

Man of  
Constant Sorrow

*My Life and Times*

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DR. RALPH STANLEY

*with*  
EDDIE DEAN



G O T H A M B O O K S



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*For my wife, Jimmi;  
In memory of my mother, Lucy;  
And with gratitude to all the Clinch Mountain Boys,  
past, present and future.*

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# PROLOGUE

## *Hills of Home*

*“I’d like to go back to the days of my childhood  
And go to church in the village there  
To meet my friends and old acquaintance  
And sing again in the village choir”*

—“TURN BACK,” RALPH STANLEY

When I was just a little boy growing up in the mountains of south west Virginia, singing was as natural as breathing. I was borned and raised way back in the hills, and a lot of our forefathers, our grandp and great-uncles and so forth, were of the old Baptist faith, and they all had lonesome voices to sing out those sad old hymns.

This was a long time ago, back in the 1930s, and a long way back in steep hills and deep hollows. Where I come from, people lived spread out from one another. There was no radio or telephone. Days would pass between you seeing anybody outside your family. Singing was a way to keep yourself company when you got to feeling lonesome.

You could hear singing everywhere from church to the back porch, from the high ridgetops to the head of the creek, wherever there were chores to do or miles to walk or fields to work. You’d hear people tell about a mule that wouldn’t budge unless the man behind the plow got to singing. Songs were handed down from father to son and mother to daughter. Singing gave you strength, and you needed plenty to get you through rough times. People from our mountains were used to going without and singing didn’t cost a cent. Not many things you can say that about.

Back in our little part of the world, singing was part of everyday living, one of the natural sounds all around us: the water running through the rocks on Big Spraddle Creek and the coon dogs barking down the hollow and the train whistle blowing as the freight cars hauled coal on the Clinchfield Railroad. Course, we didn’t pay no mind it. When you’re so used to something, you don’t go around making a fuss over it.

But some voices stood out from all the rest. The way some birds stand out: them hoot owls and whip-poor-wills you’d hear when the sun went down and it got dark in the hollow. I always enjoyed when a whip-poor-will come to sit on our yard gate and sing of an evening. Some people get spooked by night birds. The old superstition says when you hear a whip-poor-will, somebody’s going to die. But I was always taken with the mournful song of a whip-poor-will. It made me feel like I wasn’t the only one feeling lonesome.

And that's the way it was with my voice. It was lonesome and mournful and it wasn't like nobody else's. I don't say this to brag on myself but because it's true. Even today, people from all over the world tell me my voice is different—completely different—from any voice they've heard.

I tell them I've sung that way since I was a boy. I think God gives everybody a gift, and He wants them to use it. I've always done my best to honor what God gave me. I've never tried to put any air on it. I sing it the way I feel it, just the way it comes out.

When I say I sang like this since I was just a knee-high, I mean just what I say. I'm well past eighty now, but as far back as I can remember, everyone always told me I had an old-time mountain voice, what they call weathered and lived-in, like something you'd hear moaning in the woods late of a night and not from the mouth of a young'un. They called me the boy with the hundred-year-old voice. I reckon if I make it another twenty years, maybe then I'll finally get to sound like my real age.

There's a lot of people would tell me not to even bother trying to catch up. They hear something much older than a hundred years in my singing. They say it puts them in mind of the sacred chanting at a Navajo ceremony, or the gospel singing from ancient times, way back to the olden days before the written word, when people first sung out their troubles. I don't claim to know much about chanting, but the part about gospel music, well, my singing comes right out of the church.

The first time I ever sang in public was in a little country church way out in the sticks. It was a one-room building with plank benches and an old woodstove for heat. No special occasion, just another Sunday morning. You might think there wasn't much to be nervous about, but I was scared to death because my dad put me on the spot.

It was in 1935 at the Point Truth Primitive Baptist Church in Scott County, Virginia. You just about needed a search party to find it, tucked back in Long Hollow, miles from the nearest town of Nickelsville. In our type of church, the Primitive Baptists, they don't allow musical instruments whatsoever, not a piano or even a tambourine. They sing the old Baptist hymns the old-time way, cappella-style, just the voices alone.

You may have seen in the Bible where it says "make a joyful noise unto the Lord," and that's what a lot of Pentecostals and Holiness churches do around these mountains, and they play guitars and anything else handy and they get pretty rowdy. It's got a good beat to it, it makes you happy, and it makes you want to move.

But the Primitive Baptists are different. They're strictly business when it comes to their hymns. It's more sad and it's more mournful and it fits my voice like nothing else. Usually the preacher or one of the elders will line out the songs for the congregation, which means the leader sings a verse and everybody joins in and sings it right back.

On this Sunday morning, my family was sitting all bunched together on the pew-bench like usual—my dad, Lee, and my mother, Lucy, and my older brother, Carter, and me. There was a song my dad wanted to lead on. It was from the old Goble hymnbook: "Salvation, O! The Name I Love." It was one of his favorites, but he never could remember how the song started out. So he laid his hand on my shoulder and he called on me to start the song, to line it out for the congregation.

Here we were, the church-house packed and everybody waiting on me. I couldn't even look up I was so scared, just a-trembling from head to toe. I like to stare a hole in the floor and crawl inside and hide. These people were friendly enough, but this was a new church from the one I was used to, the McClure Primitive Baptist Church, close by the hollow I was from back in Dickenson County. We'd moved for a while to the neighboring county, where we lived in an old log house in Long Hollow while my dad worked a sawmill job in the area.

When you traveled mostly by foot or by horse or mule, another county—even the next county over

—might as well have been another world. To give you an idea of the distances back then: About twenty-five miles from our home place, in the coal town of West Norton in Wise County, lived the singer and banjo player Dock Boggs, who worked in the mines and made some phonograph records in the 1920s, real old-time ballads like “Pretty Polly.” Well, I didn’t know a thing about Dock Boggs until I met him at the Newport Folk Festival in the 1960s. Nothing against Dock, it just shows you how the world was a whole lot bigger place back then, especially in the mountains of southwest Virginia.

So it felt strange and different to me, this little church in a new county filled with folks I didn’t rightly know. Even if they were Primitive Baptists like us, they were more like strangers. Here I was barely eight years old, sitting there in the pew, worried and shaking like a leaf, after my dad called me to lead that hymn. Trapped.

I turned to my mother, but she paid me no mind. She was silent and somber, her head bowed down. Much as she wanted, she couldn’t help me. In our church, it had to be a man lining out the songs, the preacher or an elder like my dad. I never did hear of a woman leading on a song. And it was unheard of for a child. So Carter couldn’t rescue me neither, not even with a funny face he’d usually pull to cheer me up.

Ever since I was born, I was in the shadow of my big brother. Carter was just eighteen months older, but that was like dog years for me, because he was my idol. I was a real shy, bashful boy—“backwards” is what they called it in the mountains. I just never could mix well with people. And what was so hard for me came easy as pie to Carter, the Stanley brother everybody loved. He took over after our dad, tall and handsome with a million-dollar smile and a joke for any occasion. Carter was a game for anything. Me, I was a mama’s boy, and there wasn’t much I wasn’t scared of.

But it wasn’t Carter my dad called on to line out that song. He called on me. Early on, he noticed I had something God-given and unique. He reckoned my voice could carry a hymn as well as any man in the church-house. And now he was going to let everybody get a good listen. It’s the sort of thing fathers do. Besides, he was in a bind, forgetting how to start that song.

Scared as I was, I knew how the song went and that was what probably saved me. The melody stuck with me from the first time I’d heard it. I was always taken by the sad old Baptist hymns we sang at our home church down by the river in McClure. I can remember singing those hymns to myself around the house when I was four or five years old. I don’t know why. I just had a feeling for those songs and I still do today. So I took a deep breath and sung out the opening line the best I could:

*Salvation, O! The name I love, which came by Christ the Lord above*

The words come out of me and hung in the air and then faded to nothing. The silence was only for a second, but it seemed to last forever. I thought maybe I’d messed up somehow and failed my dad. Then the whole congregation joined in and sang the verse back, tracing the melody just the way I did it, and the church filled up with one big voice. I could feel my heart swell up like to bust. It was a feeling I never had before, and I jumped on the next verse before the feeling got away.

*Surprising wisdom, matchless grace which regarded my low and helpless case*

Just like before, everyone sang back that mournful melody in a booming voice so strong the walls of the little building like to shake down to the ground. I was too young to know what all the words really meant, but I can tell you now the hymn told my story, plain and simple. I looked up at my dad and his face was a-beaming. He finished out the hymn, and I stood there in wonder, listening to the song I had started all by myself.

Well, let me tell you, that was worth a lot to me. If it hadn't gone well, I might have run off a cliff somewhere. It lifted me up to a place I'd never been before. Here was my dad, calling on me to lead that song and knowing I could do it. I knew then I had something special nobody else had, not even Carter. I felt proud that my dad had faith and confidence in me, because I was the boy with the hundred-year-old voice.

Another thing, too. Leading on that hymn, I learned you could be afraid and still get the job done. Fear ain't nothing to be afraid of; you just need to face it down. It's helped me a lot in my life because I've been scared many a time since that Sunday morning and I've never let it stop me.

In my sixty-odd years as a professional musician, I've sang my music all around the world. I've played over in Germany and as far away as Japan. I've played for the Queen of England and at the President's Inaugural in Washington, D.C. At all these fancy venues, I can perform with no stage fright at all, but I still get nervous when I have to line out a song in church. I feel more pressure in our Primitive Baptist church-house than I do in the spotlight at Carnegie Hall, because in church the congregation is depending on me to lead them and that's where I really don't want to foul up.

A friend of mine says he hears more grief in my singing down through the years, and I think he's right. I mourn out my songs more than I did as a young man. Like anyone my age, I've had my share of sorrows, losing people closest to me, one by one, first my dad and then my brother, Carter, and then my mother. They were all with me at Point Truth Church on that Sunday morning so long ago, and they're all gone now.

Brother Carter and I started our band, the Stanley Brothers and the Clinch Mountain Boys, in 1944 and we traveled together for twenty years. On December 1, 1966, Carter passed away and I've carried on the band ever since. Even though I've been on my own for twice as many years now, I still miss him when I get on stage. There have been so many other losses along the way. Two of my best lead singers who replaced Carter were cut down in their prime. Roy Lee Centers was shot and pistol-whipped and left to die in a creek in Breathitt County, Kentucky, where he was from. Roy Lee's replacement was Keith Whitley, another eastern Kentucky boy. Keith was just a kid when he joined up with me, and he could sing like an angel. Just when he finally reached the top of the country charts, he overdosed on alcohol. Keith and Roy Lee were both good men and great singers—and just like Carter, taken away from us too soon.

I sung at so many funerals. I sung when we buried my fiddler, Curly Ray Cline, who worked with me for more years than I spent with Carter. When I lost one of my best friends, Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music, I sung over Bill's casket, the same way Bill sung over Carter's casket in 1966.

So many funerals. So many friends and family gone. Through the years, you never stop missing them. And I wish they could hear me now, because, strange as it is and as old as I am, I believe I'm a better singer now than when I made my first records in the 1940s. I can put more into it now, not so much holding back as I used to. I'm not afraid to let all the feeling out, everything I've lived for in eighty-two years. And not only the experiences I've been through, but my experience as a singer. I've worked at it more the last few years. Had to, really, because I can't lean on the banjo anymore.

Now, I won't lie to you. My voice ain't what it used to be. My tenor has thinned out some. It's got more cracks in it and it can get mighty rough around the edges and I can't hit all the high notes anymore. But it ain't all tore down just yet, and I know how to use my voice better. I can put a lot more feeling in now. I started adding some crooks and turns and I can worry those lines like I never could before.

It's just me and my voice onstage these days, just like it was when I first started singing as a little boy, long before I got a banjo. Every show I still feature a clawhammer song the way my mother

taught me, but I haven't played three-finger banjo for years. As you get older, your fingers don't work as good. Now I've got arthritis, too, so I don't fool with the five-string much anymore. But it's been a blessing in disguise. Instead of doing two things, I can focus on the one. Without the banjo, I don't have a thing to think about but just to mourn out that song.

I'm always working to be a better singer, always learning new ways. Some nights my voice is not as strong as I'd like it to be, especially if I get choked up with a cold. Other nights, I'm singing the best I ever have. It's something I can't control, and that's what gets me nervous sometimes. I ain't afraid to die, but I am scared of what would happen if my voice was to fail me. That's something I think about a lot. It's right hard to face up to, because singing is really all I've got to give anymore.

Now I want to tell you something I've kept to myself. Back in the 1960s, when Carter knew he wasn't long for this world, he said something in secret to George Shuffler, one of our band members. George was like family to us, the third Stanley Brother. He called my mother "Ma" Stanley and we called him Uncle George. One time Carter and George were listening to a Stanley Brothers record of me singing my signature tune, the old mountain ballad "Man of Constant Sorrow." Carter turned to George and said, "That voice of Brother Ralph's will go somewhere. It may not be in this lifetime, but I believe you're going to hear a lot more about that voice someday."

Now, this wasn't just my brother talking. This was the man Bill Monroe called the best natural lead singer he ever heard, and Bill wasn't one to hand out compliments. So singing was something Carter knew something about. Course, Carter would have never told me such a thing to my face. He didn't want his little brother to feel too sure of himself and get puffed up in the head.

Well, Carter's prediction has come true, and it came in this lifetime, even if it took a good long while. The voice that Carter and my daddy put so much stock in has carried me all over the world.

If you want to find my place, you can get you a map of the Southern Appalachians and have at it, but it won't do you much good. I tell people wanting directions that the best thing to do is to go until you get to the last mountain. And then, the next mountain over yonder, well, that's where I'm at.

I live eight miles from where I was born and five miles the way the crow flies from where I'll be buried, up on Smith Ridge, where my mother, Lucy, and my brother, Carter, are waiting on me. The family cemetery sits on the highest knob of the ridgetop, in the heart of the Clinch Mountain range. This land belonged to my grandfather, Noah Smith. All around, as far as you can see, are mountains and mountains and more mountains: "the deep rolling hills of old Virginia." That's what Carter called 'em in his song "The White Dove."

Rough mountains, that's what I call 'em. There's always been a lot of murder and a lot of death and a lot of heartache in these mountains. When Carter and I were coming up, life was real hard here. It was something you had to live to really know about. It was all you could do to get through it. The old songs I sing are all about that, about the hardness of life and the hope for something better beyond. I reckon that's the quality in the music that people respond to. They feel kin to it even if they've never been here.

My wife, Jimmi, is a die-hard Stanley Brothers fan, just like her daddy was. She loves to listen to me and Carter sing together. She thinks my own stuff is fine, but she likes the Stanley Brothers best. I can't say I blame her. There's never been a sound like the Stanley Brothers and there never will be. It was just God's gift. When I leaned my voice next to Carter's, there was something natural in the blend, like it was meant to be, the way a couple of mountain laurels come out of the same rock and grow into one.

Through the years, people have asked me where my music and the music of the Stanley Brothers comes from. How come it sounds so dark and deep and soulful, so different from all the rest? Well, I can't hardly explain it real good, but I can tell you where you can find out for yourself: right here on the top of Smith Ridge.

It's where Carter and I grew up, a couple of barefooted boys running those hills wild and free, stubbing our toes on rocks. It's where we first saw death, our uncle Emery Smith laying in the field after he shot his wife, Lena, and done the same to himself. It's where our daddy up and left us boys behind for our mother to raise all by herself and to make do from a vegetable patch and whatever we could bring home to help out. It's where we first started singing and playing music together, where we done our learning and rehearsing round in the barn, out in the cornfield, in the shade of the apple tree.

Smith Ridge is where the dream started. The dream of making music our full-time work and devoting our lives to it. The same way the miners got coal from the ground and the sawmill men got lumber from the woods, we aimed to gather that old music we found in these hills and hollows and take it out to people all around our territory.

It was mostly Carter's dream at first, but I came to believe in it just as much as he did. Together we lived the dream for twenty years, until the cold winter night in 1966 when he passed on, I believe from the heavy price he paid to keep it alive in the hard times. Until the end he never did give up on the dream that finally done him in.

But I'm still here, bringing the old-time mountain music to people all over the world. I just wish Carter could be here, too. After all he done for the music, he died a poor man. It still hurts me he never got to share in the success and get a decent payday.

When I get to feeling a certain way, I go to the cemetery to be with Carter and my mother. I walk through the front gate, under the sign I put up that says "Hills of Home Cemetery: Let Me Rest on Peaceful Mountain," the name of a song Carter wrote. There's a pair of white doves on the sign, and sometimes I think of the words to Carter's "White Dove" we sung together so many times:

*As the years roll by I often wonder if we'll all be together some day  
And each night as I wander through the graveyard  
Darkness finds me as I kneel to pray*

At the top of the cemetery, close by a pair of big cedar trees planted by my aunt many years ago, my grave is ready for me when it's my time to go. It's next to the graves of Carter and his wife, Mary. Before Mary died, she said she didn't want to be put underground. So we took Carter up and now the whole row of tombs are raised aboveground like theirs. On Carter's there are etchings of the rising sun and a guitar and the words "Farewell, Carter, For a Little While." I wrote the inscription myself and meant every word. Come one of these days, I believe we'll all be together in a better place. I don't know how long it'll be, so I just said farewell until that time finally does come.

My tombstone has an etching of a banjo on the front, and it sits in between my mother's grave and Jimmie's. All ours are needing are the final dates carved into that granite slab. But I'm not ready to go just yet, not by a long shot, not as long as I can sing. Just like the words say in "O Death," the song I won the Grammy for: *Won't you spare me over for another year?*

I've had a few close calls. I've had open-heart surgery, and it's pretty rough when they have to saw you in two and stitch you back up. But I got through it. I was back on the road in seven weeks. Ever since I was nineteen, I've sung and picked a banjo for a living. I stay on the road playing shows because it's my job and, to tell you the truth, it's really all I know how to do. I ain't much good for anything except music.

It's been eighty-two years now, and I've been spared to go on. I don't rightly know why I've been allowed forty years more than Carter. I can't question what I believe has been preordained. My wife Jimmi, says the Man Upstairs has let me stay around because he has more work for me to do.

I used to go to the cemetery a lot. I don't go up there as often anymore. When you get to be my age you figure you'll be there soon enough for good. But it's still a place where I can spend time and look around and linger awhile. In a way, it makes me sad. In a way, I like to go. It puts me in mind what my granddaughter Amber Dawn said to me one time. I had been on the road for a tour. She was around five years old and she'd been missing me something awful. When I walked in the door, she looked at me and said, "Pa-Paw, if you ever die, I want to lie right down with you." You hear something like that, well, it makes you feel good and bad at the same time.

It's more than memories that draw me to Smith Ridge. It feels peaceful up on the high knob there with nobody else around. It's somewhere I can always go when I need to. I reckon everyone should have such a place, and I feel blessed to have it. You can see a long ways from up here, some days clear to Kentucky. It's a view you'll never forget and it puts you in your place. You feel like your troubles ain't so bad.

Sometimes I walk down the road a few hundred yards to the house where my mother lived. It's still standing right there: the old home place. It's still furnished today, same as it was when she died in 1973. I keep all the furnishings and everything in there neat as a pin and shiny as a new dime, and it's sitting down below the cemetery. Nobody lives in it. I don't want anybody in there. I want the house just like it was when she lived there.

Sometimes I like to go to the house and sit in there and stay awhile and reminisce. There's a rocking chair by a window where my mother sat alone for hours at a time. She'd just rock in her chair and look out the window up the hill to Carter's grave. It was her way of grieving: A cemetery, a house, a window to see a grave—there are some things you need to keep around so you know where you been and where you're headed.

I'm not the only one who likes visiting the cemetery. Loads of pilgrims come to Smith Ridge every year to pay their respects. Many have told me they think it's the prettiest spot on God's earth. I know what they mean. It suits me just fine.

When Carter and I first started out, we never thought our music would ever get past the three or four states around our home. Now, thanks to the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* album, I'm more popular than the Stanley Brothers ever was. It still surprises me, and I know it surprises people here in Dickenson County. When Carter died, not many around here reckoned I had what it takes to be a front man. People figured I was the little brother just along for the ride. Even now, they still can't quite believe I was able to make it without him and go on to make a name for myself. If you'd known me in the early days, a backwards kid who could barely hand over a howdy, you'd be surprised, too.

And after all the places I've been, I haven't changed much from that shy mountain boy. Now, I'm nowhere near as backwards as I was. I like to meet the people at my shows. I know they're the ones who made me what I am. But it's still hard for me to converse and make small talk; I never could learn to mix as well as Carter. All those years, I was happy to let Carter do the talking for us both, and he done a good job. And in the time I've been on my own, I've mostly let my singing do my talking for me.

It's been so long since Carter passed away. I haven't talked much about it, or even tried to think much about it. It hurt too much to remember, so I tried to let it go to the past. But I've lived so long the past has caught up with me, and I believe it's time to face it down. There were a lot of things I never got to tell Carter when he was still around, and tell my mother and so many others who've



passed on as well. There are a lot of things I haven't said to a lot of people, and it's time to change that. I think it's time for me to look back and remember, the good memories along with the bad. As for time, I don't know how much I've got left. This book is my way of saying all the things I haven't been able to say, before it's too late.

It's funny how we look to other people. A famous photographer once took some pictures of me. She traveled all the way here to Dickenson County. Said she wanted to get me in my natural setting: laying around the house, walking down by the railroad tracks, standing at the old church-house where I sang as a boy. She was a nice lady, but I don't care much for the photos. Made me look freakish, I think more like Mr. Death than Dr. Ralph. That's maybe the way she saw me, but I don't see myself that way.

Another time a painter done a portrait of me. He had the same sort of notion she did, and he set me out in the countryside, picking the banjo, Clinch Mountains in the distance. The mountains look fine, but the banjo player don't look a bit like me. "Now, who in the world is that old fellow?" I thought of myself.

I know they were just doing their job, but neither one got close to the man I am. Same with writers. A lot of words been written through the years, and there's even been a play for the stage. But they played me pretty dumb in that play, made me more backwards than I ever was. The writers told me they done that to sell more tickets, and I can understand, because in a play you can make your story any way you want. It was a good play, I enjoyed watching it, but it really wasn't me up on that stage.

I'm just an old hillbilly, and proud of it, too. Plain as an old shoe, same as a lot of us mountain people. I think it's best to try to tell your own life. What people want is to hear the words out of my mouth, and I'm going to do the best job I can, to tell you what I remember. Some politicians and preachers, they'll talk at you and not to you. The one thing I can promise is to talk to you in plain old words. I know correct and proper English just fine, but I don't use it because that's not the way I was raised. I talk natural the same way I sing, so I'm gonna give you my story like I was talking to you across the table.

I'm a man of few words, but I try to make 'em count. It was Carter with the gift for words, not me. But I'll tell you something I never told Carter, because I wouldn't have wanted to hurt his feelings. A promoter once said something to me in private, and I've never forgot: "Carter's a lot better talker than you are. But three words from you mean more than a hundred from Carter."

So this here is the memoir of a man who don't much like to talk unless he's got something to say. I've kept my mouth shut more than most, but I've kept my eyes and ears open all the while. I've been paying close attention. I believe that's how you learn things, by looking and listening.

I know a lot of you are coming to me late, maybe only in the last few years since the *Brother, Where Art Thou?* album put me in the spotlight. I've seen you newcomers at the shows, and I enjoy seeing your faces out there; I can't make it without you. I remember the lean years when rock 'n' roll nearly starved us out, when if I hadn't had a crowd at a show, I couldn't have bought gas to get back home. It's the fans keeping me on the road, the new fans and the old fans like Bob Dylan and so many diehards from the early days who've stuck by me. It's their support that makes me feel I've done something worthwhile, that all the hard work and the hard miles ain't been wasted.

We've got a lot of ground to cover, most of a century by my reckoning, so I'm going to pull you close to my ear for a good while, if you have the patience to set a spell and listen to an old man ramble on about the way things used to be. I've got plenty of stuff I've kept bottled up, and I'm ready to let it out. I'll give you fair warning: We're going to spend a lot of time on my early years, because those are the memories that stand out most, just as clear and strong as ever. I couldn't tell you much about the show

we played last week, but I can tell you all about a summer day on Smith Ridge seventy-odd years ago as fresh in my mind as my mother's garden after an early-morning rain.

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But this book ain't just for me. It's for anybody that ever wanted to set down with their grandpa late at night and hear what all he's been hoarding up in his memory, things he did and said but he never aired out because he figured nobody much cared. I sure wish I'd had the chance with my grandparents but they were like so many from these mountains, who lived and died without ever getting to tell their story. Just like some of the best musicians I ever heard never made it off the back porch.

I can count on one hand the people I grew up with from around these parts who are still living. We were the last generation from these mountains to live from the earth. It was a hard life and there was a lot of suffering. But the music we made couldn't have come from any other place or time. The suffering was part of what made the music strong, and I reckon that's why it's lasted. It won't be long before we're all of us gone. I hope this book leaves behind something worthwhile to remember us by.

After I'm dead and buried, I don't know who will be around to carry on the old-time music, the way it's played and sung the old-time way. But I believe the songs will survive. When I was celebrating my fiftieth anniversary in the business, Bob Dylan sent me a surprise telegram. I will tell you more later about what all he wrote, but the last line said, "You will live forever." I know Bob wasn't talking about me, really, but about the songs I helped keep alive down through the years, "Man of Constant Sorrow" and "Pretty Polly" and others that took root here in the Clinch Mountains so long ago. Those old songs were here before me and they'll be here when I'm gone. What's real doesn't die.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## *Deep Hollow*

*“Mountain folks, mountain folks, everybody calls us mountain folks Whole lot of work for a little bit of pay, everybody calls us mountain folks”*

—“MOUNTAIN FOLKS,” RALPH STANLEY

A lot of people like to talk about their ancestors. They'll tell you how they're descended from a line of Scottish kings and whatnot, and they'll brag on a Lord So-and-So who they say they're related to. Maybe even got 'em a fancy coat of arms framed and hanging on the wall. Funny how you never hear anybody say they come from a gang of horse thieves that got run out of the old country.

I don't know when or why my people came here. Don't know why they decided to stay. All I know for sure is we've been in these mountains as long as anybody can remember. So I can't tell you much about who our ancestors were. Never been much interested in my family line. I don't know when. Never did try to search the family tree; my dad and my mother didn't either, as far as I know.

When I was coming up, people from around here didn't mess around in the family history. They were working too hard to fool with it, I reckon. For people in the mountains, it was just get up at daylight, go to bed at dark, and in between work like a mule.

My mother's father and my dad's father, that's as far back as I can tell you about, and I don't know much about them either because they died when I was young. My dad's daddy was named Nathan Stanley and he came from a little hollow called Bold Camp near the town of Pound, Virginia, across the county line about fifteen miles away in Wise. His wife was named Stacie.

About the only thing I remember about my grandpa Nathan was, he was the first person who made me really cry. I was four years old and my dad had a brand-new 1931 A-Model Ford, one of the first automobiles ever seen in our neighborhood. And we drove to Bold Camp to pick up Pa-Paw Stanley so he could stay with us for a few days. When we made it back home, he got out of the car and I slammed the door on my thumb. Mashed it real bad and turned it blue and I got real mad at him. He couldn't help what he done; it was an accident, probably the first car he'd ever rode in, but it still hurt like the dickens.

My mother's side, the Smiths, was a prominent family in the area. Her father, Noah Smith, was a farmer and he owned the land on Smith Ridge where I later grew up. He and his wife, Louisa, raised a family of twelve and every one of them children played music. My mother's uncle John was one of the biggest preachers around here at that time. He was a minister and moderator and an elder at the McClure Primitive Baptist Church on the Open Fork of McClure River, one of the oldest churches

Dickenson County.

Uncle John was known all around these parts as Elder John Smith, or just Preacher John. Lord, I was one to ramble, sort of like a country doctor making house calls. Back then, you were born home, you got married at home, and you died at home. Uncle John rode horseback all over the Clinch Mountain country preaching funerals and officiating weddings and baptisms. I remember him baptizing my mother in the river when I was nine years old.

Where Uncle John really made his name was as a singer. He didn't sing ballads, though. He done what they called heart songs like "You Hurt Me Lying," and hymns like "Tarry with Me, O My Savior," and "Amazing Grace," and a lot of Primitive Baptist gospel songs I've recorded through the years. People who was around back then said I sound a lot like Uncle John did when he sang them or hymns—and he's the only person who I've ever been told sounded anything like me.

Uncle John officiated the wedding of my mother and father, but you could say it was death bringing them together, as much as anything else did. Lucy Rakes was a widow and Lee Stanley was a widower, both getting on in years and not wanting to be alone. My dad's first wife died and I never did know what of, because my dad never did say and I never did ask.

My mother had it rough in the way of love. When she was a young woman, still in her teens, she had a sweetheart named Gibson. He was from the little railroad town of Coeburn down the mountain from Smith Ridge, a good workingman, and they were both stuck on each other and were engaged to get married. Then he got killed in the mines, some sort of accident, and he got crushed by the falling rock. That was the way I heard it. It wasn't until almost ten years later when she finally got married, to a fellow named Watson Rakes. Two years later, he died from a tumor in his head. So she'd already lost two men she loved, and that was awful hard for her, coming to grief both times.

Seven more years went by, with my mother raising her daughter, Ruby, by herself, and she was thirty-eight years old when she wed my dad, Lee. When they got married in 1924, they brought seven children to the deal. Lee had three boys and three girls and Lucy had Ruby. That made three half brothers and four half sisters for me and Carter, the only full brother I had. They were a lot older than we were, so we didn't really grow up with them after the early years. Out of all my half siblings, none of them played music, so we didn't hear too much picking around the home, except some old-time clawhammer banjo my mom did. But she had mostly put her banjo aside to raise the family. I reckon maybe that was why Carter and I come along, to bring some music back into the house.

I was borned on February 25, 1927, on what they called Big Spraddle Creek, about three miles down the mountain from the old home place on Smith Ridge. The nearest post office was Stratton and the nearest town was McClure, a lumber camp that sprung up down by the river. Big Spraddle was one of them dark little hollows tucked back in them steep mountains, hard to find even when you're looking for it. Don't let the name fool you. Big Spraddle was just a little creek running by our little house, nothing you'd ever see on any map or postcard. Not much at all there besides us, really, just three or four neighbors' houses down the way.

We lived at the very end of the hollow, backed right on the creek. You could hear the creek water right outside the bedroom window. Running water's got a good sound, and it was a real comfort to hear it, especially when it rained and the creek got up; it would put you off to sleep real gentle and peaceful-like.

My mother had bought the place after her first husband died, and when she married my dad, they moved in there together. It was a little four-room, clapboard job, tin roof and stone chimney, no better or worse than a thousand other mountain cabins you'd find at the time. My dad built an extra room on the back after I came along, and that's where me and Carter slept. There were cracks in the walls, and

remember waking up in the wintertime and there'd be snow that blowed in overnight on top of the quilt.

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Carter was only eighteen months older than I was, and he didn't give me any warm welcome. Saw me as competition, I reckon. He didn't like his new brother at all and he let everybody know. Especially me. My mother told me that when I was only a couple of days old, Carter hit me on the head with a potato, and he wasn't playing around, neither. Gave me a good hard whack with that tater.

Down in Big Spraddle, we were on our own, nobody to bother us. We had a half acre there next to the house, against the woods and the mountain, where we had a little yard and a garden. There was a spring from a high place on the hillside that dropped down in the hollow and this is how we got our water. We had some gourds we raised and we'd hollow them out for drinking gourds. So we always had fresh water to drink and wash with. It was pure mountain springwater, and it was always so cold it'd put goose bumps on your arm, and I don't think I've ever tasted better.

We always had enough to eat from what we raised. My mother was a cook that couldn't be beat. She made everything from scratch, all the best things a boy could want, like big ole cathead biscuits which get the name from how big and rounded they are, and homemade sausage gravy, and hog jowl and sometimes grated cornbread, which is from field corn before it matures. One thing I liked best was her cream corn; she'd shave the kernels off the cob and cook it up with home-churned butter.

She could make anything taste good. It didn't matter what my older brothers dragged in from hunting. Once in a while, they'd bring back a live possum they trapped when they was out in the woods. You probably know possums will eat anything dead or alive. Well, my mother would put the possum under an upside-down tub, and prop up that tub just enough to let in some air, then she'd put a rock on top to weigh it down. She'd keep the possum like you would a pet and she'd feed it table scraps for two weeks and clean all the trash out and plump it up nice. And she'd make us a good possum dinner out of that.

For me and Carter, Big Spraddle was our very own playground. All around were woods where we could get outside and get lost together. Carter would run those woods like a rabbit. I don't think he was scared of anything. But I was scared all the time. I don't know what of. Snakes, the dark, whatever was out there, I reckon.

There was a lady we called Old Mother Hubbard; she lived down in Clinchco, near the coal camp. She was an old widow and lived by herself, no friends or family to speak of; she dressed in rags and had strange ways about her. The grown-ups would say, "If you do this or that, we'll take you to see Old Mother Hubbard." All us kids were real scared of her; we thought she would do something terrible to us, who knows what. There was other widow women like her, and you'd hear people say they were witches.

Snakes and witches wasn't nothing next to what worried me most, and that was the coal mines. All of my half brothers worked in the mines, down the mountain at the Clinchfield Coal Corporation, the biggest operation in these parts. They told about how hard it was in the mines, slaving away in mud up to their knees and higher sometimes, cold, dark water all around. I heard their stories and seen their faces black with soot, and I knew it wasn't for me. I never did think I could stand it. I had asthma and I figured I'd smother down there. I swore I'd keep both my feet above the ground.

Let me say right here that coal miners are some of the finest people you'll ever meet, and they were some of the best Stanley Brothers fans there ever was, from our earliest days when we first played the camps on payday. We could always draw a crowd in those coal towns, and they were faithful to the end. Patty Loveless, one of my favorite singers in the world, was raised by her coal-miner dad across the Kentucky border in Elkhorn City, Pike County. Patty told me her dad was listening to

Stanley Brothers album on the record player when he died of a heart attack.

When I was growing up, coal was king. Now, the Clinch Mountains are pretty to look at on top, but it was underneath where the real prize was, and these were no ordinary chunks of coal. We had the best coal for burning there was and more of it that could be dug out the fastest and the cheapest. Whether it was a blessing or a curse, I don't rightly know. Probably a little of both.

One thing's for sure. It was the coal put us on the map. A study by the Virginia Geological Survey from 1916, "The Coal Resources of the Clintwood and Bucu Quadrangles," lays it on thick, with a bunch of fancy words and big numbers that like to give you a headache just to see 'em. To tell it to you plain, we was setting on top of ten billion tons of high-grade coal. "Distinctly superior" was the way the report rated the kind we had in the Virginia coalfields compared to other areas, so you can see why I'm bragging a bit on our coal.

The 1916 survey map shows a bull's-eye right in our neck of the woods. The railroad town of Dante, just down the road from where I still live today, is in the dead center of that bull's-eye. The year before, the Carolina, Clinchfield and Ohio Railway had been extended from Dante a ways across the Kentucky border to Elkhorn City. They blasted mile-long tunnels through the rocky ridges and they laid trestles across the deep gorges; and by the time they finished, the CC&O was the most expensive stretch of railroad track ever built in the U.S.

It was worth the money to the big investors, because the CC&O busted open the Virginia coalfield. For centuries, we'd been cut off from the outside world because of the rough terrain. The new railroad was all the big companies needed to make their move. Now there was a way to get the coal out of the mountains, all the way down to Spartanburg, South Carolina, and points north and east.

The coal companies from up North bought up most of this land in one big grab. They paid a nickel an acre and they've made billions of dollars. The biggest was the Clinchfield Coal Corporation. They owned huge stretches of coal and timber lands, with all the mineral rights, not only in Dickenson but in counties all around: Wise, Russell and Buchanan. They built Clinchco just about overnight, where Mill Creek runs into the McClure River. Clinchco was biggest, but there were other company towns, too, like Trammel, built by Virginia Banner Coal Corporation, and Splash-dam and Bartlick and Vansant.

The company towns had rows and rows of those little shotgun shacks and the bosses packed 'em full of workers who poured out of the mountains and hollows looking for steady jobs. Many a one later wished they'd never left.

The company bosses all got rich and the people stayed poor like they've always been. That's the way it's been and it's still like that. There's still a lot of coal in this ground, and they're still getting it out. Nowadays they haul it by truck as much they do by train. Even today, the coal companies own almost half the land in Dickenson County, and they have mineral rights to 75 percent.

Yeah, buddy, I'll tell you what, the coal trucks are keeping the roads around here hot. They've deep-mined right under my house, five miles down or more, and there's some closer to the ground easier to get at. They tell me there's \$60,000 worth of clean coal right under the property here, and that's only about three feet down. I used to think if the music ever went bad on me, I could get the coal.

They can cut through the hard limestone and sandstone like it was nothing; nowadays they've got dynamite where they're cutting the mountains down, too. They just lop the tops right off to get to the coal. Around Dickenson, they've pretty much stripped the countryside clean. I don't like the strip mining. It tears up the land, but everybody's got to make a living somehow. And it's a lot safer for the workers than it used to be.

Back when I was a boy, it was digging coal with a pick and shovel and hauling it out with mules

Men worked seams no more than three feet high for twelve-hour shifts, flat on their backs, take lunch breaks laying sideways, a big swig of water to make it go down. There was an old song they'd sing: *Lord have mercy on a miner's soul, down on my knees in thirty-inch coal*. My brothers said the trick loading coal was to bounce a shovelful off the top of the mine shaft into the coal car. You'd load twenty cars a shift and never stand up once. I remember a neighbor came out of the mines one night and swore he'd had enough. "I don't care if I have to starve," he said. "I ain't never going back in the mines no more." The next day, he was back in the mines.

There was a mine shaft in McClure that was real dangerous. Anytime you get below the riverbed the mine gets real gassy, what they call "hot." This one stayed hot too long, and something ignited that gas and it blew up and killed a bunch of miners. There are memorials all around Dickenson and Wise and Buchanan counties, stone monuments with the names of the men who died in the mine. Some people say the reason so many young boys from around here went off to war is because they figured fighting had to be better than coal mining.

Down the mountain, along the little two-lane dirt road between Clinchco and Tom's Creek, you can see the coke ovens by the side of the road where they burned the coal. Great big open-air fires. They were burning all the time. It was a mighty fearsome sight, especially at night with those big blue flames shooting into the black sky. Like the whole world was on fire. And the trains ran that coal night and day, steam whistle screaming.

Back up at the head of the holler, you felt protected. It was two worlds, really, and they were separate: the mining towns and lumber camps with all that commotion, and our little hideaway at B Spraddle with our little house bounded by a creek and a green hill and the woods. I'd say it was paradise next to Clinchco and Dante and those scary places full of fire and smoke where the men and the machines worked night and day digging and sawing and hauling.

My dad never did mess with the mines. He was a sawmill man, and I'll tell you more about that later, because this early on, all I knew about my daddy was he was the best singer I'd ever heard. I can close my eyes right now and hear his voice a-ringing out, loud and clear like he was here beside me. He had a real old-time lonesome voice, down to earth like he dug it right out of one of the mountains.

My daddy didn't play music, but he sung a lot around home. He sung for himself; he wasn't out to impress nobody. He sung when the feeling hit. He didn't often sing a whole song from start to finish, mostly just snatches of sad old ballads that caught his fancy. I reckon he picked up a lot of what he knew when he was out in the woods cutting timber with men from Kentucky and Tennessee and North Carolina and other places I'd never heard of. In them days, people swapped songs as fast as they would pocketknives or anything. My dad knew a lot of songs. He sung "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow," "Pretty Polly," "The House Carpenter," "Wild Bill Jones," "The Brown Girl," and "Omi Wise."

Far back as I can remember, I'd lay awake in my room late at night listening to my dad sing alone out on the porch after a long day at the sawmill. It'd be dead silent and I'd be drifting off to sleep and then he'd light into a string of verses that hung like wood smoke in the night air and lingered in my mind long after he'd gone to bed. Some kids get lullabies and nursery rhymes. I got my daddy moaning "Man of Constant Sorrow" to himself out in the dark:

*You can bury me in some deep valley for many years where I may lay  
Then you may learn to love another while I am sleeping in my grave*

My mother didn't do much in the way of singing except in church. But there were my half sisters

from my dad's first marriage and they were good singers like he was. They were a lot older than me and the songs they liked were old as dirt. They sung around the house while they did chores and when they was resting, too, just to pass the time, real sad old-timers like "Barb'ry Allen" and "Tragic Romance." They were better at remembering the words than my dad was, and I'd listen close to find out what happened. Seems like in every song somebody always come to a bad end. There was cruel Barb'ry Allen and her man, Sweet Willie, buried side by side in the churchyard, a green briar and a red rose growing out of their graves. I'd hear my sisters close out the song, and I'd be hanging on every word:

*They leaned from the top and locked in a true lovers' knot  
The rose run around the briar*

There must have been a hundred verses, but the last lines always stuck with me. I liked the stories and I liked the melodies even more. For me the words and the melody were always joined together like the briar and the rose. Most people just listen to the words in a song. I listen to the words and melody both, but I like the melody best because that's where your feeling is, I think. It's the way I hear music and the way I sing it, too.

Those songs helped pass the time and made the chores go by easier, because there was always a lot to do. At our house, my mother always kept everything in order, from the kitchen to the garden, everything in its proper place and neat as a pin, too. There was a hook for every utensil and a can for every preserve. You'd seldom see her without a broom or a mop or dishrag.

I've always tried to be neat and tidy because that's how my mother raised us. Some people don't care what their place looks like; they leave everything laying around the house and the yard in a awful mess. Some people got no pride, I guess, but I do.

There were no books I can recall, save for the family Bible. There wasn't much in the way of toys and playthings like children have today. My parents wouldn't allow even a deck of playing cards in the house, because it could lead to gambling and all kinds of trouble. For Christmas, we'd get an orange, one for Carter and one for me, and handful of rock candy. Maybe a cap gun, too. It wasn't till years later that I got a bicycle of my own and I had to trade a dog to get that bike.

There was only one what you would call "modern convenience" in the whole house. In the corner of the living room there stood a nice Victrola, one of those windup jobs they had back then. You didn't need electricity; you'd just crank it by hand and it would play those old 78-rpm phonograph records, one song on each side. I remember having to change the steel needle all the time. In the bottom shelf of the Victrola there was a pile of records, and Carter and me wore 'em out. It was the first music we heard from the outside world, on phonograph records; we never heard of radio until several years later.

Our favorite records were by the Carter Family, and Grayson and Whitter, and Fiddlin' Powers and his Family; they came from places that weren't so far away, less than a hundred miles. They sounded familiar to us, like people we knew back in our mountains.

G. B. Grayson was from near Mountain City in eastern Tennessee, a little hollow called Laurin Bloomery. Grayson was blind, so he couldn't do regular work. He earned his livelihood at barn dances and pie suppers and fiddle contests and on street corners, wherever he could. He played the prettiest lonesome fiddle and he was a good singer, too, which was rare for a fiddle player. Grayson sang a lot of the lonesome ballads my dad sung: "Omie Wise" and "Rose Conley." In 1930, he got killed in a wreck out near Damascus, Virginia, when a log truck hit the car he was hitching a ride on and he got thrown off the running board. So we never got to see Grayson play, but we had his records and we couldn't get enough of 'em. The way some boys studied schoolbooks, we studied these old 78-rpm records, and we learned 'em good.



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