

Masters of Bluegrass #16 Tony Rice

Rice was another master of the music who appeared on the professional scene in the 1970s. Originally from Florida, Tony and brother Larry grew up in Southern California where they saw brothers Roland and Clarence White perform. By 1971, Tony was playing in Lonnie Pierce's Bluegrass Alliance along with Sam Bush, Courtney Johnson and Ebo Walker. Shortly afterwards, he and brother Larry on mandolin, began playing with J. D. Crowe. Rice sang nearly every song on the classic 1975 J. D. Crowe and the New South album and became the voice of the new bluegrass generation. This and his formidable guitar playing skills, showcased on 2 solo guitar albums, made him a major figure in bluegrass in the decade.

It was a great loss to the music therefore, when Rice joined David Grisman's all-instrumental Quartet in 1977. After a short tenure with the group, Rice recorded a series of acoustic jazz projects that featured his own brand of David Grisman inspired instrumental music. Periodically, he still recorded vocal music as in 1979's Manzanita, 1983's Church Street Blues, 1984's Cold on the Shoulder and 1993's Tony Rice Sings and Plays Bluegrass and 1980's Skaggs and Rice. No other guitarist in the last thirty years has had a greater impact on bluegrass music than Tony Rice. His hard-driving rhythm playing brings out the best in any soloist or vocalist, and his fleet-fingered solos have set a standard to which others yet aspire. Several of his recordings stand as bluegrass classics.

His group, The Tony Rice Unit, featuring mandolinist Jimmy Gaudreau, fiddler Ricky Simpkins and sometime guest, brother Wyatt Rice, was a staple at many festivals throughout in 1990s. A medical throat ailment has silenced Rice's voice in recent years but he still appears as a guest guitarist on many projects.

In the early 1990s, Rice and David Grisman recorded the first "Tone Poems" a series of albums featuring vintage stringed instruments played by masters.

Tony Rice's Legacy

As a vocalist, his rich warm baritone is the sound of bluegrass for many. As a guitarist, he defines bluegrass lead guitar. He developed a rich vocabulary of Rice licks that appear in every player's solos. Indeed, the challenge for modern players is to not sound like Rice. Just as Scruggs defined bluegrass banjo, Rice defines bluegrass guitar. His style owes much to Clarence White and hints at what that player may have achieved.