

Sixteen Tons

"Sixteen Tons" is a song written by Merle Travis in 1946, about a coal miner, based on life in the mines of Rosewood, Kentucky. The song became an instant success. Tennessee Ernie Ford recorded the song in 1955. With snapping fingers and a unique clarinet arrangement, it quickly became a million seller. It hit Billboard's country music chart and held the No. 1 position for ten weeks, then held the No. 1 position on the pop music chart for eight weeks. Ford's version also spent four weeks at No. 1 in the UK Singles Chart in 1956.

The song has been recorded by more than 20 artists between 1955 and 2012 and there are at least 8 foreign-language versions.

Some people say a man is made out of mud
A poor man's made out of muscle and blood
Muscle and blood and skin and bones
A mind that's weak and a back that's strong

Chorus:

You load sixteen tons, what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt
Saint Peter don't you call me, 'cause I can't go
I owe my soul to the company store

I was born one morning when the sun didn't shine
I picked up my shovel and I walked to the mine
I loaded sixteen tons of number 9 coal
And the straw boss said, "Well-a bless my soul!"

[Chorus]

I was born one morning, it was drizzling rain
Fighting and trouble are my middle name
I was raised in the canebrake by an old mama lion
Can't no high-toned woman make me walk the line

[Chorus]

If you see me coming better step aside
A lot of men didn't, a lot of men died
One fist of iron, the other of steel
If the right one don't getcha then the left one will

[Chorus]

The lines "another day older and deeper in debt" and "I owe my soul to the company store" are references to the "truck system", where workers were not paid cash, but instead with non-transferable credit vouchers that could be exchanged for goods only at the company store. This made it impossible for workers to save cash. Workers also usually lived in company-owned houses, the rent for which was automatically deducted from their pay. In the United States, the truck system, and the associated debt bondage, persisted until around the 1950s.

The phrase "sixteen tons" refers to a practice of initiating new miners. In the mid-1920s, a miner would haul eight to ten tons per day. Miners would deliberately reduce their workload so that a new miner could haul sixteen tons on his first day.

Merle Travis (1946):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pfVvqLM_e4
Tennessee Ernie Ford (1955):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1980WfKC0o
B. B. King (1955):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69ytaFDx1Rw
Edmund Hockridge (1956):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCl63fBkgF8
The Don Harrison Band (1976):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8-pbsXBe24
Johnny Cash (1987):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfp2O9ADwGk
Jeff Beck and ZZ Top (2012):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2aqvKY6zLc
Tim Armstrong (2012):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lj7_hxhK2c0

Foreign-Language versions:

French (1956):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-dk9Au59c8
German (1956):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjEnpFbpL0k
Spanish (1960):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1WD2o4sL3s
Brazilian (1971):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDmQjNS214E
Brazilian (2020):	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_qJ3xkk28I

The Truck System

The “truck system” (sometimes called the company store system) and its link to debt bondage were central features of U.S. coal mining from 1850 to the early 20th century.

The truck system meant that workers were paid not in cash, but in company-issued tokens (called ‘scrip’) that could be used only in the company store. So, while miners were technically “paid,” they couldn’t spend their earnings outside the company’s control.

Mining companies often owned everything in isolated mining areas, such as housing, stores, medical care and transportation.

A miner was typically:

- Paid in scrip instead of dollars
- Required to rent company housing
- Required to shop at the company store
- Charged inflated prices for food, tools, and medicine

The prices at company stores were often much higher than market rates, and tools, blasting powder, and safety gear were often deducted from wages. Injury or illness forced miners to buy credit-based medical care.

Workers frequently ended each pay period owing money to the company, and debt was carried forward indefinitely. Because of this, quitting would mean losing your house immediately, and leaving town without settling your debt could result in your arrest or inability to work elsewhere. In practice, miners were economically trapped. The system hit immigrants and black miners the hardest. There was little legal protection, and the miners could not easily move their families and they faced violence or intimidation if they rebelled.

For much of the 19th century, this system was legal. But growing unrest led to reforms. Some states passed anti-truck laws (requiring payment in cash), but enforcement was weak and companies often found loopholes. Federal labor protections were also limited.

Major strikes in 1914 exposed abuses and helped build public pressure for reform. Eventually, the truck system weakened due to labor unions (especially the United Mine Workers of America) and the “Fair Labor Standards Act”, which included:

- Stronger laws for wages and working hours
- Increased government oversight
- Better transportation, reducing company-town isolation

By the mid-20th century, the truck system was mostly abolished.