

Ronald Dean Rice- Audiophile, Musician & Engineer

Anyone who thought there were only three Rice Brothers is encouraged to study bluegrass history. Ron Rice grew up playing acoustic bass and performing with his three brothers, Larry, Tony and Wyatt. He's the third youngest of the four and is now retired from a long career in power generation. While proud of the family's musical heritage and impact, Rice is a highly talented, yet modest man who has created his own path. Currently living with his wife Terry in Falls Church, VA, his story is an important piece of bluegrass music history.

Rice was born in Lynwood, California on February 22, 1955 to Herbert H. and Dorothy L. Rice, with his namesakes being Reagan and Martin. The Rice family resided in the suburbs of Los Angeles until the summer of '65 then moved considerably along the east coast, as Dad Herb was in construction.

Rice started playing the bass at age six with his brothers Larry playing mandolin, Tony playing guitar and Andy Evans playing banjo. This band was known as the *Haphazards*. Rice notes, "We played a lot of local bluegrass gigs around the Los Angeles area, amusement parks, auditoriums, coffee houses and pizza parlors. Other shows we played in the early sixties were more folk related, back in the Hootenanny days. I remember being back stage with and playing on the same bill as Peter, Paul and Mary, the Kingston Trio, and the Stoneman Family just to mention a few."

Rounder Records-The Rice Brothers 1 (1989) and The Rice Brothers 2 (1994)

Rice recalls that the exact origin of the first Rice Brothers project remains something of a mystery. "I'm thinking it's probably those fine folks up at Rounder is what got the Rice Brothers project in the making." At some point Rounder asked the question "will there ever be a Rice Brothers recording?" That question was brought to the attention of the brothers and Tony's long time recording engineer Bill Wolf. After some serious discussion we decided it was something "we could probably do." That answered Rounder's question and Rice Brothers 1 was assigned Rounder Records code 0256. "Shortly after that we were in studio A, along with a group of great

musicians, at Bias Studios in Springfield, VA. We all managed to come up with a decent song selection that seemed to work and Wolf produced, recorded and mixed the project as well as Rice Brothers 2.”

As for live performances Rice recalls, “We did maybe a total of a half dozen or so performances as The Rice Brothers; WAMU’s annual concert, which was the first time we were all together on stage as a unit, a couple of east and west coast bluegrass festivals and the last two times all of us performed together was at the benefit for Larry (Locals and Legends for Larry) and another benefit for the homeless shelter, in Tallahassee, FL.” Other performances consist of old home recordings from numerous locations over a sixty-year timeframe, mainly Larry’s music room in Florida and Dad’s music room in California.

Becoming an Audiophile

Rice’s journey to becoming an audiophile goes way back. Rice remembers, “Dad took us into a studio in Burbank and we recorded two songs; *Little Maggie* and an instrumental. I had never been exposed to a professional recording environment before. When the engineer invited us for a listen in the control room I got real involved since the recording was an accurate reproduction of the live music we had just played. The whole purpose is to have the loudspeakers as accurate as the live performance. At age six hearing the *Golden State Boys* rehearsals was amazing. There is a huge difference listening to live acoustic music up close versus hearing the music recorded and played back through a loudspeaker. If you listen to old Flatt and Scruggs recordings live over radio from the ‘40s just imagine if you were there watching them perform, versus listening to a recording.” Harken back to 1959, when Herb Rice’s earliest recordings were with one microphone. Louise Rice, matriarch, saw her relatives the Poindexters, move to California and the *Golden State Boys* were up and running. Herb Rice and Floyd Poindexter did some early recordings on an old Bell and Howell tape recorder. The tapes were a form of communication between west and east coast. Rice lets us know that, “Long distance calls were unheard of in those days. After Dad’s passing I wound up with those old recordings. These recordings are special. I sang *Sawing on the Strings* Tony sang *The Battle of New Orleans* and Larry was singing and playing mainly country songs on a Stella guitar. There were hymns Mom and Dad sang with Dad on the guitar and duets with Uncle Floyd. After that there weren’t many recordings until 1972 when Wyatt got his first guitar from a pawn shop. Shortly after that,

Dad bought us a stereo reel to reel tape recorder. There were many recordings from that time on that machine, mainly the progression of Wyatt learning to play guitar.

Further, Rice recalls, “Larry took after Dad, and was a prolific recorder himself. There were often jams at Larry’s and many friends would stop by to play, and Larry recorded all the sessions. After Larry died, Linda Rice, Larry’s wife, boxed up all the tapes from the music room, gave them to Wyatt for delivery to me. I bought a multi-track tape machine, restored and calibrated it and then transferred those tapes to a high-resolution digital format. There’s still a lot of tapes to be gone through, in addition to the family recordings. There’s some great material on there; Tony singing and playing, and brother duets, some of all four of us. Wyatt and I are working on a project called “*The Music Room*,” which is named after Larry’s room in Crystal River.”

Jake Stargel, one of the world’s premier acoustic guitarists and a top-notch recording engineer to boot, recently worked with Rice, on the recording project, “*Cigars and Guitars*.” Stargel sent Rice the final mixes, and when hearing the mastered project, his reaction was, “This is the best mastering I’ve heard. I want him to do all my projects. I love what he does with acoustic instruments. He’s great.”

Day Job and Mastering Career

Rice’s day gig for close to thirty years was working at a power generation facility located outside the Washington DC area on the Potomac River. “In the mid ‘90s a couple of friends of mine had worked for one of those infomercial record labels that put together box sets. They had an idea called “Roots of Rhythm,” designed to capture blues, soul, and R&B. The span was from the ‘20s to the ‘90s. They had a tremendous library of material to put together such a project and since I was one of the few at the time that had a CD-R they approached me to put their project together for presentation. That’s what got me started in the business of mastering audio.”

Beginning in the 40’s and carried into the 50’s and 60’s, it became evident that if volume levels were raised, record sales would increase. Rice believes that with increased volume there may be audible distortion, and sometimes a sacrifice of dynamics. Thus, he is careful to try and have his projects at the optimal level, with compression which results in as true a recording as

possible, and competitive within genres. Rice's advice to sound engineers and audiophiles alike is to, "Have a good listening system in your home, have a huge music collection and keep an open mind about all genres of music."

Over the last several years, Rice has mastered projects for the ever so popular North Carolina group, *A Deeper Shade of Blue* "Steam," Lee Kotick "Cigars and Guitars," Ronnie Bowman "It's Getting Better All the Time," two of The Steep Canyon Rangers "Lovin' Pretty Women," and "Deep in the Shade," and Junior Sisk and Ramblers Choice "Blue Side of the Blueridge." Rice has worked with Brother Wyatt and Dan Menzone on several of the Rice & Menzone Alliance projects as well as countless numbers of compilation discs for those infomercial labels.

Ron's Bass

In 1987, Wyatt, Larry and Ron played a gig at Clearwater Music Hall in Clearwater, Fl. At the show was John Milton, a fellow pipefitter, of the same profession as Ron and Dad. Milton lived in Floral City and was a friend of the Rice family. Rice informs us that, "A friend of Milton's, Bob Bragg had several acoustic basses and I picked one out. The 7/8 hand-carved German bass was built in Berlin, in the 1920s. Several earlier repairs were made and then more done by Bob Bragg. It just sounds like an acoustic bass with great tone, and it is set up well and easy to play."

Family and Friends

Tony Rice, older brother and iconic guitarist, has a lot of love for his younger brother. There's an unspoken bond between all the brothers. Tony notes that Ron was in awe of sound engineering at an early age, as well as being an excellent bassist. Of his younger brother, Rice tells us, "Anyone who listens to *Rice Brothers 1* (1989) and *Rice Brothers 2*, (1994) (Rounder Records) hears that Ron's music speaks for itself. Whatever he does, he does it to perfection. His place was to be a sound engineer rather than a road musician. I love him with all my heart and always will."

Wyatt Rice, guitar instructor at East Tennessee State University, long standing member of the Tony Rice Unit, and Ron's younger brother by ten years, shares his memories and perceptions of his brother. Growing up they shared a bedroom in Parish, FL, and as long as Wyatt remembers Ron has

always been a hi-fi fanatic. Of his brother, Wyatt says, “Ronnie is a very giving person, as are all my brothers. He always got the latest equipment and I learned about engineering and mastering by watching him. He’s an audiophile. When Dad bought me my first guitar, Ronnie was at home when I learned to play. Ronnie and Dad used to tape my playing.” Wyatt remembers his brother Ron playing bass with his uncles (Poindexters) at the feed store in Parrish and Ron was in the band. Wyatt remembers, “We always did stuff with Uncles Leon, and Walter, and there was a lot of music.” Wyatt also recalls that in 1999, he was just learning about computers and distinctly remembers Ron having one and using it to edit music. Wyatt wanted to buy one and Ron invited him up to Washington, DC, and gave him a great rig and showed him how to use it. Wyatt quips, “I asked him how you record on it.” Wyatt also recalls a Christmas gift from Ron, a stereo set they installed in their bedroom. The two brothers often fished together and Ron facilitated a job for Wyatt and they worked at the same Tampa Bay Shipyard. The brothers traveled and worked together for two years. When queried about Ron’s bass and playing, Wyatt notes, “Ronnie is my favorite bass player. The two Rice Brothers CDs were fun for all of us. I like the tone Ronnie gets from his bass and his timing is impeccable. He has a very gifted ear for anything music. Remember he’s an audiophile.”

Frank Poindexter, Uncle to the Rice Brothers, and Dobro player for *A Deeper Shade of Blue*, has known nephew Ron since he was born. Poindexter is proud of all his Rice Brother nephews, and remarks that Ron’s timing talent was unquestionable, and that early out in California, playing with their band the *Haphazards*, he was born to be a bass player. Poindexter shared his observation that the first time Ron went into a recording studio, he was more amazed of the equipment and engineering than he was of playing the music. That interest put him on the path of becoming an incredible sound specialist, engineer, editor, and masterer. About his nephew, Poindexter indicates, “He has the ear and the knowledge to make it sound as perfect as it could sound. Ron was smart with his decision to be loyal to his daytime career and fitting in his playing and engineering work.” Poindexter congratulates Rice on his retirement from the power industry and can’t wait to fish and play golf together.

Mark Johnson, of Clawgrass Banjo fame, has been a long time Rice family friend and eagerly shares insights into Rice and their friendship. When Johnson was working at the Crystal River Nuclear Power Plant back in

1981, as a radiation safety officer, Ron and his Dad, Herb, were also working there as pipefitters, and it was brother Larry, who introduced him to Ron . When the original “*Clawgrass*” project was being recorded, Rice was a driving factor in both performing and production. Johnson recalls, “All four Rice Brothers were making musical magic, as well as honing their skills at photography. Rice took the photo near Johnson’s house that appears on the Tony Rice Rounder Records project, “*Backwaters.*” Ron is an avid salt and freshwater fisherman, and both he and Mark would spend many hours together fishing back in those days especially in the old phosphate pits near their homes. Johnson says, “Time is catching up with the both of us and retirement from our day jobs is upon us. I think more music and fishing is in our futures! HA!”

Pam Davis, Larry Rice’s daughter, carries fond memories and bestows accolades on her Uncle Ron Rice. Davis cherishes her relationship with her Uncle Ron and offers her insights into him. “He was close to my Dad and when I miss him, I remember Uncle Ron telling me to look in the mirror because I look just like Dad. Ron is a giving man and he reminds me of my Dad. He gives me great advice when needed. He’s funny and has a great sense of humor.”

For more information about Ron Rice, refer to the book, “Still Inside, The Tony Rice Story,” by Tim Stafford and Caroline Wright, Word of Mouth Press, copyright 2010.

Lee Kotick, of Tallahassee, FL., is a retired educational consultant for programs for students with disabilities. He played guitar in Max Tillman and Bottom Dollar Boys and the Larry Rice Bands.