

Arts & Music



Gary Reid as Carter Stanley in "A Life of Sorrow"

Photo by Susan Saandholland

Show brings bluegrass legend Carter Stanley to life

Staff Report

The Rex Theater in Galax is presenting a performance of a one-man play called "A Life of Sorrow, the Life and Times of Carter Stanley" on Saturday at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$10.

"He played the music, he wrote the songs and he self-destructed," says the promotional material for the show.

The program touches on a variety of aspects from the rich and colorful life of this legendary mountain musician. With his brother, famed Appalachian performer Ralph Stanley, he fronted a bluegrass band from 1946 until his untimely passing at the age of 41 in 1966.

As the Stanley Brothers, they were the second professional band to perform the style of music that came to be known as bluegrass.

Carter Stanley was an expressive singer and a prolific songwriter. Bill Monroe, the acknowledged Father of Bluegrass, once called him the "best natural lead singer" he'd ever heard. The songs he wrote and the recordings he made helped form the foundation of a music that is now a world-wide phenomenon. Gone from the music scene for 50 years, his legacy is largely forgotten.

"A Life of Sorrow" affords today's audiences a chance to connect with this bluegrass legend, portrayed by actor Gary Reid of Roanoke, as he recounts highlights from his life and career, including childhood days on the family farm, old-time musicians who influenced him, his songwriting, struggles with alcohol, stories from life on the road, and his admiration for Monroe.

Bruce Nemerov, a contributor to NPR's "All Things Considered," said to Reid, "You really inhabit the character... no false, 'theatrical,' distractions. The strength of the show — and it does have plenty — is in its intimate, non-theatricality. Really, well done!"

"A Life of Sorrow" is the creation of Reid. A bluegrass enthusiast and historian for over 40 years, he is regarded as the foremost authority on the music of the Stanley Brothers. After many years of research, his book, "The Music of the Stanley Brothers," is now available. The book traces the duo's 20-year recording history.

"This will be my first time to perform professionally in Galax," said Reid. "I've been a visitor to Galax numerous times over

the years and first became aware of the area when, as a teenager, I discovered bluegrass and old-time music. The area is so steeped in traditional music, it's hard not to know of — and be influenced by — the music of the region."

Reid continued, "Naturally, my own passion for the music of the Stanley Brothers further fueled my interest in the area. Legendary disc jockey/master of ceremonies Harold Mitchell told me once of seeing the Stanley Brothers in person at Hester's Drive-In near Galax in the middle 1950s. This led me on a trip to the library to look for anything I could find pertaining to the Stanleys in Galax."

He was lucky enough to find an advertisement on a reel of newspaper microfilm announcing a "stage show" at Hester's Drive-In by "Carter Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys" on May 26, 1954. "This struck me as being very odd... why was it billed as Carter Stanley, as opposed to the Stanley Brothers? Did they have a spat? Was Ralph away on vacation? Who knows?"

In any event, the group was back in the area a week later, billed as the Stanley Brothers, for a show at the Airport Drive-In on June 2, 1954.

In 2009, Reid conceived the idea of putting together a one-man show about Carter Stanley. To that end, he took two semesters of acting at Virginia Western Community College and has since appeared in more than 60 productions and events at regional community theatres as an actor, producer, and stage manager and has appeared in several short films and commercials.

Most recently, he won second place at the Sounds of the Mountains storytelling competition in Fincastle, and is the 2015 recipient for the IBMA's Print/Media Person of the Year award. Reid's work with Fred Bartenstein on The Bluegrass Hall of Fame inductee biographies book earned a 2015 ARSC Award for Excellence in Historical Recorded Sound Research.

"A Life of Sorrow, the Life and Times of Carter Stanley" by Gary Reid will be held at The Rex Theater, 113 E. Grayson Street in downtown Galax on April 9 at 7 p.m.