

“Rank Stranger”—The Stanley Brothers (1960)

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Essay by David W. Johnson (guest post)*



The Stanley Brothers



Original label

Every so often a song connects with deep emotions that keep the song alive in our musical consciousness for decades. Much of the power stems from the song itself, but a memorable cover version can make a difference. The Stanley Brother’s cover version of the Albert E. Brumley composition “Rank Strangers to Me” had this effect on the original song, increasing its cultural significance by connecting it to new audiences.

SENTIMENTAL SONG

“Rank Strangers to Me” was one of songwriter Albert Brumley’s “sentimental” songs. It touched on powerful emotions, but was not explicitly religious. Brumley made his name as a writer of Southern gospel songs--called “Southern” to distinguish this branch of gospel music from the works of Black gospel songwriters such as Thomas A. Dorsey, who wrote “Peace in the Valley.” Brumley went on to become “the most popular Southern gospel writer of all time,” but when he wrote “Rank Strangers to Me,” he was a staff songwriter at Eugene M. Bartlett’s Hartford Music Company in Hartford, Arkansas, earning \$12.50 a month.

By the time Brumley wrote “Rank Strangers to Me,” he had composed the gospel classics “I’ll Fly Away,” “I’ll Meet You in the Morning,” and “Turn Your Radio On.” The Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company first published “Rank Strangers to Me” in its 1942 songbook “Super Specials No. 5.” Publishers of Southern gospel music sponsored singing schools at Christian churches in order to increase the demand for songbooks. Gospel singers flocked to schools, camps, and “conventions”--public gatherings organized by church-going people who shared a love of singing.

GOSPEL CONNECTION

In his autobiography, “Man of Constant Sorrow,” Ralph Stanley recalled the first time he and his older brother Carter listened to Brumley’s song. “We were driving to a show, listening to the radio, when we heard the Willow Branch Quartet doing a song called ‘Rank Stranger.’ There was something there that grabbed Carter and me. We’d never heard that term ‘rank stranger’ before. . . .”

Ralph approved of the Willow Branch Quartet's version of the song, but "wanted to make it different. Carter and me worked out a whole new arrangement. . . ." He added, "I never heard a thing about the Willow Branch Quartet since we heard them sing that Sunday morning. . . ." Changing an arrangement was a way musicians could claim a song as their own. In the competitive world of old-time country and bluegrass, professionals were reluctant to acknowledge the influence of other musicians, but it was unavoidable.

The Willow Branch Quartet appears to have influenced the Stanley Brothers. Both groups made music in the same city during the same years. Both performed on radio. Carter and Ralph appeared on the "Farm and Fun Time" program on Bristol station WCYB. The Quartet had sung in churches and on radio since 1952, and released 78 rpm records between 1954 and 1956 and 45's in 1956-1957. These are now collector's items. The Quartet took its name from the Willow Branch Baptist Church in Bristol and was well-known in the region, recording "Rank Strangers" (with an "s") in 1955. Also suggesting influence is the vocal arrangement on the Stanley Brothers' 1959 recording of the gospel standard "Cold Jordan," which is identical to the Quartet's arrangement recorded in 1956-1957.

When Ralph and Carter heard "Rank Strangers" on the car radio, they were listening to one of the hour-long religious programs broadcast Sunday afternoons by station WFHG in Bristol, or to a Saturday gospel sing broadcast from a school auditorium. The Willow Branch Quartet were frequent guests on the Sunday programs and participated in gospel sings. "Rank Strangers" was one of the Quartet's most requested songs. "They had a good version on it," recalled former neighbor Marvin Harlow. "I saw them sing it many, many times. It was a hit for them, too. That's where Carter and Ralph got it."

The Quartet's original members were Wilda Dillon Combs, soprano and lead singer; Wilda's mother, Ettie Dillon, alto; J. C. Leonard, tenor; and Harold Shaffer, bass. Mother and daughter singing together gave the group the distinctive sound of family voices harmonizing. They sang in the old Baptist style. Wilda (sometimes Ettie) would sing a line that was repeated by two or more vocalists before the group went on to the next line.

What made the group exceptional was its lead singer's voice. "Wilda Dillon sang different than anybody I ever heard," Marvin Harlow recalled, "The closest to her was Dolly Parton." Two records by the Quartet appear to have influenced the Stanley Brothers' version of "Rank Stranger." One was the Quartet's recording of the song, and the other was their arrangement of the gospel song "Rest at the End of the Road." On "End of the Road," Wilda sang the first line of the chorus in a loud, piercing voice that sounded like Ralph singing the first line of the chorus on "Rank Stranger." The first lines have the same syllable count and both versions drop the second verse of Brumley's original.

LIFE IN FLORIDA

The year 1960 was a balancing act for the Stanley Brothers. The brothers and their sidemen, the Clinch Mountain Boys, recorded for two record labels that year. Carter and Ralph had a contract with Starday Records in Nashville, but in September 1958, Carter approached King Records in Cincinnati for a deal. Starday agreed to release the brothers if they recorded 24 more sides for the label--enough material for two albums.

As performers, Carter and Ralph were making the best money of their careers. Two years before, they had struggled to make a living performing in baseball fields, drive-in theaters, and outdoor music parks. To improve their prospects, they needed to leave their native Virginia. Ralph Stanley summed up: "We had to move somewhere because we felt like we was wore out around Bristol."

Offered a spot on the "Suwannee River Jamboree" radio program broadcast on Saturday night from Live Oak, Florida, the brothers took the opportunity. They moved to Live Oak in 1958. Their time on the "Jamboree" was short, but led to finding a sponsor. The Jim Walter Corporation built shell homes that it sold to first-time buyers who planned to finish them. The Stanley Brothers and Clinch Mountain Boys promoted Jim Walter homes by hosting a radio show, performing on television, and playing at Sunday open houses. On their own time, they performed all over the state.

Live Oak is in northern Florida, halfway between Jacksonville and Tallahassee. For two brothers raised in southwestern Virginia, forsaking the mountains of Appalachia for the flatlands of Florida made them feel like outsiders. They joined a church and tried to fit in. Ralph's wife began to work at the local diner. Their sideman, George Shuffler, took a room in Live Oak for several years, renting a house so he could bring his wife and children to Florida. "They didn't like it and went back to the mountains," George recalled. He took up fishing. When the musicians had days off, they hung out at the gas station across from the post office.

Life in Florida was not Carter and Ralph's first experience with alienation. In 1953, as the demand for personal appearances dried up, they followed a path many Appalachian men took, heading north to Michigan to work for the Ford Motor Company. Not knowing anyone else in the Detroit area, the brothers were frequent visitors to the apartment of a family from Dickenson County who moved to Michigan the previous year. According to Ralph, the time in Michigan "was just for a while, to get some regular paychecks to tide us over. It may have been only for a few months, but it felt like a life sentence to me."

At a performance in Live Oak, two young entrepreneurs, Tom Markham and Tom Rose, approached Carter and Ralph about recording at their new studio in Jacksonville. The timing was right. The brothers needed to make good on their agreement with Starday. They had been with Columbia and Mercury, but when record sales did not meet expectations, neither company renewed their contract. Recording for major labels, the brothers worked with experienced producers and engineers in well-equipped facilities. Magnum Studios in Jacksonville was a twenty-by-twenty space in a wooden garage with a concrete slab floor.

At the end of May or in early June 1960, the Stanley Brothers spent three nights in the studio with sidemen Curley Lambert on guitar and mandolin, and Ralph Mayo on fiddle and guitar. Mayo also played with the Webster Brothers in Alabama and brought in bassist Audie Webster for the session. Recording at Magnum, the brothers made do, moving microphones around until they got the sound they wanted. They recorded 15 or 20 songs, choosing 12 to send to Starday. One of the songs was "Rank Stranger."

THE DEFINITIVE RECORDING

The Stanley Brothers dropped the middle verse of Albert Brumley's composition to shorten "Rank Stranger" to a standard length for a 45 rpm record--about three minutes. Format and length were tailored to jukebox play and radio broadcasts. Carter and Ralph were not the first

bluegrass musicians to record the song. In November 1959, mandolin player Jimmy Williams and his partner Marvin "Red" Ellis on guitar recorded "Rank Strangers to Me" and three other songs at Red's studio in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Their version was about three minutes, with a mandolin introduction and an instrumental break between verses. The Stanley Brothers' arrangement is similar.

On the definitive version, Curley Lambert's ascending mandolin riff kicks off the song. Carter sings the first verse in a wistful voice as the group hums in the background. Ralph sings the first line of the chorus at the volume of a shout. *"Everybody I met/seemed to be a rank stranger. . . .* Here the word "rank" means total or complete--perhaps a meaning from Albert Brumley's roots in Oklahoma or Arkansas. Ralph's voice sounds pained, almost angry. It turns the song away from the nostalgic thoughts of a wanderer to an expression of alienation.

Carter sings the remaining three lines of the chorus with an edge. As the group repeats each line, Ralph's voice rises above the others. After Ralph Mayo's crisp guitar break on the turnaround to the second verse, Carter returns to his wistful voice as group members hum behind him. Ralph enters just as loud on the second chorus, adding emphasis to his emotion by holding the last note. Several mandolin flourishes accent the verses.

Every element in this version of "Rank Stranger" is familiar to folks who know the music of the Stanley Brothers, except the one that makes the song unique among the brothers' recordings--the deliberate contrast between Carter's gentle singing of the verses and Ralph's piercing wail on the chorus. Ralph recalled what he and Carter had in mind, "We wanted it to be like somebody surprising you from behind. Like somebody waking you up and everything seems different and you don't know if you're awake or still dreaming."

"Rank Stranger" was a good fit for the Stanley Brothers. Early in their careers, Carter wrote songs that evoked similar feelings of melancholy and loss, notably "The White Dove" and "The Fields Have Turned Brown." In both, the singer's parents passed away. In "The Fields Have Turned Brown," a prodigal son returns home to find the homeplace abandoned: *"But now they're both gone/This letter just told me/For years they've been dead/The fields have turned brown."*

When recorded in 1960, the Stanley Brothers' version of "Rank Stranger" did not seem as special as it does today. The recording was made without a professional engineer or producer. The recordings from the session sounded thin, and recording levels varied. The genius of the brothers was in keeping the arrangement simple--three voices, two guitars, a bass, and mandolin. The instrumentation supported Carter and Ralph's vocals without intruding.

Released as a 45 rpm single and on the album "Sacred Songs of the Hills," the Stanley Brothers' recording of "Rank Stranger" introduced an exceptional song from the Southern gospel tradition into the repertoire of country music and bluegrass. Country royalty covered the song. Carl Story, known as "The Father of Bluegrass Gospel Music," recorded "Rank Stranger" in 1963. Kitty Wells, "Queen of Country Music," covered it in her straightforward style. Nashville traditionalist Ricky Skaggs included "Rank Stranger" on his 1997 tribute to old-time country and bluegrass, "Bluegrass Rules." In the early 1970s, Ricky sang with the Clinch Mountain Boys alongside Ralph Stanley.

Ralph wrote in his autobiography, "I reckon it became the most popular song the Stanley Brothers ever sung. They holler for it everywhere I've ever played . . . I don't care where we've

been in the world, if I mention ‘Rank Stranger’ on the stage, you’re going to hear from the crowd. . . . It’s one of those songs you know will always be sung somewhere, by somebody.”¹

David W. Johnson is the author of “Lonesome Melodies: The Lives and Music of the Stanley Brothers.” He is grateful for the assistance of Pastor Gary Combs, the son of Wilda Dillon Combs; Gary B. Reid, author of “The Music of the Stanley Brothers”; and Marvin Harlow, who knew the Stanley Brothers and Willow Branch Quartet.

*This essay expresses the views of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

¹ Ralph Stanley with Eddie Dean, *Man of Constant Sorrow*, p. 384.