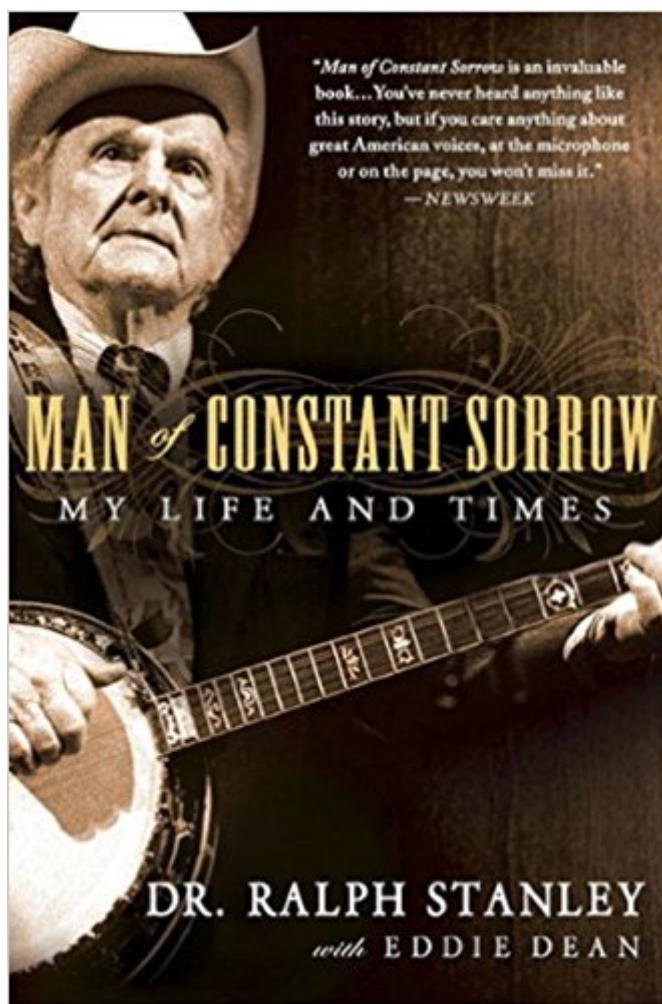


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# Man Of Constant Sorrow: My Life And Times



## Synopsis

A legend looks back on his six decades in music. Ralph Stanley was born in 1927 in a corner of Virginia known as Big Spraddle Creek, a place where music echoed from the ridge tops, was belted out by workers in the fields, and resonated in the one-room country church where Ralph first found his voice. For his eleventh birthday, Ralph was given five dollars, and had to chose between buying a sow or a banjo. He chose the banjo, which his mother taught him to play in the clawhammer style. In 1946, he combined his banjo with his brother Carter's guitar, and the two blended their voices into one as the Stanley Brothers. For twenty years the Stanleys chased the dream through good times and hard times, until the hard times caught up to Carter and he succumbed to liver disease at age 41. In the four decades since his brother's passing, Ralph has brought his music from the hills and hollows of southwest Virginia to the wide world. Now in his eighties and still touring, Ralph has at last grown into his voice and is ready to tell his story. In *Man of Constant Sorrow*, Ralph looks back on his career in what most call bluegrass but what he prefers to call "old time mountain music." He recounts the creation of hundreds of classic tracks, including "White Dove," "Rank Stranger," and his signature song, "Man of Constant Sorrow." He tells tales from a life spent on road with his band the Clinch Mountain Boys, explains his distinctive "Stanley style" of banjo-playing, crosses paths with everyone from Bill Monroe to Bob Dylan, and reflects on his late-career resurgence sparked by an unlikely Grammy win in 2002 for his song "O Death." He also raises a dirge for Appalachia, his mountain home that is quickly disappearing. Harmonized with equal measures of tragedy and triumph, *Man of Constant Sorrow* is the stirring testament of a giant of American music.

## Book Information

Paperback: 464 pages

Publisher: Avery; Reprint edition (November 2, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1592405843

ISBN-13: 978-1592405848

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 67 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #229,415 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #80 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Country #107 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Country & Folk #4181 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature

## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Stanley's life spans the history of recorded bluegrass and country music, but his high, lonesome voice encompasses human suffering throughout time. Born in 1927, Stanley and his brother and first singing partner, Carter, grew up in the mountains of southwestern Virginia where Stanley learned old-time music in a Primitive Baptist church and from his mother, who picked the banjo clawhammer style. As a young man he often doubted his future as a musician, farming and working briefly in a sawmill, before committing himself to the music business. He stuck with it after Carter's alcohol-accelerated death in 1966 even though his career did not prove lucrative until very late in life when he was featured on the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack. He won the 2001 Grammy for best male country vocal performance, besting the likes of young commercial country star Tim McGraw, of whom Stanley writes, [W]ouldn't know a real country song if it kicked him in the ass. Stanley's plainspoken narrative is told in a rural diction as though he were sitting in the front seat of an old Ford headed down the mountain for his next show. His story is a comprehensive and endearing cornucopia of authentic mountain music, place, family, friends, rivals, faith, love, life, death and the road. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

"The life chronicled in this autobiography is right out of Southern Gothic lit... The level of detail renders Stanley's tales as captivating as his music." -"Rolling Stone" "A delightful, outspoken surprise... An often tart yet affecting music memoir." -"Kirkus" (starred review) "After all these years [Stanley's] tongue is still sharp." -"Wall Street Journal" "[Man of Constant Sorrow]" is a lot like the man himself: warm, folksy, down to earth, plainspoken, a little blunt and prickly at times." -"New York Times" "No less than the oral history of a quintessentially American music scene." -"Mother Jones" "This late-in-life memoir is a classic- remarkably frank, detailed, revealing, and from time to time it rises to the level of plainspoken poetry. The master of old time singing and clawhammer banjo pulls no punches as he recalls his rural Virginia mountain boyhood, the Stanleys' slow rise to success, his career restart after his alcoholic brother's death in 1966, and musicians he played with, from Bill Monroe to Keith Whitley and even Bob Dylan. He settles a few scores, shares his inner thoughts on matters social, political and spiritual, and tells his tale in a flowing, engaging style that's no doubt also a credit to Virginia journalist Dean." -"American Songwriter" (five stars) "In the prologue to *Man of Constant Sorrow* Ralph Stanley writes: 'I've always done my best to honor what God gave me. I've never tried to put any airs on it. I sing it the way I feel it, just the way it comes out.' With music writer Eddie Dean, he relates his life in the same speaking voice - honestly

and with extraordinary detail." -"Austin Chronicle" "As fascinating as Stanley's personal revelations are, this book's greatest value lies in his documentary-like descriptions of the hardships rural musicians faced in the 1940s and '50s-crowded cars, band rivalries, long and dangerous roads and hand-to-mouth!

This is a wonderful autobiography full of fascinating details and information about the early days of bluegrass and the Stanley Brothers in particular. It reads with all the colloquialisms you would expect from someone born and raised in the Appalachian mountains of Southwest Virginia, who had little formal education. His account was recorded and directly transcribed to print with few editorial changes. The struggles Ralph and Carter faced in forging their own sound in the early days of recorded music is also a look into our country's history in the years after World War II when recorded music was in its infancy. Driving long distances over primitive roads to venues that paid very little, if anything at all, was typical. The Stanley Brothers struggled financially, especially in the beginning, but the only alternative was the "dark coal mines" or subsistence farming. They might have broken up had they not been persistent with their dreams. Ralph quit "the road" twice, once to return home to farming, a profession for which he had little aptitude, the second time, he and Carter went to Detroit to work in the auto factories. They quickly returned to what they loved and had aptitude, which was music. Over the years, feuding with Flatt and Scruggs, who were much more successful commercially, was a continuing problem, along with Carter's alcoholism, which would lead to his death in 1966. Over the years, Ralph and Carter argued over the question of whether to become more commercial or remain true to their mountain roots. Ralph won that argument but it wasn't until the movie, "O Brother Where Art Thou?" was released, with Angel Band and Man of Constant Sorrow, years after Carter's death, that the public discovered the Stanley Brothers. Ralph finally reaped the financial rewards that eluded him for so many years. Today, those who love bluegrass music would agree that the Stanley Brothers were unequaled in singing and their songs have become part of the American Songbook. If you like the Stanley Brothers, you will love this book!

A very good story. I could do without the hick writing style. Ralph Stanley and Carter are up there with Beethoven, Mozart and others. I wish he had written in contemporary style. Even so I couldn't put it aside and became even more of a fan of some of the greatest music ever produced. Ralph points out correctly that original Country music is an enduring art form. I'm thankful he endured. I had the rare privilege of being in a small audience years ago and was able to request "Angel Band"

from Ralph what a thrill. As Bob Dylan says Ralph and his music will live forever. No small compliment from an all time music great. I would not argue with Bob Dylan's musical taste which I rate perfect.

It reads like you're sitting next to Dr. Ralph Stanley and he is telling his life story. Although I am not always fond of self written biographies, for someone might leave the difficult subjects out, I did like this book very much. Dr. Stanley describes his life in the same way as he spoke. To me, but I am not an American, I really feel that someone of southern origin, really tells his life story in words like he is talking to you person to person. A very honest book about a great musician and decent mountain man.

I grew up on a farm in North Carolina, before I became a newspaper reporter and then a stockbroker, and in reading this book it seemed like I underlined something on every page. Things like: "Two Stanley brothers in front, three Clinch Mountain boys in back, and just enough gasoline for a round trip: that's how we made the miles in the early days." Ralph and Carter Stanley came down from the farm on Smith's Ridge in the deep, rolling hills of old Virginia and started on Farm and Fun Time on live radio back in the 1940's. Elvis came along in the 1950s, and television. A lot of things changed. The Stanley Brothers music stayed the same. "I can't read a note of music and neither could Carter," Ralph says in this book. "We always played by ear, same as everybody did in the mountains...Carter was such a wonderful and talented MC, he could please any kind of crowd...He was so used to speaking off the cuff. He never planned what he was going to say, just like we never planned our sets. We sung whatever we felt at the moment and whatever requests we got from the audience." But Carter took to drinking. "All I can tell you is over the years, it (alcohol) just kept tightening the grip on him, and there wasn't nothing I could do to unloose that grip." Carter died in 1966. Ralph carried on. A lot of musicians passed through his band. George Shuffler, Ralph writes, became like a third Stanley brother. Curley Ray Cline "could have more fun drinking a cup of coffee than a lot of people could have in a month." I saw Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys perform when Carter was still alive and I've seen them many times since. Ralph's singing, that high, cracked voice, stays the same. "This music isn't about the notes you play, but the emotions you have," he says. That kind of sums it up. I loved this book, but set it down with sadness. No one plows behind a mule any more. Everybody watches the same awful television shows. Kids don't grow up like we did, working the fields, swimming in the creek, coming in at noon to listen to hillbilly music on the radio. It's a time that's gone and won't come back. The musicians who came off those

mountain farms soon will soon be gone too. But the music remains, and country roads, and those misted hills of home. Ken Byerly, author of Mountain Girl and other books.

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