

Bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley dead at 89

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Bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley died June 23 at the age of 89. Along with his brother Carter (1925-1966), Stanley led one of the most remarkable groups in Bluegrass music and was one of the genre's greatest banjo players and singers. In reviewing the life and work of this talented musician, one is struck by the humble character of the man himself and the sincerity and depth of feeling evident in his work.

Born February 25, 1927, Ralph Stanley grew up on a small farm deep in the hills of southwest Virginia. The times and the conditions were harsh. The home in which he lived for the first nine years of his life had no electricity or running water. His father, a sawmill worker, left the family when Ralph was just 12 years old. Tragedy struck the family again when an uncle's body was one day found lying in a field. He had shot and killed Ralph's aunt before turning the gun on himself.

In a 2009 memoir, *Man of Constant Sorrow*, Stanley described these "rough mountains" and how they affected his music. "There's always been a lot of murder and a lot of death and a lot of heartache in these mountains," wrote Stanley "[T]he old songs I sing are all about that, about the hardness of life and the hope for something better beyond. I reckon that's the quality in the music that people respond to. They feel kin to it even if they've never been here."

Bluegrass music developed in these mountains after the Second World War. Several of the boys yanked out the mountains by the war—Ralph Stanley had served in Germany—now returned home and began to modify the folk songs they had grown up with. The music they played was faster, required greater virtuosity and featured soaring group harmonies.

Earl Scruggs had already developed a new style of banjo playing featuring rapid-fire picking and forward rolling volleys of notes, and Stanley soon developed his own variation. The classic "Dickson County

"Breakdown" is just one exciting example of his abilities on the instrument. George Shuffler, an innovative musician who helped define the sound of Bluegrass guitar, completed the Stanley Brothers' front line.

Among the Stanley Brothers finest and most beautiful recordings were "Little Maggie," "Molly and Tenbrooks," "Pretty Polly," "The Drunkard's Hell," and the immortal "I'm a Man of Constant Sorrow."

The lyrics of many of these songs, although not written by the Stanley Brothers, are also worth noting, for their compactness, their lack of sentimentality, their extraordinary popular-poetic quality. The experiences here are not simply individual ones; they speak to the longing and suffering of large numbers of people. "Little Maggie," for example, contains these enigmatically semi-tragic lines:

Over yonder stands little Maggie,
With her dram glass in her hand.
She's drinking away her troubles,
And courting some other man.

Oh how can I ever stand it?
To see them two blue eyes,
Oh shining in the moonlight
Like two diamonds in the sky. . . .

I'm going down to the station,
With my suitcase in my hand.
I'm going to leave this country
I'm going to some far distant land.

Go away, go away little Maggie
Go and do the best you can.
I'll get me another woman
You can get you another man.

While Carter was the group's primary singer, something special happened when Ralph approached the microphone. His voice was plain, sincere and always tinged with sadness, even on up-tempo numbers. His was the voice of someone trying to have a good time but unable to shake the more troubled

thoughts in the back of his mind. “I’ve never tried to put any airs on it,” Stanley wrote of his singing style, “I sing it the way I feel it, just the way it comes out.”

While the Stanleys found some success in the late 1940s, they were unable to live off their music alone. By the mid-1950s, both Ralph and Carter took a break from their music careers and relocated to Michigan. They took jobs at a Ford plant in Dearborn. Ralph worked the night shift as a spot welder. He later wrote of the experience, “It was just for a while, to get some regular paychecks to tide us over. It may have only been for a few months, but it felt like a life sentence to me.”

The intervention of fellow Bluegrass musician Jimmy Martin convinced the brothers to leave their jobs and appeal to Mercury Records in Nashville for a new contract. They did, and never looked back.

Sadly, Carter Stanley died of alcoholism in 1966. After some hesitation, Ralph Stanley carried on without him. In the years that followed, he often gave unknown, up-and-coming musicians their first breaks. One of his later groups included future Bluegrass and country music stars Ricky Skaggs and Keith Whitley.

The music of Ralph Stanley, and Appalachian folk music more generally, found a new generation of listeners following the success of the Coen Brothers’ film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and its hit soundtrack. The film featured Stanley’s mournful a cappella rendition of the traditional “O Death,” in which the singer pleads for death to “spare me over another year.” The performance is haunting, almost certainly the best vocal performance of Stanley’s career. It earned him the 2002 Grammy Award for best male country vocal performance.

The soundtrack also featured a hit version of “I’m a Man of Constant Sorrow” recorded by Dan Tyminski, whose version was modeled on the Stanley Brothers’ own definitive arrangement of the tune.

Ralph Stanley continued to record and perform up until his death. He could be seen playing in a wide variety of venues, from the largest of theaters to the small stages of fairgrounds and church picnics. When arthritis ultimately robbed him of his ability to play the banjo, his voice remained. It seemed to carry with it some of the more difficult experiences of the 20th century, along with the optimism which they had never been able to eliminate.



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