

## Down from the Mountain Tour: Old-time hits the big time

CenturyTel Center, Shreveport, August 10, 2002

*[Featuring the Nashville Bluegrass Band, Norman & Nancy Blake, Alison Krauss & Union Station, Emmylou Harris, Patty Loveless, The Whites, Chris Thomas King, Jerry Douglas, The Cox Family, Rodney Crowell & Dr. Ralph Stanley]*

SHREVEPORT, LA.—The good doctor and first-generation bluegrass pioneer, Dr. Ralph Stanley, came down from the mountain in early August for a second leg of the Down from the Mountain Tour, including dates on Aug. 7, 9 and 10 in Southaven, Miss., Houston and Shreveport, La. But he didn't come alone. As befitting one of the patriarchs of our music, this grandfather brought his extended musical "family," an all-star lineup of talent that easily justified the average \$55 – 35 ticket price.

But how would this intimate acoustic music, usually featured on the small stages of festivals and auditoriums, translate into large coliseums normally holding audiences of 5,000 to 10,000 for big rock and country shows. No electric guitars, drums and amplifiers....just a row of high quality mics and three small monitors graced the stage, along with a podium for master of ceremonies Rodney Crowell.

All doubts quickly faded when the Nashville Bluegrass Band's Mike Compton, Pat Enright, Stuart Duncan and Dennis Crouch, along with Barry Bales from Union Station, took the stage for an a cappella kickoff of "Po' Lazarus." Through the acoustic magic of the latest, greatest, only-the-best-will-do-it-justice sound reinforcement, the cavernous CenturyTel Convention Center in Shreveport filled to the rafters with the gorgeous sound of five voices in harmony. From the first notes, the guesstimated 4,000 – 5,000 packing nearly every available seat knew they were about to take a memorable musical journey through early American music—old-time, bluegrass, country (real mule-behind-the-plow country, not pickup-trucks-and-cowboy-hat-pop country), blues and some more modern acoustic fare in keeping with the tradition.

"O Brother" soundtrack and Down from the Mountain producer T Bone Burnett has managed to package, popularize and expose a broad new audience to music that previously seemed the exclusive secret of diehard fans and connoisseurs. Even more surprising, Burnett kept its soul and heart amazingly intact in the process. You have to tip your hat to a man who has apparently taught half the nation the words to "Man of Constant Sorrow." The result: a simply amazing concert that managed to satisfy both the folks attending to hear the O Brother "hits" and the true blue fans who were left shaking their heads in enjoyment and amazement that four thousand or more like-minded music lovers were hooting and hollering right along with them for every hot instrumental break or vocal lick. "Our" music isn't supposed to draw crowds like this, is it? Well, somebody forgot to tell T Bone.

As enjoyable as it was to hear each of the featured acts do two or three songs, the best part of the evening to many diehard fans was the mix-and-match taking place during the course of the three-hour show (two sets divided by a short intermission). Imagine the backstage manager hustling performers on and off from a bullpen featuring such a depth of talent, creating a concert that felt like a fan's dream jam session. A couple of great songs, then a new mix of performers quickly entered and stepped up to the mic...a constantly evolving musical buffet that left you eagerly awaiting the next surprise from the kitchen.

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Pair Emmylou Harris with the NBB (AKUS's Ron Block subbing on banjo for the absent Allen O'Bryant) for a vocal version of Bill Monroe's "Get Up John," with plenty of hot licks courtesy of Mississippi favorite son, mandolinist Mike Compton, unusually dapper in his white suite, and from fiddle virtuoso Stuart Duncan. Or the angelic blend from the voices of Patty Loveless, Emmylou and Allison Krauss on "Go to Sleep Little Baby," from the "O Brother" soundtrack. Or dobro-wizard Jerry Douglas (who got his start touring with the Whites) rejoining Buck, Sharon and Cheryl for some real old-time country. Mix in some delta blues from Chris Thomas King. A heart-rending "You'll Never Leave Harlan Alive" by Patty Loveless. Some seldom heard songs from the rich archives of flat-picking music-historian Norman Blake. A spirited version of "Angeline the Baker" featuring Duncan and Compton. A fine Jimmy Rogers-yodeling rendition of "In the Jailhouse Now" from emcee Crowell, complete with the extra verses that never made it to the "O Brother" soundtrack. The evening's high points were so numerous it seems unfair to mention only a few.

The Cox Family, from Cotton Valley about 40 miles away, were greeted with the sort of adulation reserved for hometown heroes, father Willard singing and fiddling from a wheelchair due to the highway accident in 2000 which prevented the family from capitalizing on the buzz they earned from the "O Brother" movie and the original Down from the Mountain concert at the Ryman.

When Alison Krauss and Union Station took the stage early in the evening, the roar from the crowd proved this band, a musical powerhouse that nearly lifted the CenturyTel Center off its foundations, has earned a following that is probably broader than any other bluegrass band working today. And appropriately, the concert featured not one, but two versions of the hit that caught the entire music industry off guard. Dan Tyminski nailed his trademarked version with the help of Enright and Duncan on vocals. And near the concert's end, Ralph Stanley offered his traditional version, aided by Blake, Compton, Crouch and Duncan and Cheryl White.

Exploring some new territory here without his Clinch Mountain Boys, the good doctor offered a wonderfully old-timey ballad, "Girl from the Greenbriar Shore," and an impromptu steamroller version of "Little Maggie" that oozed timeless mountain soul. The entire ensemble of nearly 30 performers joined Stanley for the encore, "Angel Band," offering such unexpected treats as a four fiddle "string section," including Krauss, Duncan and Tyminski.

With the entire crowd on their feet, many in the audience unexpectedly got their secret wish to sing with Ralph Stanley as he "lined out" "Amazing Grace" as a second encore. As Dr. Ralph had noted earlier, with his characteristic dry wit, he had played the Louisiana Hayride with his brother Carter in 1949 and it was nice to be back. It was nice to have him back, along with all the other remarkable talents of this amazing tour, which is reaping long overdue rewards and exposure for these artists. For those of us who have been drinking at the fountain of this music for years, it's extremely satisfying to see the wider populace as a whole enjoy its thirst quenching sweetness in midst of the desert of here today, gone tomorrow radio fodder.

— Curtis Darrah

*NOTE: For those unable to attend one of the DFTM tour dates, a wonderful concert movie capturing the original Ryman show, "Down from the Mountain," is available on DVD or video and is highly recommended.*