

Rolling Stone

[Carnegie Hall Performance on
June 13, 2001]

". . . . And as full of hurt as much of the songs were [at the Carnegie Hall performance of the *O Brother Where Art Thou* soundtrack], it was still a celebration, both of the music and of life. Throughout the evening, the good Dr. Ralph Stanley was held like a trump card. His a capella "O Death" is a thing of wonder and one of the film's failings, not for any reason of offense (the song is sung at a near lynching by a Klansman in *O Brother*), but because it cheats the listener of the visual of Stanley presenting the song. It's the most desperate, haunting of songs; that it is spit like an aural exorcism from such a little man, immaculately dressed and dapper in his seventies is a chilling contrast. The song commanded absolute silence from everyone spare the air conditioners.

A master performer without an expiration date, Stanley broke the tension somewhat with a song he's been performing for more than half a century, the soundtrack's "hit" tune, "Man of Constant Sorrow." Stanley's arrangement is the most popular treatment of the song, penned around 1913 by the blinded and very down on his luck Richard Burnett. While Tyminski adapted the Stanley Brothers arrangement, the interpretations couldn't be more enjoyably different, Tyminski's tenor conveying a world-weary woe and Stanley's whelp a pained, primal jolt.

Lest the evening's program end with a one-two punch of an unwilling death and blinded despair,

all of the evening's performers (including Costello) gathered behind Stanley for the set closing Stanley Brothers gem, "Angel Band," a poignant, fitting conclusion. While this old-time music features a long-running fascination with death, "O Death" and "Angel Band" might best capture its contrast in the human experience. The latter a more peaceful, spiritual "Oh come angel band/Come and around me stand/Oh bear me away on your snow white wings to my immortal home"; the latter wild with desperation and tangible detail "Oh death, won't you spare me over til another year . . . Oh mama come to my bed/Place a cold rag on my head/My eyes are aching and I cannot see/I feel the sheet pulling over me."

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