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## Roy Lee Centers

Posted by 66d35 - 2007/07/18 19:30

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I was just listening to the song 'Roy Lee' recorded by James King in the car the other day, and it struck me that many might not know the story behind this tragic event. Here's a brief outline of what happened:

Roy Lee Centers

Age 29

Born Nov.08, 1944

Died May 05, 1974

Roy Lee Centers sang lead and played rhythm guitar for Ralph Stanley's Clinch Mountain Boys from early 1970 until his tragic death in 1974. Centers' tenure is especially memorable in light of the fact that his voice sounded very similar to that of Carter Stanley. Roy Lee helped put Ralph's new group on a level almost as legendary as the original Stanley Brothers. Born in the heart of feud country's "Bloody Breathitt" County, Centers grew up in a musically rich area where poverty and violence had become part of the lifestyle. Like many eastern Kentucky youth, Roy Lee moved to southwest Ohio to find employment. He also became part of the local Bluegrass scene, working with Fred Spencer under the name Lee Brothers and for Jack Lynch and the Miami Valley Boys. After Larry Sparks left Ralph Stanley's band in the fall of 1969, Joe Isaacs filled the spot temporarily until Roy Lee took it on a permanent basis. Later, Centers and his family moved to Breathitt County. The more than four years that Roy Lee Centers spent with the Clinch Mountain Boys coincided with tremendous growth of Bluegrass festivals. Stanley fans accepted the congenial Kentuckian as the nearest humanly possible version of a second Carter Stanley. The Clinch Mountain Boys also included fiddler Curly Ray Cline, bass player Jack Cooke and for more than a year the youthful duo of Keith Whitley and Ricky Skaggs. As a result, they gained a large and loyal following on the festival circuit. They also toured Japan, where they received a tremendous welcome. Roy Lee also recorded a great deal with the Clinch Mountain Boys. He sang lead on two albums on Jessup, six on Rebel and another one on King Bluegrass (subsequently reissued on County). A two-album Live In Japan set issued on the Seven Seas label in Japan also later appeared on Rebel. Centers played on Curly Ray Cline's albums and those of Keith Whitley and Ricky Skaggs, Lee Allen and J.D. Jarvis. Sometimes he played banjo rather than guitar, being equally skilled on both instruments. Given the wide acceptance that Centers received, Bluegrass fans were shocked when they learned that Roy Lee had been fatally shot in one of the shooting altercations that have made his section of Kentucky notorious. The fans were even more shocked when they learned that his killing went virtually unpunished. Centers came to be a revered figure in the Bluegrass world and his childhood friend and fellow musician, Lee Allen, wrote and recorded a tribute song entitled In Memory Of Roy Lee Centers. Vector Records released two albums made largely from live recordings. For a time, Roy Lee's oldest son, Lennie, worked in the bands of Lee Allen and also of the Goins Brothers.

-Ivan M. Tribe

This does not tell quite the whole story.. in fact, so notorious did this case become it is now taught in law classes in the US. The gunman involved was a Deputy Sheriff and was very well connected in the area. He was convicted and sentenced to 12 years for manslaughter - not murder - but released after only 3 months! It was a strange kind of manslaughter too, as Roy Lee was not armed and had his young son with him at the time they were marched into the woods at gunpoint by the killer. His son ran for his life and managed to escape as his father was shot to death in front of him.

As a result of this terrible crime, one of the finest ever bluegrass voices was silenced, and we only have relatively few recordings - and a couple of fine songs written in his memory - to remind us of his legacy.

Andy

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## Re:Roy Lee Centers

Posted by Stanleyfan - 2007/07/20 18:11

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I was looking at the video of Ralph Stanley & Don Reno playing Home Sweet Home on youtube & got talking to Roy Lee Centers Great Nephew, his username is nanners2886

nanners2886

My great uncle was Roy Lee Centers, He was Ralphs lead singer after Carter died.

Stanleytonefan

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I am a big Ralph Stanley fan & have read about your great uncle, he was certainly was one of the best. Is his son Lenny still around?

nanners2886

Why yes Lenny is still around. He lives in Campton Ky. He was offered a spot on the grand ole opry but he declined saying he would rather play his own music. But yeah, he is still around.

Stanleytonefan

Thanks for that Nanners, I am glad that Lenny is in good health, he must be very proud of his Father, it seems such a waste that he died so tragicaly & so young & the same applies to Keith Whitley that replaced him in the Clinch Mountain boys. Mr Shelton was kind enough to send me a copy of the Ralph Stanley song & memory book (volume 3) which has some nice photos of your Great Uncle.

[http://www.transatlanticbluegrass.com/forum/components/com\\_fireboard/uploaded/images/roy.jpg](http://www.transatlanticbluegrass.com/forum/components/com_fireboard/uploaded/images/roy.jpg)

ROY LEE CENTERS

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## Re:Roy Lee Centers

Posted by 66d35 - 2007/07/21 23:23

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Fascinating. I really thought Roy Lee was an absolutely phenomenal singer. A really tragic loss. There was something in his (and of course Carter's) voices that can send a shiver down your spine. There are a lot of excellent vocalists around, but not too many that can have that effect. James King, especially with Kevin Prater on harmony can, though.... there is a very solid 'Stanley' sound to James King's band these days. I really like the whole package, and Adam Poindexter on banjo really drives it along with an OUTSTANDING tone.

Andy

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## Re:Roy Lee Centers

Posted by Stanleyfan - 2007/07/22 09:01

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I agree Andy,

He was an incredible singer & seem to encapsulate that amazing Stanley sound.

It was also a tragic loss when Keith Whitley died as he too had a voice that made the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

Ralph has had a lot of great musicians in his line up since Carter tragically passed away but there are few that were able to replocate that sound.

I really admire Ralph for keeping it as real as possible over the years as it must have been so hard to continue after the loss of his brother.

I am one of his biggest fans & love all of his music & admire those that have contributed to the Stanley sound.

from Joe Wilson through George Shuffler, Lester Woodie, Melvin Goins, Larry Sparks to the more well known Clinch Mountain Boys like Curly Ray Cline,, Jack Cooke, Charlie Sizemore & James Allen Shelton.

I truly believe that Steve Sparkman, next to Ralph, is the greatest Stanley style picker alive today & recommend his albums "Smith Ridge" & "Harlan County Five String" to any one.

I spoke to him recently and he says that he is going to bring out a video & new CD on the "Stanley Style" Picking technique.... I can't wait :cheer:

Any way, I better stop there as I could fill the forum with my view on the life & times of the Stanley Brothers

Thanks for the opportunity to voice some of it!;

Dean [http://www.transatlanticbluegrass.com/forum/components/com\\_fireboard/uploaded/images/Ralph.jpg](http://www.transatlanticbluegrass.com/forum/components/com_fireboard/uploaded/images/Ralph.jpg)

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## Re:Roy Lee Centers

Posted by 66d35 - 2007/07/22 14:29

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George Shuffler was one of my own early influences. I found this LP instruction thing (I recall it was on Folkways) and there was an Oak Publications book as well I think. It had a rather untypical Shuffler break in there... Mountain Dew... but messing around with that did get me listening to his other stuff and his crosspicking in particular. That was quite a challenge figuring some of those things out. Easier now of course with so much material available, but then... there was nothing.

I agree James Allen Shelton does a real good job. Very tasteful and creative breaks. Much rather listen to him than some of the so-called "hot" pickers around these days. Most of 'em are tedious, boring and entirely predictable. Can be hard to tell one from another (I note even Tony Rice has been saying that). Standard formula: throw as many notes in as you can, base everything on meandering, musically meaningless scales, and leave no spaces anywhere. Tone? Power? What's that? :dry:

I could name some names, but I'll resist the temptation. Tony Rice did though B)

Pretty much the same situation on banjo, too, don't you think?

Thank God there are still some tasteful, clean, powerful pickers out there.

Andy

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## Re:Roy Lee Centers

Posted by Stanleyfan - 2007/07/22 21:36

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This is a Youtube clip from 2006 featuring Larry Sparks

He's playing "Kentucky Girl" at the Jerusalem Ridge Festival

He too is a great Flatpicker & You can still hear the Carter Stanley sound in his voice.

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=Y-kwoWouK5c>