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The Stanley Legacy: Mountain Music Creators and Ambassadors

Ted Olson

East Tennessee State University, olson@etsu.edu

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THE STANLEY LEGACY MOUNTAIN MUSIC CREATORS AND AMBASSADORS



The most traditional-sounding of first-generation bluegrass music greats, Carter (1925-1966) and Ralph Stanley (1927-2016) were from Dickenson County, Virginia. In 1946, following military service in World War II, the Stanleys formed a band fronted by Carter on guitar and lead vocal and Ralph on banjo and tenor vocal. After debut recordings for the Johnson City, Tennessee-based Rich-R-Tone label in 1947, Carter and Ralph and the other members of their band the Clinch Mountain Boys (though the group was often credited as The Stanley Brothers) made nearly four hundred recordings for several national and regional labels. The band was based at WCYB radio in Bristol, Virginia/Tennessee, but also worked out of other locales (including the Suwanee River Jamboree in Florida). The group performed a wide repertoire of songs, including such Carter Stanley-penned classics as “White Dove,” “The Fields Have Turned Brown,” and “I’ll Never Grow Tired of You.”

After Carter’s death in December 1966, Ralph continued performing and recording (frequently for the Virginia-based Rebel Records) with a new version of the Clinch Mountain Boys,

and this band’s “high lonesome sound” became popular at bluegrass festivals across the US. Musicians who played with Ralph Stanley during these years constituted a bluegrass and country music Who’s Who, including Curly Ray Cline, Melvin Goins, Larry Sparks, George Shuffler, Jack Cooke, Roy Lee Centers, Keith Whitley, Ricky Skaggs, Charlie Sizemore, Ernie Thacker, and Ralph Stanley II.

In 1976 Ralph Stanley received an honorary Doctorate of Music from Lincoln Memorial University, which inspired his nickname “Dr. Ralph.” Continuing to tour and record until shortly before his death on June 23, 2016, Stanley received many awards, including a National Heritage Fellowship. Additionally, he was inducted into the Grand Ole Opry and the International Bluegrass Music Association Hall of Honor. Stanley won the Best Male Country Vocal Performance Grammy Award for his a cappella performance of “O Death,” featured on the soundtrack for the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* In 2004 the Ralph Stanley Museum and Traditional Mountain Music Center—celebrating his life and music—was dedicated in Clintwood, Virginia; this would be among the first sites to be included on the music heritage trail that came to be known as The Crooked Road. Despite ample opportunities to pursue his career elsewhere, Stanley desired to live his life in his home place of Southwest Virginia, making Dr. Ralph the embodiment of what the Crooked Road celebrates—the connection between traditional artists and the culture and community they represent.

Ralph Stanley II, a talented guitar player, singer, and songwriter, continues his father’s legacy as leader of the Clinch Mountain Boys. A Grammy winner, Ralph II (as he is often called) has released six solo albums and a duet album recorded with his father. Nathan Stanley, Dr. Ralph’s grandson, also continues to carry on the family’s music legacy.



Ted Olson is the author of Blue Ridge Folklife, a study of Blue Ridge culture, and a Grammy Award-nominated music historian.