

No second fiddle

Guitarist Shelton carries on musical legacy with living legend

By Lance Martin

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Having made a career of playing guitar for the bluegrass legend whose biography is titled *Man of Constant Sorrow: The Life and Times of a Music Legend*, James Alan Shelton seems a man in a good place.

In that career, Shelton's served as lead guitarist, road manager and for many years booking agent for a man the Library of Congress honored as a Living Legend: Dr. Ralph Stanley.

The longest-serving member of the Clinch Mountain Boys, Shelton's 17-year tenure still seems brief when you consider that Stanley has been playing professionally since 1946 when he got into the business with his brother, Carter, and performed as the Stanley Brothers.

"It had been my dream to play guitar for Ralph Stanley ever since I was a kid," Shelton said. "He was my favorite growing up. He was a big influence."

Shelton would eventually see Stanley numerous times over the years and even played fill-on on a few weekend dates, traveling with the Clinch Mountain Boys. So on a weekend in February 1994 when Shelton decided to take a day off from his factory job and go see the band yet again, he found himself talking to Stanley.

"He asked me if I'd be interested in playing," according to Shelton, "and I said, 'yeah' – you know I didn't even think about it, I just said, 'yeah.'"



James Alan Shelton

Photo by David Gartland

“He said, ‘Well I might be giving you a call,’ and a couple days later, he called me up and hired me. I’ve been there ever since.”

Shelton may now be the longest-tenured member of the Stanley’s Clinch Mountain Boys band, but puts that into perspective when he notes the longest-serving member of the band prior to him was former bass player Jack Cooke who played with Stanley for 40 years. “We don’t have a lot of turnover,” Shelton noted.

Since joining Stanley, Shelton has established himself as an accomplished guitarist. He’s recorded numerous solo albums as well as instructional DVDs and books – all available at his website www.jamesalansheltong.com.

Shelton was a fan of the Stanley Brothers’ music growing up in Scott County, Va., home of the famed musical Carter family that included June Carter Cash. He particularly liked the work of George Shuffler, the Stanley Brothers’ guitarist who, over time would become known for his own style of cross-picking called the Shuffler style.

“I just liked that cross-pickin’ style,” Shelton said. “I just thought it was such a pretty style. Over the years, I got to know George and became good friends with him. He says that I’m the closest thing to him as far as playing.”

That statement is backed up by the fact that when Shuffler was inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Association Hall of Fame in late September, Shelton was asked to give his induction speech.

“It was probably one of the proudest moments of my life to get to do that,” he said. “I worked on that speech for a month and was still fine tuning it the morning I left for Nashville. He came out with tears in his eyes. He even thanked me in his speech for carrying on the style, which is a nice touch.”

Not only is Shelton known for his guitar playing, he’s also known for crafting some fine guitar straps. Before he started playing with Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys, Shelton sold his hand-tooled Shelton guitar and banjo straps that he made in his basement to other players including Larry Sparks, J.D. Crowe, Doyle Lawson and Stanley.

He started making them because he couldn’t find a strap in stores that he liked. A friend was selling some leatherworking tools after his daughter was born and “he couldn’t set and beat on that leather and make a racket.”

“That was one of the best investments I ever made,” Shelton said. “I bought a hundred dollars’ worth of tools and scrap leather and I kind of turned it into a second job.”

Shelton said his experience as a musician helped him craft straps that included details important to players such as adjustability and a smooth finish on the backs of them so they “don’t tear up your suit clothes.” He doesn’t advertise them much anymore because “I’m afraid I won’t be able to turn them out” with the pace of his touring schedule with the Clinch Mountain Boys.

A strap on one of his favorite guitars, a 1946 D-28 Martin, was made right after joining Stanley's band 17 years ago. "I believe in getting the most out of it because it's a lifetime of work for a cow," Shelton said.

But it's not just the straps Shelton's known for. Huss and Dalton Guitars actually made a James Alan Shelton signature model that was inspired by his vintage guitars. He never knows which one of them he'll take for a road trip until he leaves.

And when Shelton returns from those trips, he still has plenty to do whether it's his duties as road manager planning the next trip or working a solo project. "I'm on the job 24 hours a day – there's always something band related to do," he said.

Yet Shelton would have it no other way. He proudly carries on the musical style of his mentor, George Shuffler, and his band leader, Ralph Stanley, Shelton acknowledges he's living a dream. "It never gets old," he said.

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.)