

## Masters of Bluegrass – Lecture #8 The Stanley Brothers

Some experts believe that the Stanley Brothers 1948 recording of *Molly and Tenbrooks* is the first direct evidence that musicians were copying the sound of the original bluegrass band. (Rosenberg) The Stanleys heard the tune at a Monroe performance and their version was actually released before Monroe's. Originally from Virginia, Ralph and Carter Stanley called their band the Clinch Mountain Boys. Before 1948, Ralph had played the older clawhammer or 2 finger banjo styles taught to him by his mother. After hearing Scruggs, he quickly adopted the 3-finger style. Pee Wee Lambert was a member of the band who played mandolin and sang in Monroe's style. It was Lambert that sang *Mollie and Tenbrooks*. Leslie Keith, composer of *Black Mountain Blues (Rag)*, joined the band on fiddle. During this period Keith remembered making \$50 to \$100 a night playing packed schoolhouse concerts 6 or 7 nights a week.

The Stanley's followed the accepted recipe for country music success during this period. Daily radio shows created a demand for personal appearances in the broadcast area. Large stations like WSM in Nashville would support large listening areas but the smaller stations where the Stanley's played only one or two hundred miles. Records helped spread their notoriety further but interest was still largely regional. Musicians would often play a live 5:30 A.M. radio show, sleep at the station and play a noontime program before leaving on the sometimes long drive to a far away town for an evening performance. After the show the band would drive home and sleep at the station until 5:30 and start the process again. One musician commented about this period saying that one day he realized that he had not taken his shoes off for a week!

The Stanley's survived this way through the 1950s until they were "discovered" by the folk music fans of the late 1950s and early 1960s. These urban college educated Northerner audiences were a mystery to Southern musicians at first. During the 50s the Stanley's moved further and further away from the non-commercialized musical sounds of their mountain past. They had taken inspiration from the country music listened to by their Southern audiences. Their comedy was a broad country approach that featured costumed hillbillies with funny accents and many rural references. The folk fans just didn't get or like this unsophisticated presentation although they yearned for the authenticity the Stanley's represented. The Stanley's soon learned that these audiences appreciated the old songs accompanied by stories of how and where they were learned. Ralph's older banjo style was really well received. In a way the slicker more commercial Flatt and Scruggs never could, the Stanleys represented authentic folk music.

In 1965, bluegrass festivals promised to become a new and important source of income for the Stanley Brothers. However, Carter died in 1966 of alcohol related illness. Ralph reformed the band began to sing more solo. About this time, he learned of 2 young boys who sang in the Stanley tradition. Keith Whitley and Ricky Skaggs sang lead and tenor vocals respectively and were asked to join the Clinch Mountain Boys. Skaggs went on to country music and bluegrass music success. Whitley, after a short successful country music career in the 1980s, died in 1989 from alcohol related disease at 35.

With an active bluegrass festival scene, Stanley's band stayed busy throughout the 1970s to 2000 and beyond. In 2000, Ralph was asked to sing and appear in the movie *O Brother Where Art Thou?* and a new wave of popularity began. Today at age 82, he is considered to be the elder statesman of bluegrass.

### The Stanley Legacy

Today, the Stanley's style of bluegrass is appreciated for its connection to older mountain styles. For many, the mournful "mountain soul" of the Stanley's is the authentic old sound that Flatt and Scruggs and even Monroe to some extent left behind. When Ralph re-introduced older banjo styles into bluegrass, he brought a new sound to bluegrass. Guitarists including George Shuffler and Junior Blankenship featured lead guitar as it had never been heard on the group's many recordings.

Many popular bluegrass standards are Stanley tunes.

### Awards

An honorary Doctorate of Music from Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee in 1976

Stanley was inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Hall of Honor in 1992 and in 2000, and became the first person to be inducted into the Grand Ole Opry in the third millennium

He is featured in the Josh Turner hit song "Me and God," released in 2006.

In 2006 he was awarded the National Medal of Arts

Stanley's autobiography, *Man of Constant Sorrow*, coauthored with Eddie Dean, is expected for release from Gotham Books on October 15, 2009.