

# ROOTS OF BLUEGRASS

'The life and times of Carter Stanley' comes to NC Stage Co.

CAROL RIFKIN  
CITIZEN-TIMES CORRESPONDENT

Carter Glen Stanley (1925-66) was a colorful and tragic figure in mountain music. His ability to write songs in vividly beautiful strings of everyday language earned him a hallowed spot in bluegrass. Using a meter grown from gospel and mountain roots, his haunting voice, paired with the high lonesome vocals of his brother, Ralph Stanley, made them stars of a new genre evolving called bluegrass.

Veteran musician, historian and author Gary Reid brings his one-man play with music "A Life of Sorrow — The Life and Times of Carter Stanley" alive 7:30 p.m. Aug. 12-15 and 2 p.m. Aug. 16 at the North Carolina Stage Company.

"I first discovered the music of the Stanley brothers back in 1973 and it just totally captivated my attention and changed the course of my life for the next 40 years," said Reid. Not content to just listen, he set out to know the who and why behind their famed sound, studying recordings, when they were made and who recorded them. These investigations sparked an interest in learning the process of making and distributing records and he went on to found Copper Creek Records, a well-known bluegrass label that took over much of his life for the next 35 years.

"As the Internet changed the sale of physical records and sales dropped off dramatically, I knew I had to do something else," said Reid, who once again picked up his early research of the Stanley Brothers. "I wanted to talk to people who had personal interaction with them and I wanted to develop a program that would put me in touch with these people." The play began.

"I am in Roanoke; it's a little over three hours to Clinch Mountain," said Reid. "I started going to Ralph Stanley's festival there in '75, 40 years ago, and I go to that every year." While in the area, he does research, talking to people who knew them, looking at places they played and visited. Already an accomplished musician, Reid was more than familiar with the iconic songs written by Carter Stanley, such as "The Fields Have Turned Brown," "The White Dove" and "Who Will Sing For Me," but what he had not done was acting. After much thought, he signed up for acting lessons at Virginia Western Community College. His instructor taught play writing and helped him develop a play.

"I started doing community theater productions and a friend helped me do TV commercials and independent film work," said Reid. "In five or so years, I had about 60 credits as an actor, producer, stage manager." Earned credibility helped him launch the play at the Roanoke South County Library and he's done about a dozen performances throughout southwest Virginia to date.

"A lot of people think of bluegrass as an 'old as the hills' genre that grandpappy played, but in the big scheme of things, it's relatively new, having come to fruition in the '40s starting with Bill Monroe," said Reid. "Ralph and Carter were the first professionals to emulate that style and they took it from being Bill Monroe's to being a style of music, helping to define and popularize the music." A gifted songwriter and expressive performer, Carter Stanley



KAREN KESSLER/SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES  
Gary Reid recreates the life and times of legendary bluegrass musician Carter Stanley Aug. 12-16 at N.C. Stage Co.



SUSAN SAANDHOLLAND/SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES  
Bluegrass legend Carter Stanley comes to life in an upcoming performance at N.C. Stage Co.

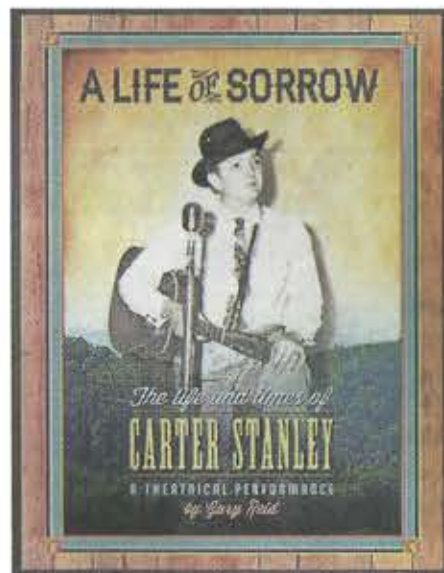
added over 100 songs to the core repertoire of early bluegrass.

"After Carter passed, if you asked Monroe who was the best Bluegrass Boy, he would say Carter Stanley was the best natural singer he had ever heard," said Reid. "He had a special knack for recreating old songs and making them current to the audience of the '40s, '50s." The Stanley Brothers performed from 1946 until Carter Stanley's passing at the age of 41 in 1966. While Ralph Stanley has become an internationally known Appalachian musician, much of his brother's legacy has faded away over the last 50 years.

"Of the two brothers, Carter was the driving force," said Reid. "Ralph was content to stay in the background. For whatever reason, they never had the success of Flatt and Scruggs. That lack of success and acceptance of his art really affected him; it ate away at him." From early on, Carter Stanley developed a taste for alcohol and many of the places they played in the '50s and '60s

were bars and beer joints. People were all too happy to buy him a drink and Reid chronicles how growing alcohol abuse robbed him of creativity and eventually took his life. While their music didn't catch on with the mainstream listeners, he's earned his recognition posthumously as the booming bluegrass community plays his music.

"Carter had five children," said Reid, who has a good relationship with



SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES  
"A Life of Sorrow: The Life and Times of Carter Stanley" comes to N.C. Stage Co. Aug. 12-16.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** "A Life of Sorrow — The Life and Times of Carter Stanley"

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Aug. 12, 13, 14, 15 and 2 p.m. Aug. 16

**Where:** North Carolina Stage Company, 15 Stage Lane

**Tickets:** \$10, \$16, \$20, 828-239-0263, [www.ncstage.org](http://www.ncstage.org)

the family. "Jeannie, the youngest, was 4 when Carter passed away. She recorded a CD in tribute to her daddy called 'Baby Girl.'"

The one-man play runs for 70 minutes with a 15-minute intermission and ends with a question-and-answer session.

"It's Carter's voice, what he would want people to know what his inspirations were, his growing up days on the family farm in rural Southwest Virginia," said Reid. "There are sections on his admiration for some of the old-time groups that they heard on the radio and records, some they worked with in the early days. Another part of the play deals with his jealousy, namely for Flatt and Scruggs."

Carol Rifkin writes about Appalachian culture for the Citizen-Times. Email her at [CMRifkin@gmail.com](mailto:CMRifkin@gmail.com).

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