

Tim McGraw and Jon Meacham talk Springsteen and Merle Haggard at Rancho Mirage Writers Festival

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Author Jon Meacham (left) and country star (Tim McGraw) right appear at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival on Jan. 29, 2020 in Rancho Mirage, Calif. *Brian Blueskye*

Country music star Tim McGraw appeared with presidential historian and writer Jon Meacham at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival on Wednesday morning to discuss their collaborative book, "Songs of America: Patriotism, Protest, and the Music That Made a Nation."

"We are an unlikely duo. I'm very fit, very well-known for my good looks and singing voice," Meacham quipped.

The pair toured last summer with McGraw performing the songs they discussed in the book from the Civil War, Civil Rights Movement to the present day with work from artists like Bruce Springsteen and Lee Greenwood.

They used recordings of the songs for their 45-minute appearance in Rancho Mirage, but there were several miscues and the songs weren't correctly synced up with the presentation.

The duo addressed controversial songs from our nation's history and how the songs are addressed in the book. Meacham said when one thinks of the Civil War, they understand the tensions of Daniel Decatur Emmett's song "Dixie" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

"'Dixie' was written for minstrel blackface performers in New York City singing about how the informally slaved wish they could be back in slavery, that's what the song was written for and one of the ways we had to find a way to deal with this is how do you tell the tension of the story," Meacham said.

McGraw added that he grew up in Louisiana, where "Dixie" is part of the culture and had to go through the process of finding a way to perform the song during their book tour in a way that didn't come off as offensive. He combined "Dixie," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and the folk protest anthem "All My Trials" into a trilogy song.

"The combination of those three songs sets the tone of what we were trying to say and shows the arc of what it really means," McGraw said.

Another topic of conversation was the song "Ballad of the Green Berets," written by Staff Sgt. Barry Sadler during the Vietnam War in 1966.

"It's so patriotic and so moving, and everyone sort of gathered around it. It was a magnetic post for people of that era," McGraw said.

The crowd in Rancho Mirage sang along as the sample played. Meacham added the song wouldn't have been released by the beginning of 1968 due to the changing opinions of the war, saying, "That's how quickly the war changed for some folks."

McGraw said that he grew up traveling with his stepdad, who was a truck driver, sitting in the cab of the truck listening to Merle Haggard, Charlie Pride, George Jones and others that he referred to as his "education in country music." He also shared a story from his early childhood.

"My mom tells me my first introduction to music was while she worked in a bus stop cafeteria in Rayville, Louisiana before she married by stepdad. I was in a playpen right by the jukebox and I would sit in there every day while she worked listening to the jukebox. "

Meacham responded with a joke about McGraw's wife, country singer Faith Hill.

"Faith actually wants to keep you in a playpen," Meacham quipped.

The interpretation of Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" — is it a parody song or a song ridiculing the counter-culture movement? — has been up for debate since it was released in 1969. McGraw said whichever version Haggard said was correct is probably what sold tickets at each time it was brought up.

After discussing the meaning behind Bruce Springsteen's "Born In The U.S.A.," McGraw shared a funny story about why he doesn't cover Springsteen songs. In 2014, McGraw was invited to a MusiCares concert honoring the legendary singer to perform a cover of "Tougher Than The Rest" with Faith Hill. McGraw was asked last minute by Springsteen to sing a cover of "Glory Days" with him that included an all-star cast of other singers such as Sting, John Legend and Neil Young.

During the performance of the song, Springsteen looked for someone to sing the second verse. After two of them declined to step to the microphone (McGraw refused to say who those popular singers were), McGraw was put on the spot.

"He looked at me and said, 'Hey cowboy hat, come sing the second verse!' I didn't know the second verse," McGraw said. "I didn't want to be the third person to say no to Bruce Springsteen, so how hard could it be? It was a bad mistake. The lyrics are on the teleprompter but I can't find the melody to save my life. I get two lines into it and Bruce just pushes me out of the way and starts singing the song. That's why I'll never ever do a Springsteen song."