



Susan Saandholland

GARY REID (At right and below), like many of his generation, grew up listening to Top-40 radio. But a chance encounter with LPs from a police auction set his musical taste on a new course. ABOVE: A poster of Carter Stanley adorns the playbill for the show.

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A man of constant sorrows

Carter Stanley show coming to Yuma libraries

BY AMY CRAWFORD
SUN STAFF WRITER

I am a man of constant sorrow.
I've seen trouble all my days...

The lyrics may sound familiar but the man who made them popular may not be.

Carter Stanley, a bluegrass legend, wrote a version of the song along with his brother Ralph in the early 1950s that was popularized in the 2000 film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?"

The rest is history – a history that will be revealed as the Yuma County Library District presents Gary Reid's "A Life of Sorrow: The Life and Times of Carter Stanley" Feb. 5 at the Foot-hills and Main library branches.

"Carter Stanley was an interesting guy," said Reid. "He wrote the songs, he played the music, and... he self-destructed."

Reid, who grew up listening to Top 40 radio in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., "about 18 miles as the crow flies from The White House," accidentally stumbled into the genre as a teenager in the 1970s.

"In my senior year of high school, my political science teacher won a stash of used albums in a police auction," Reid explained in an email interview with the Yuma Sun. "He offered to let me have any that I wanted for 33 cents apiece. Mixed in with those LPs were two by Bill Monroe (the acknowledged Father of Bluegrass), two by Flatt & Scruggs (the headliners of the day), and the Stanley Brothers. I wasn't looking for bluegrass music, but when the needle hit the grooves of those records, something about the sound that jumped out of the speakers caught my attention and hasn't let go since."

The soulful lyrics and picking/plucking strings led Reid to play acoustic string bass in a band, The Johnson Mountain Boys, from 1977 to 1978. To-

day, he plays the rhythm guitar.

Reid's love of bluegrass led him to move to Roanoke, Va., in 1983 to be closer to the nexus of the music he adopted.

"I would say it is because Ralph Stanley has survived all these years that I decided to do the show about Carter. While a lot of people are familiar with the name of the Stanley Brothers, or of Carter Stanley, they have very little understanding of the man, or men, behind the music."

In training for the one-man show, Reid himself had to get "behind the music," so to speak, learning how to play the guitar and taking voice lessons.

"Several years ago, at Ralph Stanley's bluegrass festival, the Stanley Family presented me with a replica of the guitar that Carter Stanley played – they give one every year to someone who has contributed to the Stanley tradition. At the time, I didn't know how to play!"

As Reid's project was taking shape, he signed up for lessons, and now incorporates the guitar as part of the show.

"Carter was sort of an 'old school' guitar picker who used a thumb and finger pick, as opposed to the flat pick that is this choice of most bluegrass guitarists. I learned Carter's style for the show."

"A Life of Sorrow" celebrates Carter's early childhood days on the family farm in rural southwestern Virginia; recalls his admiration for the old-time musicians who influenced him; and lays bare his jealousies and insecurities as well as his struggles with alcohol that eventually cut short his life at the age of 41 in 1966.

"As Carter was such an important contributor in laying the foundations of what is today known as bluegrass, and as he's not here to tell it, I wanted people to know his story... especially this year as 2016 marks 50 years since his passing," Reid said.

Reid's research for his show has

made him an expert on Carter Stanley. He has more than 40 years of experience as a performer, producer, writer and historian of bluegrass and old-time music.

Reid is a three-time winner of the International Bluegrass Music Association's award for Best Liner notes and the 2015 recipient for the Print/Media Person of the Year award. He has published two books, "The Music of the Stanley Brothers" (University of Illinois Press) and "The Bluegrass Hall of Fame Inductee Biographies" (co-written with Fred Bartenstein and the recipient of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections award for Excellence in Historical Recorded Sound Research). He has been involved in more than 60 community theater events, short films, and commercials as an actor, stage manager, and producer. In April 2015, Reid placed second at the Sounds of the Mountains Storytelling Festival in Fincastle, Virginia.

"Bill Monroe once cited Carter as the 'best natural lead singer' that he'd ever heard," Reid said. "He had a very emotional quality in his voice that many say has never been surpassed in this kind of music. Family members say that the separation of his parents when he was a young teen deeply affected Carter, and the themes of lost love, loss of loved ones through death, and a longing for home showed up in many of his songs. That childhood hurt apparently never left him. That, coupled with the fact that the Stanley Brothers never received the commercial success that he felt they deserved, did much to foster feelings of self-doubt that eventually led to his early demise. All of this, and more, is vividly portrayed in the show."



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