

Carter Stanley: The Sibling That 'O Brother' Forgot

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It's shaping up to be another banner year for Ralph Stanley. In March, the old-time-music patriarch was named Virginian of the Year. He has a multi-record deal on a major label, not too shabby for a grandfather who turned 77 over the winter. The \$1.4 million Ralph Stanley Museum is set to open in the fall in his native Dickenson County. And this Thursday through Saturday, Gillian Welch and other performers will pay homage at the Dr. Ralph Stanley Bluegrass Festival, held every Memorial Day weekend at the family home place in far southwest Virginia.

Stanley has been on the "*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*" gravy train ever since the phenomenal success of the 2001 soundtrack of reconstituted, fiber-enhanced American roots music. Few would argue that Stanley has long since earned every penny of his career-capping cash-in, which a few years ago seemed as likely as his winning the Virginia Lottery. Yet there is a nagging sense that this Appalachian fairy tale is missing its crucial character, if not the leading man.

That was Carter Stanley, the forgotten Stanley Brother, the one who died young without ever getting a decent payday, much less an armful of Grammys. In bluegrass circles, his star has never dimmed, and for good reason. Without Carter, there would have been no Stanley Brothers, perhaps the most revered brother act in country music history. Carter was the founding member and the driving force, while kid brother Ralph, at least in the early years, mostly tagged along for the ride.

Now that Ralph's late-blooming success has rendered his brother barely a footnote, two recent reissues, "*The Complete Mercury Recordings*" and "*An Evening Long Ago*," are reminders of Carter's accomplishment, which "*O Brother*" mimicked nearly a half-century later: bringing traditional country music to a mass audience. The Stanleys didn't have a hit movie and a bunch of celebrity guests to help win converts. In fact, their music didn't exactly storm the country charts, which by the mid-'50s were cluttered with slick pop confections. Hank Williams was dead, and the rock revolution had Nashville in full retreat, with orchestrated productions replacing fiddles and pedal steel.

But bluegrass was still a viable, if increasingly marginalized, commercial entity, as Bill Monroe and Flatt & Scruggs had proved, so Mercury took a chance on the Stanley Brothers. This major-label status gave the Stanleys nationwide exposure on jukeboxes and on radio, and the impact was immediate and lasting, far outweighing the modest sales. For the first time, they were reaching listeners far beyond their native southern Appalachia with their mournful, spooky sound, the beginnings of a cult that today numbers Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello in its ranks. At the time, it was a shock to many that hard-core country could still nudge its way onto the airwaves.

"I remember the first time I heard the Stanleys on the radio," says Bill Malone, author of "*Country Music USA*," the definitive history of country and western. "I was growing up in East Texas, and I was very upset at what was happening to country music. I thought it was becoming

too pop and trying to fight back against rock-and-roll in the wrong way. So when I heard Carter and Ralph singing, I thought, 'Man, this is wonderful.' The sound was just so lonesome and crisp and clear. I'm sure that whole mountain mystique must have affected me. Being on a farm in East Texas, it was really romantic to think about those Virginia mountains. I had images of isolated coves and people way off the beaten track."

That mystique, which so entranced Malone and others, was due to more than mere geography. It was the Stanleys' vocal blend that set them apart from other bluegrass acts. Rooted in the brother duets of the '30s and '40s, they brought a sweet restraint to their tight harmonies that sharply contrasted with the high-pitched, cathartic hollers of Bill Monroe and his followers. By holding back, the Stanley Brothers created a dramatic tension that perfectly suited their songs of loss, longing and heartbreak.

Ralph's eerie tenor seemed to echo from the dark hollows where this music was born. Even so, it was rarely more than a supporting instrument for Carter's lead singing. He introduced a conversational voice into bluegrass that spoke with an emotional directness rivaled only by honky-tonk singers like Hank Williams and George Jones. It had a mellow glow and the unhurried, deep-dyed, rural cadence of country folk. Ralph made your hair stand on end, but Carter warmed your heart.

"The Monroe style has a very declamatory public character, whereas Carter's style is much more intimate," says Bob Cantwell, author of "Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound." "The vocal tone, which has something of a sob in it, is very characteristic of the old Regular Baptist testimony or salvation story. It wavers between song and speech, and it's an extremely intimate way of talking, where you hear the most candid and ingenuous expressions of feeling, and Carter certainly had that in his voice." Monroe himself, not one to dole out compliments, deemed Carter "the finest natural lead singer there ever was."

Mercury's Nashville facilities offered the best studio setting the Stanleys would ever enjoy. Carter seized on the advanced technology, a far cry from their debut recordings made six years before for a tiny independent regional label, Rich-R-Tone. "You could compare it to the radio crooners who figured out in the late '20s that with a microphone, they could sing in a much more intimate, consultative way," says Cantwell. "And I think Carter figured that out, too."

Birth of a Sound

It wasn't just Carter who was finding his voice. The mountain-shy Ralph rose to the occasion as if newly risen from the dead, shadowing Carter's lead like a grieving ghost. A gifted multi-instrumentalist named George Shuffler added his baritone to the sibling harmonies and the hallowed Stanley sound was born. Though still in their twenties, they'd been professional musicians for a decade and they sounded old beyond their years, the same sort of seasoned world-weariness you hear in the records of Otis Redding and Williams, two who never made it to 30.

"The Mercury years found the Stanley Brothers at the height of their performing powers, a sharp, bright sound full of verve and energy," Malone writes in "Country Music USA." "Ralph's blossoming tenor was, of course, responsible for much of this sound, but their band, the Clinch

Mountain Boys, was pushed along to greater rhythmic drive by the pulsating bass of George Shuffler, one of the first great bass players in bluegrass music."

The earliest of these sessions, from the mid-'50s, featured original compositions by Carter that are now part of the bluegrass canon: "This Weary Heart You Stole Away," "(Say) Won't You Be Mine," "Memories of Mother," "I Long to See the Old Folks." Though Carter's lyrics shared many of the themes of 19th-century sentimental parlor music, they were infused with a yearning that went beyond nostalgia. In his classic songs, "the deep rolling hills of old Virginia" enter the realm of myth. It is a dreamlike landscape that bristles with feelings that mirror Carter's own joy and despair, where "white doves mourn in sorrow, and the willows hang their head," where "the cool southern breeze played the music, at the old home with Mother and Dad."

To Cantwell, the imagery is more than just poetic license at work. It was Carter's way of recasting the past in a more favorable -- or more bearable -- light. "Carter was very much the self-conscious professional, and he knew what was expected of him by his audiences. And part of what was expected was that the old, pastoral mountain life would be idealized. The fact of the matter is that, growing up, Carter and Ralph had a wretched life and they were deeply poor. So what you're hearing is not a longing remembered so much as a longing invention of a childhood they never had."

Dickenson County, in the southwestern sliver of Virginia near the Tennessee and Kentucky borders, remains a place of pristine beauty and endemic poverty. The county, home to the Clinch Mountain range, has the highest unemployment rate in the Old Dominion. During the Depression, when the Stanleys were growing up in a place called Big Spraddle Creek, music offered a chance to escape a life sentence of hard labor. "We did everything we could to keep us out of the coal mines and the cotton mills," Shuffler says in a telephone interview from western North Carolina, where he was raised and still resides.

A longtime member of the Clinch Mountain Boys, Shuffler would often stay at the Stanley farm on breaks from touring, and he became close to Lucy Smith Stanley. "Ma Stanley was like a second mama to me," he says. "She was from the old school, from way back in those mountains. She believed in raising what she had to eat, and she'd want me to help. I'd plow her garden for her and help set it out and help gather it in."

Shuffler says Carter's songwriting themes stemmed from homesickness. The band barnstormed the back roads to eke out a living. It performed 50-cent shows at schools and drive-ins and anywhere else it could draw a crowd. Often there was barely enough money to pay for gas and meals. Carter utilized these grueling road trips to hone his craft, gazing out the window and composing songs in his head. "If we weren't home, we were trying to get home," says Shuffler. "Carter would go back there in his mind and write off that. He kept music on his mind about all the time. And when he got through writing it, he'd start singing it, and he expected me and Ralph to know it right then and fall in there behind him."

The band's remarkable cohesion -- especially the vocal parts -- on the Mercury sessions is a result of this practice of working out songs as the road went by. By the time the band went into

the studio, the songs were as familiar as an old pair of overalls: There was no need for rehearsals, no crib notes, no sheet music.

The Stanleys' constant touring in the Appalachian outback made a regional hero of Carter. The singer of the saddest songs in country music was in person a gregarious, handsome, back-slapping charmer. Onstage he was the star, the affable MC who cracked jokes and kept the show going. Though just two years his junior, Ralph was in every respect the baby brother, in both appearance and demeanor. His shorter, chubbier build earned him the nickname Fluffo from band mates, and he was as mute and inscrutable as a tar baby, clutching his banjo as if it were his only friend.

Carter more than made up for the quieter half of the Stanley Brothers. Just as his singing won over new listeners, his neighborly ways offstage earned him legions of devoted fans, and it also helped him gather material for his songs. "We'd get to a theater or a schoolhouse," recalls Shuffler. "We'd tend to get there pretty early, and he'd like to get some old-timer out on a woodpile or a log bench and sit there and talk to him for an hour or two. That's what Carter enjoyed."

Songs Drawn From Life

If this was a lean time for the band, it was even leaner for the locals, and there was plenty of tragedy around for Carter to work into his material. A highway crash in eastern Kentucky that killed a busload of children became "No School Bus in Heaven," while "The Flood" depicted a natural disaster from 1957 that nearly engulfed the Clinch Mountain Boys in the very range from which they took their name. "We'd been playing a show in Grundy [Va.] and we were trying to get back through the mountains to Smith Ridge," says Shuffler. "And that flood came in and we were looking to get washed away any minute. We pulled the car up on a high hill above the flood line and some people took us into their house for the night. Carter wrote the song there."

The Stanleys recorded "The Flood" a week later at a radio station, and Mercury released the record soon after to try to cash in on the topicality. Shuffler's nimble mandolin decorates the dirge, one of Carter's most affecting works. Like many of the Mercury recordings, "The Flood" was a commercial dud, and the next year the band was dropped from the label.

It was at the same station, WCYB in Bristol, Va., that a young folk enthusiast, Larry Ehrlich, recorded the Stanleys one night in 1956. The band had played several shows that day and attended a hog auction that evening, but Ehrlich persuaded the tired musicians to regale him with old-time songs that they hadn't had the chance to record, personal favorites that weren't part of their regular stage repertoire.

The result, "An Evening Long Ago," harks back to the rural string bands of the '20s and '30s that they had heard as boys. With the band gathered around a single boom mike, this midnight show for an audience of one is a revelatory document, as Carter solos on many selections with a hushed delicacy that reveals how much he personalized traditional material. "Carter sang with the greatest ease of any singer I have ever watched," Ehrlich recalls in the liner notes. "His unique, impeccable phrasing and timing were the result. He had the most tender voice I have ever heard."

By the early '60s, bluegrass had gone underground, ignored by mainstream country radio. But the folk revival rescued the Stanleys from their long commercial dry spell -- if not in record sales, at least in live appearances. The songs that Ehrlich craved, the murder ballads and hoary folk tunes, were now in vogue. The Stanleys became darlings of the college circuit and captivated a new audience -- mostly urban and educated -- that relished the backwoods authenticity their music embodied.

In 1964, Bill Malone was a grad student at Southwest Texas State, completing the dissertation that was later published as "Country Music USA." He hosted the Stanley Brothers at a concert at the campus in San Marcos. "They didn't have to play at being folk," says Malone. "They *were* folk, especially considering where they came from and the poverty they grew up in. I was struck by the contrast between the two. Carter was very outgoing and talkative, and Ralph was so reclusive. Carter could veer from being very serious and religious to being bawdy and telling ribald jokes."

The concert drew a large, appreciative crowd, and the band was in top form, according to Malone. Shuffler was now playing lead guitar in a distinctive cross-picking style that became a hallmark of the later Stanley sound. "It's still just about the most memorable moment I've ever had in music, being able to hear them play live," says Malone. "It was so very soulful and it really touched my heart." The next day, Malone drove the band to Austin for a show at the University of Texas. He and Carter discussed politics and civil rights ("I found him to be immensely intelligent, tolerant and open-minded"), but mostly they talked about music. "Carter said, 'There ain't been but one great country singer, and it's George Jones. He's the best there ever was.' I think what Carter liked was, here was George Jones way down in Beaumont, Texas, spilling out his life and being able to communicate that pain. . . . Same with Carter singing about that very localized life [in Dickenson County] and sending out a message that's universal, that reaches people across the world."

The Stanleys had recently recorded Jones's classic hit about infidelity, "The Window Up Above," and they often featured it in their live act.

It is a strained, fumbling rendition, one of several missteps Carter made late in his career -- including an embarrassing cover of an R&B tune, "Finger Poppin' Time" -- as he tried to steer the Stanleys toward a more mainstream sound.

The Texas honky-tonker and the Virginia bluegrassier had more than their singular talents in common. Like Jones, Carter was a self-destructive, chronic boozier, and Malone remembers Carter asking him to stop at a liquor store on the way to Austin. Though Malone says he didn't detect any obvious signs, Carter's drinking had already begun to sabotage his health. His songwriting inspiration dried up and life on the road only worsened his thirst for alcohol, as the Stanleys continued their relentless touring, with four band members packed into Carter's Mercury Monterey sedan.

The strain on the brothers took its toll. Ralph, who was busy handling the finances -- he'd always been the band's moneyman -- found himself nursing the star attraction. Behind the scenes, Ralph was keeping the act from falling apart; onstage, he and Shuffler had to cover Carter's frequent

vocal flubs. Carter resented Ralph's efforts to get him to clean up and took to calling his kid brother "Jesus Christ." Even so, the Stanleys stayed together as one of the last great brother acts until the end, when Carter coughed up blood during a performance at a school auditorium in Hazel Green, Ky. Six weeks later, in December 1966, he was dead of cirrhosis at 41.

Keeper of the Flame

After Carter's grisly demise, Ralph forged on, becoming bluegrass's most tradition-bound performer. He has honored his brother's memory in many ways. The most lasting tribute is the homecoming festival at the home place, a few miles from where he still resides. Originally called the Carter Stanley Memorial Bluegrass Festival, the event has in recent years -- like much else related to the Stanley Brothers -- become mainly associated with Ralph alone.

No matter whom it is named for these days, the three-day event has become an annual homecoming for musicians. Former Clinch Mountain Boys like Ricky Skaggs make the annual pilgrimage, as do bluegrass legends including Jimmy Martin, who is scheduled to perform along with Larry Sparks this year. It has long been the biggest neighborhood bash in Dickenson County -- so big, in fact, that in the '80s the festival was briefly held in nearby Kentucky after huge crowds resulted in a crackdown by Virginia state police.

While newcomers like Gillian Welch and Jim Lauderdale bring young fans to the fold, there are always old-timers in attendance who are mindful of the festival's original purpose.

George Shuffler makes the three-hour drive from his hometown of Valdese, N.C. At 79, he remains an active musician, last year releasing a CD, "Mountain Treasures." Shuffler shows up to see old friends and pay his respects to Carter and Ma Stanley, who are buried in the family cemetery on Smith Ridge. "It's worth the trip," he says. "The people come from all over those hills. Me and Ralph reminisce and pitch a tune or two and sing a few together."

One song of Carter's is a festival perennial, "Memories of Mother," recorded those many years ago for Mercury, when bluegrass was young even if it sounded old, when times were hard and the music was everything.

"We do it every year at Ralph's," he says. "That thing tears me up. I still well up when we sing that thing. He's buried right there in the graveyard with her, you know. It'll bring a tear to a glass eye."

Then, though he's battling the "awfullest cold I've ever had in my life," Shuffler can't help himself. Over the phone line, he recites in his sore-throated baritone the words of Carter Stanley:

Mother's at rest in a lonesome old graveyard

On a hill far away, I stand

Grass covered over, it seems so neglected

When spring season comes, the flowers will bloom. For more information about the Stanley bluegrass festival, call 606-784-9936 or visit www.drralphstanley.com.

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From left, George Shuffler, Ralph and Carter Stanley, and Jack Cooke in 1961. Two reissues of their recordings are reminders of Carter's bluegrass greatness.

Photo Credit: Leon Kagarise