

# “Rank Stranger”—The Stanley Brothers (1960)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*The Stanley Brothers*



*Original label*

Though dozens of artists have recorded the song “Rank Stranger” over the years, the Stanley Brothers’ simple, effective treatment remains its definitive version and it was this recording that was named to the National Recording Registry in 2008.

Though strongly associated with the legendary Stanleys, “Rank Stranger” was not authored by them. Instead, it was the work of prolific gospel songwriter Albert E. Brumley, Sr., the composer of such other seminal gospel classics as “Turn Your Radio On” and “I’ll Fly Away.” Composed in 1942, “Stranger” would not be popularized until the Stanley Brothers committed it to vinyl at the somewhat late date of 1960. Though it is often reported that the brothers recorded the tune in Nashville, various sources indicate otherwise, that it was actually tracked at a remote facility in Jacksonville, Florida, near the end of May or early part of June of 1960. (The Stanleys were, at the time, headlining a live, weekly radio show, the Suwannee River Jamboree, from Live Oak, Florida.) The recording was released later that year on their “Sacred Songs from the Hill” album over the Starday label.

For the song, Carter Stanley took the lead while brother Ralph, with his soaring tenor, took on the echoing refrain in typical Bluegrass call-and-response style. In keeping with Bluegrass tradition, the recording’s primary instruments were a guitar and mandolin. Spare and unamplified, the sparse instrumentation echoes the song’s lonesome (high lonesome?) premise and feel.

Ranking with “Angel Band” and “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow,” “Rank Stranger” is one of the Stanley Brothers’ most significant songs. It retained a primary place in their repertoire until their musical partnership was ended by death in 1966 with the passing of Carter Stanley. Ralph Stanley, however, continues to perform to this day and he often reprises “Stranger” with new accompanists. He enjoyed a major renaissance in 2000 with his participation on the million-selling “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” soundtrack.

Since its recording and popularization, “Rank Stranger” has affected many and its premise and meaning has often been debated.

To some, its wayfaring narrator is a Civil War veteran returning from battle to find his world not only irrevocably changed, but strangely alien as well: “Everybody I met/Seemed to be a rank stranger/No mother or dad/Not a friend could I see.”

To others, the meaning is more spiritual than literal. As Southerners often speak of “losing their religion,” is this the plight of the narrator? His return, as outlined by the lyrics of the song,

therefore denoting not a physical return to a physical place but a spiritual restoration and reckoning, albeit with the lingering question--has the narrator's reconciliation arrived too late?

Of course "Rank Stranger" is also a song about death, the transcendence and an afterlife—"They've all moved away/To a beautiful land by the bright crystal sea/Some beautiful day I'll meet them in heaven/Where no one will be a stranger to me."

With its tale of isolation, aloneness and time passing, this Stanley Brothers musical classic calls to mind a variety of other artistic works including the Biblical book series "Left Behind," any number of "Twilight Zone" or Rod Serling-type stories and such latter day recordings as Bruce Springsteen's haunting "My Father's House" and Gillian Welch's "Orphan Girl." The sonically similar "My Dear Companion" by Jean Ritchie—recorded by Emmylou Harris, Dolly Parton and Linda Ronstadt as part of their "Trio" project—too seems to owe much of its searching pathos to "Stranger's" searing lament.

Since the Stanleys' rendition, "Rank Stranger" has become a standard of the Bluegrass genre widely covered by various Bluegrass ensembles and by such major musicians as Ricky Skaggs. Even Bob Dylan recorded the song to close out his 1988 album, "Down in the Groove."

Under anyone's treatment, "Rank Stranger" has endured as a premiere example of the uniquely American art form that is Bluegrass music, its emotions and messages as resonating today as they were over 50 years ago.

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