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The picker who set the beat

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VALDESE - George Shuffler is the first to admit he doesn't move as fast as he used to. But he still gets around his farm pretty well, even though he has to lean on a cane.

"My hips are just about wore out, from going all over for so many years," Shuffler says, showing a visitor around the farm. He's lived on this Burke County spread 180 miles west of Raleigh for all of his 82 years -- except for the decades he spent on the road playing guitar behind the Stanley Brothers, Don Reno and other legends of bluegrass.



Bluegrass pioneer George Shuffler, 82, popularized the crosspicking style of guitar playing. He will receive the North Carolina Heritage Award this week. STAFF PHOTO BY TED RICHARDSON

Shuffler pauses beside an old tractor, which still runs despite its rusted-out appearance. Time was he would use the tractor to cultivate corn and soybeans, but now it mostly hauls hay for his horses. A few of them come running as he approaches, hoping for a snack.

"I got my first horse when I was 10 years old," he says. "Swapped my possum dog for it. I've got 18 horses now, and about all I do is spend money on 'em. Can't get a fair trade for anything anymore, so I'm stuck paying \$12 a bale."

Standing here in the bright autumn sunshine, lamenting a farmer's hardships, Shuffler could be any other old-timer. For long stretches of his life, that's who he has been. A visitor would likely never guess that Shuffler is one of the most influential bluegrass guitarists to ever hoist a pick.

That will be discussed at some length on Thursday in Raleigh, where Shuffler will be feted with a North Carolina Heritage Award.

He'll attend the ceremony, and he'll probably enjoy it. But like another famous Tar Heel guitarist, Doc Watson, Shuffler isn't entirely comfortable with people making a fuss. It's fitting that he made his name as an accompanist, playing in the background.

"I was told that you have to brag on yourself to get farther up the ladder," Shuffler says, moving to the porch of his modest house. "If that's what it takes, I don't want it."

Inside, Shuffler settles into an easy chair in his den, which has served as a recording studio in the past. Bryan Sutton, a rising young hotshot guitarist, came here a few years back to record "The Nine Pound Hammer" with Shuffler for Sutton's 2006 album "Not Too Far From the Tree: A Collection of Guitar Duets With Heroes & Friends," which also features Watson, Ricky Skaggs and Earl Scruggs.

It's not too hard to persuade Shuffler to pull out his guitar and show off a little. Does he play much anymore?

"Oh, no more than I have to," he deadpans, a twinkle in his eye.

But he still plays more than passably, in a homegrown rhythmic style somewhere between country blues and sea chanteys.

"When I was 12," Shuffler says, pausing to expel some tobacco juice into a cup, "the old fellow across the creek, Jack Smith, showed me how to do three chords -- G, C and D, that might have been all he knew. I took it from there."

He noodles around a bit, falling into the classic crosspicking pattern. It's a syncopated technique that is to bluegrass guitar what the shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits Bo Diddley beat is to rock 'n' roll -- an element so essential, you hardly think of it as something a person still living could have originated.

"I was barefoot, walking home with my dad afterward and playing my old guitar," he continues. "I'd stop and play those three chords, G, C and D, because I was afraid I'd forget them. I'd do that, then run to catch up with my dad, stop and play some more. That evening, Mama was humming 'Birmingham Jail' and I seconded on guitar. She got so hoarse she couldn't talk."

Shuffler plays a bit more, but not much. Five decades after he backed up the Stanley Brothers on "The Flood of '57," his fingers don't move as fast as they used to, either.

"Ah, that's enough o' that [expletive]," he says with a laugh and puts the guitar away.

Down at the mill

George Shuffler was born in 1925, the second-oldest of nine children, all of them still alive. Long living runs in the family -- his mother and father lived until 93 and 99, respectively -- as does church-singing. After Shuffler left bluegrass, he and his family turned to gospel. He played guitar, his two daughters sang, a son played bass and a nephew played drums.

But back before his music career, Shuffler grew up working tough manual-labor jobs around Valdese. The worst was in a textile mill where he made \$30 a week, less than \$1 an hour working six days a week. He absolutely hated his boss.

"During the war, when there were shortages, they'd pay time and a half if you did a second shift," he remembers. "So some days, I'd work 16 hours straight through. The owner was a short fellow, white burr head, and I just wanted to knock the snot out of him. I was high-tempered and strong as a young bull, just meaner 'n a snake. Something'd get my back up and I'd get all to cussing and leave. 'One day,' he said, 'there will come a time when I'll fire you.'"

That day came, Shuffler recalls, when World War II ended. So he went to work at the local bakery for "Mr. Jenkins," who was a kinder sort. But that was no more satisfying than working at the mill. So when musical opportunity presented itself, Shuffler jumped on it.

One night, he was at a show in Granite Falls to watch the Bailey Brothers, Danny and Charlie, one of the top hillbilly acts of the time. Their backup band didn't show up, so Shuffler volunteered to fill in on bass.

He acquitted himself well enough for the Bailey Brothers to ask him back the next night, and the night after that. After a week, they asked if he wanted to come to Nashville to play with them on the Grand Ole Opry radio show.

"It was \$60 a week," Shuffler says, "and I was making \$30 at the bakery. So I could send more home than my dad was making at the mill. I asked my dad what to do and he asked me if this was what I wanted. 'Yeah,' I said, 'it's the only thing I've ever wanted to do.' 'OK, then, be careful and keep in contact.' We pulled into Nashville at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and were onstage that night, playing in front of 3,000 people and on WSM. I was scared to death, knew my mom and dad would be listening. But we got an encore. I was ready to pick all night."

Shuffler spent the next few years playing where he could, including a preacher's tent and Hickory radio station WHKY -- where he met his wife, Sue. They made a date to meet at his next show, but he didn't recognize her because she'd cut her hair.

"He told me he didn't like it," she says now. "I told him I did not care."

It was love at first sight. They've been married 56 years.

Play all day and night

While Shuffler is primarily known for his guitar-playing, some people insist his best instrument is actually bass. Joe Wilson, chairman of the national council for the traditional arts, calls him "one of the best bass players ever." Jim Watson of the Red Clay Ramblers first saw Shuffler playing bass with Ralph Stanley in the late 1960s and was similarly impressed.

"I was just entranced by his playing, it was so good," Watson remembers. "He wasn't just doing this basic thump-thump thing, he was a real accompanist playing a lot of notes without getting in the way of the rest of the music. He used to be legendary for his stamina. He could go all day and all night long playing music."

Shuffler liked to keep as close to home as possible, which is one reason why he spent two decades with the Stanley Brothers, Carter and Ralph. They were based in Bristol, Va., just a few hours drive from Valdese, so the Shuffler family didn't have to move to Nashville.

The other reason Shuffler stayed with the Stanleys for so long was his versatility. He was the Stanley Brothers' George Harrison figure, a jack-of-all-trades sideman who could play bass, guitar and even a little mandolin. Other players came and went during the 1950s and '60s, but Shuffler was a constant presence through good times and bad.

Things were never plush, even in the good times. They played a lot of country schools, often in buildings with no electricity -- just torches, lamps and a potbelly stove.

When there was electricity, the sound system consisted of a couple of 12-inch speakers, a microphone and a small amplifier that took a minute to warm up enough to use after it was plugged in. All of it had to fit in the back of a car. On the road, they slept three to a room in cheap flophouses with a bathroom down the hall (and a sink in the room for "late-night minor relief").

At times, they struggled to survive, especially after rock 'n' roll exploded with Elvis Presley in the mid-1950s. One winter, things were so dire that Ralph Stanley sold off his herd of cattle to keep the band together.

A knack for trading

There were times Shuffler quit the band, only to be lured back with a salary increase of \$10 or \$15 per week. During those interludes, he came home and traded livestock for a living.

"I was pretty fair at that because I'd grown up around it," Shuffler says. "I could look a horse in the mouth, tell its age, how hard it'd been worked. Livestock's been a love my whole life. We'd be on the road and Carter would say, 'I just caught George looking at cattle trucks. Guess he'll be going home again soon.' I head that more than once and I'd always say, 'Nah, I don't know what you're talking about.' But sure enough, a week or two later, it would happen."

During some of those lean periods, the Stanley Brothers were just a trio of the two brothers and Shuffler, trying to produce a full-band sound on the cheap. That led to Shuffler's most enduring contribution to bluegrass, crosspicking, a syncopated style of playing that enabled him to produce rhythmic and melodic elements simultaneously.

"We were doing these old, slow, drawn-out mournful songs," Shuffler recalls. "I tried Merle Travis-style guitar and Mother Maybelle Carter-style guitar, but single-string leads just were not getting it. So I tried that -- two notes down, one up, crossing over strings. At first, Carter did not like it. 'Is that all you do?' he asked. 'It's all I want to do,' I said. And after it started selling, I could not do it enough to satisfy him."

Shuffler may not have been the first to play guitar in this style, described by critic/author David Gates as a "wrist-twisting approximation of the three-finger banjo style." But just like Bo Diddley and the backbeat that bears his name, there is little dispute over who popularized crosspicking.

One result of Shuffler's crosspicking was to elevate guitar to a lead instrument in bluegrass. Before, guitarists mostly strummed behind fiddle and banjo solos. After Shuffler, bluegrass guitarists played solos, too.

"There's not a bluegrass guitar player out there who hasn't had some of George's influence on his playing," says Laura Boosinger, an Asheville banjo player who nominated Shuffler for his Heritage Award. "I remember Tony Rice saying onstage at a festival once, 'If not for George, none of us would be doing what we're doing.' He invented a whole style of guitar playing people have been emulating for 50 years, which is pretty dadgum impressive."

Making up

Today, Ralph Stanley is an icon almost on a par with Johnny Cash -- another generation knows him as that spooky-voiced old guy who sang "O Death" in the 2000 movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" But during the Stanley Brothers' run, he was very much in the shadow of his brother Carter, who died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1966 after years of alcoholism. He was only 41.

"And now here I am, twice that old," Shuffler says. "I rode with Carter the last mile of his life, in the ambulance. He put the mileage on himself, but man, could he sing. He was 25 or 30 years ahead of his time, he really was. After Carter died, I stayed with Ralph about another year, and I just did not think he'd ever get off the ground. He was playing skull orchards and dives, just trying to exist. But he stayed true to the old-time style, because it was all he knew. Took awhile, but it paid off."

Shuffler's parting with Ralph was ugly. It came in Ohio, after an argument got out of hand.

"There was some fallout over my driving, him complaining about me hitting a few bumps," Shuffler says. "One word brought on another and I got mad enough to quit. I told him that night, 'I'm going home, and don't you ever call me again!' Don Reno asked if I wanted a job, so I took it and that was that."

Shuffler and Stanley reconciled years ago, and he's now a regular guest at Stanley's annual Hills of Home Bluegrass Festival. By then, Shuffler was well into his gospel career with his family. Nowadays, about the only place he still performs regularly is singing in the choir Sunday mornings at the Lake View Baptist Church in Valdese.

But he'll still do the occasional guest spot at a festival. Most recently, he was at the International Bluegrass Music Awards (IBMA) convention in Nashville, where he was hailed far and wide as an important originator.

"I get more compliments in Nashville than ever before," he says. "The big stars I've met have all been nice and humble, at least to my face. Don't know what they might be saying behind my back, but to my face they're very nice."

All of which adds up to a nice balance. As much as he runs himself down, one suspects Shuffler gets more of a kick out of all this than he lets on.

"He mostly seems content to just hang out on his farm, do a little horse-trading," says Wayne Martin of the N.C. Arts Council, which will present Shuffler with his Heritage Award. "He's always been pretty low-key, either talking or playing. His guitar-playing isn't flashy, which is part of who he is. It's what made him a great accompanist of that era.

"But on the other hand, he still takes the trouble to go to things like the IBMA. That tells me that even though he's pretty matter of fact about everything, part of him still finds some satisfaction that he's being recognized for his contributions."

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