

FEATURES

Getting down and dirty with Bluegrass in MoCo

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SILVER SPRING – A small Silver Spring venue, Singers Glen, also known as Bruce Cohen's living room is an intimate affair where as many as 60 people can show up at his private residence to enjoy local music.

Nearly that many showed up and sat in a semicircle Sunday afternoon to watch Gary Reid's one man show depicting the life of bluegrass singer Carter Stanley.

Some of the 55 audience members agreed that once the show began, Reid stepped out of the room and Carter Stanley would enter it.

This was no surprise.

According to Reid, the process of becoming the bluegrass singer happened during the course of five years as he worked to solidify the play and script.

His connection to Carter Stanley goes back to 1973.

Reid said it began when he accidentally ran into one of Stanley's albums as a 17-year-old.

"There just was something so moving about the emotional quality in his voice and the songs that he wrote that just reached out and spoke to me then and stayed with me for the last 40 years or more, 43 years, I guess," Reid said.

Reid also said Stanley contributed much to what is known as bluegrass music today and "laid the groundwork for the music."

Though Stanley helped mold what bluegrass music is today, Reid said he believes Stanley's work is in danger of being forgotten.

"He's been gone from the scene for so long that a lot of people have kind of forgotten about him and I think that what he did was so important to establishing the music, that he show that I put together is kind of a tribute to honor his memory," Reid said.

Reid also mentioned Stanley had a rough beginning in his personal life that stayed with him and resonated in his songs.

"He was a very tragic individual. His parents divorced when he was a young teenager and he never really recovered from his father's loss and that showed up a lot in his song writing," said Reid.

"In later years he dealt with it in a number of ways including alcoholism which eventually cut short his life at the age of 41."

Given that Stanley had a complex character and Reid had never acted, Reid decided to take acting classes at a community college in Roanoke for two semesters and participated in several other productions during the following years.

"I started doing a lot of local community theatre assignments in the last five or six years. It involved 60 or so different productions either as an actor, as a stage manager [and] as a producer. I've been in a couple of commercials and short films," Reid said.



PHOTO BY NADIA PALACIOS

Gary Reid

Though Reid had been in several other productions, he said he kept his main focus on this performance in particular. Reid said one of his professors even helped him with writing the play.

Once he began putting it all together, Reid said he barely had time for any other productions.

"Actively working on the play itself, it was about five years in the making. I started in 2009 and we had the first official performance in September of 2014. Since then I've given 38 performances in probably about seven different states," Reid said.

After a couple of his performances, owner of Singer's Glen, Bruce Cohen, reached out to Reid upon reading about him in Bluegrass Magazine.

Cohen said he thinks the process of making this play was unique in that it was sort of "reversed."

"(Artists) usually decide that

they want to be a singer or they want to be an actor and then they go to acting or singing (school) and then they choose their subject matter. Here it was in reverse. He knew he wanted to channel Carter Stanley. And in order to do that he had to learn (to play) the guitar and take the acting courses and voice lessons in order to channel Carter Stanley, which isn't the normal course of events," Cohen said.

Cohen said he had reached out to Reid back in December to plan this event.

For both Cohen and Reid, this show was a first in certain ways.

Reid said this performance was his first one in Maryland.

For Cohen, this was the first theatrical performance done at his venue, which also happens to be his home.

"This was extraordinary. This far exceeded my expectations. I thought that it would be a tribute to Carter Stanley, which indeed it was, but I didn't realize that it would be so full of emotion and heartfelt sentiment," Cohen said.

Reid said the setting made the performance much more intimate since he was able to react to the audience's reactions.

"I think I felt a little freer this afternoon and maybe gave it a little extra push. Somewhere the energy weld up to bring forth something that might not have been (done in other venues)," Reid said.

Several members in the audience said they enjoyed Reid's portrayal of Stanley and said they felt the performance was quite personal to him.

Pat Leder said she did not know the history of the Carter Stanley and his brother but she said she enjoyed how Reid talked about several eras of Stanley's life.

"(Reid) was the person (Stanley). So it was very interesting. He went all the way from the beginning of (career with) his brothers and the music going through that era. His presentation was very interesting and funny and heartfelt," Leder said.

A bluegrass musician from the band Seldom Scene, Dudley Connell called the performance an "enlightening and good exploration into the Stanley brothers' career."

"It was a more personal narrative than I expected and I found that intriguing," Connell said.

Connell's wife, Sally Connell, said she enjoyed the stories and Reid's portrayal of Stanley.

"(Reid) himself disappeared and became the persona. He never really broke character. I just got absorbed in the stories," Connell said.

Lewis Story said he has seen several of Reid's performances. He said it is easy to become immersed in Reid's performances.

"You listen to this guy and you can get wrapped up in his stuff. You get enveloped in what he does," Story said.