoma dust bowl refugees in Bakersfield, Calif.

Other songs, such as "They're Tearin' the Labor Camps Down," speak of the plight of migrant workers, and "Irma Jackson" deals with an interracial love affair.

Eat Cake and Chicken

Haggard presented a poem he wrote to Mrs. Nixon, who earlier celebrated her 61st birthday at a family dinner upstairs. Her birthday is March 16 but she tradition-

ally celebrates on St. Patrick's Day.

The family ate cake and broiled chicken. White House press aides say the first family eats chicken two or three times a week along with such fish as trout and sole.

The President has said he does not approve of boycotting meat as some housewives have suggested for April. At the same time, he suggests consumers should eat more fish, and he attributed the high price of meat to excessive demand.

After the concert, Haggard joined Senators and Representatives, who made up most of the audience. Mr. Nixon, wearing a green satin bow tie with his dinner jacket, asked Haggard and his wife to join them in shaking hands on the reception line.

Mr. Nixon has made formality and ceremony a point at such functions. The military men and women who help around the White House

were in their baroque formal uniforms. There was harp and violin music for arriving guests on the ground floor while on the second floor, a contingent from the Marine Band played background music.

The President and Mrs. Nixon, who was dressed in a green chiffon evening dress reminiscent of the late nineteen-twenties with its big ruffles, were preceded by the colors as they came down the grand staircase and entered the East Room for the concert. The marines played "Hail to the Chief."

And so it seemed warm and strange to see Mr. Nixon greeting guests in the oval Blue Room, standing next to the slim, dark-haired country musician who wore an open-throated shirt, flared pants and fancy boots.

Haggard had his good-luck cowboy hat firmly on his head through the whole thing.