

Bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley to make rare stop in Greenville

Bluegrass pioneer plays Municipal Auditorium Oct. 22

By Lance Martin

Special to the Kenneth Threadgill Concert Series

The blues has B.B. King. Rock and roll has James Brown. Country has Willie Nelson and bluegrass has Ralph Stanley.

Greenville will get Ralph Stanley for one night on Oct. 22 when he and the Clinch Mountain Boys headline the Kenneth Threadgill Music Series. It's a show music fans will not want to miss.

Ralph Stanley first found fame with his late brother, Carter, after forming the Stanley Brothers in 1946, bringing their form of bluegrass music down from the Appalachian mountains of rural Dickenson County, Va. Their music today is known as the Stanley style of bluegrass music.

"It's more of a mountain style of bluegrass music," explained James Alan Shelton, lead guitarist for the Clinch Mountain Boys since 1996. "It's got a little bit more of a raw emotion to it. They sang a lot of songs about mother and home and tragedies and everyday life. Things that people could relate to. They didn't just sing love ballads or whatever – they had songs that could be true to life. I think people just latched onto that."

The Stanley Brothers' influence and popularity earned them both a spot in the International Bluegrass Music Association Hall of Fame right next to other pioneers



Bill Monroe and Flatt & Scruggs. After Carter's death in 1966, Ralph carried on with the music but changed the band to Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys.

With absolutely no hesitation, Shelton can tell you the first time he ever saw Stanley live: "Jan. 17, 1973," he recites as if it were yesterday. "Saw him and Bill Monroe together in Gate City, Va., at the National Guard Armory. It was a good show – two legends on the same show, it was pretty nice."

In Shelton's 17 years in the band, he's learned a lot from Stanley, but one lesson rises above it all.

"The biggest thing that I ever learned from him he told me years ago," he said. "He said, 'Play to them people out there ... play to the people that are buying the tickets. Don't play to impress your pickin' buddies.'"

And even for an 84-year-old who had a pacemaker installed in January, Stanley is hard to slow down, according to Shelton.

"It's amazing at 84 years old how much traveling he does," Shelton said. "I've said all along he's still the toughest guy on that bus and he'll be the last one standing; I guarantee it."

Stanley, known by many as Dr. Ralph Stanley after being awarded an honorary doctorate in music from Lincoln Memorial University in 1976, has served as an influence to generations of musicians. Alumni of the Clinch Mountain Boys include the late Keith Whitley, Ricky Skaggs, Larry Sparks and Charlie Sizemore, who each went on to successful solo careers.

And while Stanley has influenced so many, he's careful to not let others influence him and the style of music he and his brother made popular.

"Ralph, he's kinda' in his own little world," Shelton said. "He don't let other music influence him. He don't really listen to any other music other than himself. I don't think he wants to because he don't want anything creeping in on his style."

Shelton recalled a recording session where Ralph didn't know the song and Shelton brought a tape of it for him to hear. "He said, 'I want you to play me that one time and then I don't want to ever hear it again,'" Shelton said. "All he wanted to do is kinda' get the idea of how it went. He wouldn't allow that recording to influence his style. He wanted to do it *his* way."

Shelton credits Stanley's professionalism as a key to his endurance in the music industry.

"He wasn't the type of guy that would go out after a show and jam with the fans in the parking lot and drink beer and party," Shelton said. "Ralph was business-like and he handled himself in a business-like manner all through his career and it's paid off for him."

Another key to Stanley's success has been the authenticity that he brings as a true bluegrass pioneer and the connection it gives him with the fans.

"People can relate to it (mountain music) from any walk of life," Shelton said. "You might have a lawyer sitting on the front row and on the other end of the aisle there might be some old farmer with overalls, so the appeal is pretty broad."

It should be no surprise that Stanley himself was central to a revival of bluegrass that came with the success of the 2000 movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The movie's soundtrack featured bluegrass standards, including a hit for a version of *Man of Constant Sorrow* that had once been made a hit by the Stanley Brothers in 1951. The album also included a chilling a capella version of *O Death* which earned Stanley a Grammy award for Best Country Male Vocalist Performance.

Shelton said the success of *O Brother* took Stanley to an even higher level of success and was fantastic for mountain music.

"In bluegrass circles, Ralph Stanley was already a legend," Shelton said. "It kind of clued the rest of the world in on who Ralph Stanley was and they discovered him through the movie. A lot of people latched onto it and found something they liked and then decided to dig deeper and see who else they could find."

The music has enjoyed cycles of success that for whatever reason have been tied to movies, Shelton observed.

"When I was a kid, you had the Bonnie & Clyde movie that hit in '67," Shelton said. "And then a few years later, you had the dueling banjos movie (*Deliverance*) in '73 – that was two pretty good shots in the arm for bluegrass music. Then we had a big, long dry spell and nothing else really came along until *O Brother*. I think the country was ready for down-to-earth roots music, something they could identify with when it came along."

Shelton said since the movie's popularity, he's seen more interest in bluegrass.

"I'm noticing lately more people are getting back toward traditional music," he said. "It's a little bit surprising... I'm glad for that because I've always been a traditionalist anyway. Even when I was a teenager growing up and learning to play, I still leaned more toward the traditional hardcore bluegrass than I did of the new-grass of the early '70s when I was becoming a teenager."

So whether fans at the Oct. 22 show have seen Stanley perform before, the show is likely to be one-of-a-kind, even if they hear a lot of the old favorites such as *Rank Stranger*, *Pretty Polly*, and *Man of Constant Sorrow*.

"A lot of times Ralph will ask for requests from the audience," Shelton said. "That can be interesting because you never know if it's something we normally do or not."

When asked if they usually play with a set list, Shelton said, "We never do – we kinda' know the first five or six tunes and after that, it may go anywhere."

The band will feature six players on the Municipal Auditorium stage, Shelton said, including a fiddler, lead guitar, banjo, rhythm guitar, bass and Stanley who "mostly sings but still plays the claw hammer-style banjo.

Shelton said the Greenville show will be the last stop on a rare five-city foray into Texas that comes on the heels of a month when they played shows from Florida to the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in San Francisco.

“We don’t get out that way very often,” he said. “You’ve got a true bluegrass living legend that’s 84 years old. If he’s coming to your town you should go out and see him. One of these days, you might not have that chance anymore, and say, ‘I wish I’d seen Ralph Stanley when I had the chance.’”

Ralph Stanley & The Clinch Mountain Boys appear with Rockin’ Acoustic Circus and Brad Davis on Saturday, Oct. 22, at Greenville’s Municipal Auditorium at the Kenneth Threadgill Concert Series. Tickets are available in Greenville at Cavender’s, Calico Cat, the Magic Bubble and the Municipal Auditorium. For more information on the Threadgill Concert, call (903) 457-3138.

(Martin, a Waco-based freelance writer, is a former Greenville resident and frequent Threadgill Series contributor.)