

# Tony Rice, Guitar Hero

*Sandra Beasley*

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One morning last September, the red carpet was laid in Raleigh, N.C., for the 2013 International Bluegrass Music Awards, which had moved there from Nashville to escape country music's shadow. The city's bronze statue of Sir Walter Raleigh was newly adorned with a banjo. A few miles from the convention center, I was on my phone, trying to find out if Tony Rice, the legendary flatpick guitarist, would show up for his induction into the Bluegrass Hall of Fame. "Tony has canceled a lot of dates over the last decade,"

his longtime agent, Keith Case, had told me, "but nobody plays like him, either." Rice was still asleep at his home in Reidsville, 85 miles away. Pamela, his wife of almost 25 years, was debating whether to

give him a B-12 shot to provide strength for the drive.

Rice's warm, slightly nasal baritone has been silenced for nearly two decades by muscle-tension dysphonia, a disorder that contracts muscles around the vocal cords, interrupting speech and strangling pitch. Rice attributes the throat spasms partly to the strain of singing for years above his natural range — though he does not deny that the stress of life on the road has played its part as well. The last time he recalls singing in public was the 1994 Gettysburg Bluegrass Festival. "Guys, this is it," he said midset. "I have to shut it down." His most recent recorded vocal is an elegant but hoarse 1999 cover of Tom Waits's "Pony."

Fans still drive hundreds of miles, though, on the chance of hearing him lead his band through "Blue Railroad Train" on his Martin D-28 guitar. Though tendinitis and arthritis have limited his touch, his long sets are a transcendental experience for those who treat bluegrass like a religion.

"His influence on the bluegrass guitarist is megalithic and permanent," says the banjoist Béla Fleck. When the famed fiddler and singer Alison Krauss, whom Rice first invited onstage when she was a teenager (she later dedicated a tour to his musical catalog), spoke to me about him, her voice quavered. "There's no way it can ever go back to what it was before him."

Bluegrass and its Appalachian cultural roots hold a peculiar place in America's heart: enjoyed, but not always respected. (Even Krauss owes her popularity in part to crossover efforts, like her Grammy-winning collaboration with Robert Plant.) People joke, "What's the difference between a violin and a fiddle?" The answer: "No one cares if you spill beer on a fiddle."

Yet bluegrass is a demanding and improvisational art, and Rice is one of its most respected practitioners. Part of his appeal is his visible intellect onstage, but as his mind stays quick, Rice's body has been failing him. His sinuses are inflamed, his frame is whittled by stress, his sleep is inconsistent. In the past decade, Rice, now 62, has put 210,000 miles on his Mustang SVT Cobra for his music, and he's feeling it. A lifelong perfectionist, he wanted to give the I.B.M.A. the performance his community deserved. They just wanted him there.

This was not the first time I'd been among the waiting. In June 2012, I drove to Cashiers, N.C., to hear him headline the Cashiers Mountain Music Festival. But he didn't show up. As I paced between pine trees, he messaged: "The reasons are too much to text. Can we possibly converse later this evening? TR."

Fifty yards away, two coltish teenage girls in spaghetti-strap dresses and cowboy boots sang in clear, bell-like tones alongside a local band. The mostly middle-aged crowd had camped out for the day under tented shade, snacking on boiled peanuts and barbecue. Many had come specifically to hear Rice, some carrying his 2010 biography, "Still Inside: The Tony Rice Story."

Rice's hesitation to cancel until the last minute is framed by both his deep desire to play and a

reluctance to let down his fans. He also knows that as long as his band shows up in good faith, they'll be paid. He takes his responsibility for their finances seriously, sometimes covering a guest musician's cut out of his own pocket — even as he finds himself unable to afford a break from the road.

At Cashiers, the technical skill of the Tony Rice Unit, led by his younger brother Wyatt on guitar, was dazzling but lacked the power Rice gets from his D-28. When I asked Wyatt how they balanced their sound without Tony, he said, “We didn't, really.” An accomplished rhythm guitarist and recording engineer, Wyatt was only 8 when Tony invited him onstage to play; at age 17, he moved from the family home in Florida to California, to record on Tony's “Backwaters” album, and they've often toured together since. “We show up an hour before the show starts,” Wyatt said. “The ‘rehearsal’ part will be onstage.”

A few weeks later, I drove to Reidsville, N.C., and checked into a Days Inn room, where Rice had agreed to meet me for an interview. Rice showed up at 9:30 p.m., his idea of afternoon. (He rarely wakes before 2 p.m.) He had a focused gaze, a firm handshake and a long ponytail of thinning brown hair.

“I know the word is out there that there is something wrong with Tony Rice,” he said. “Maybe I'm a little self-conscious about it. That happens. That's life. I look at myself and I say: ‘You know, I'm 61 years old. I have a right to look a little bit on the ragged-out side.’ ”

I worried that the rattle of the air conditioner would drown out his raspy voice. He took the bottle of water I offered, as well as an ashtray. He has been smoking since age 15, sober since age 49. “I got tired of being drunk,” he said, “and tired of being hung over.”

Rice lives in Reidsville with Pamela, his third wife and a childhood family friend, and a menagerie of dogs and birds, not far from his first home in Caswell County, N.C. His dad, Herbert Hoover Rice, was an amateur musician and expert welder. His work took the family to California, where he co-founded the Golden State Boys, in which his oldest son, Larry, played mandolin. Larry helped get Tony hired at age 20 by the banjo great J. D. Crowe to play with the New South at the Holiday Inn in Lexington, Ky. The gig was a destination for bluegrass fans, fabled among musicians for its rigorous schedule: five nights a week, four sets a night.

Just as the pace was exhausting him, Rice heard a recording by David Grisman, a mandolinist from Greenwich Village. Grisman's progressive sound lured Rice to San Francisco. “The music laid out in front of me was like nothing I'd ever seen,” Rice said. “At first I wasn't even sure I could learn it. The only thing that saved me was that I always loved the sound of acoustic, small-group, modern jazz.”

Rice co-founded the David Grisman Quintet in 1975, and they toured Japan. But when Grisman suggested the Quintet leave America to tour with the French violinist Stéphane Grappelli, Rice balked. Grisman lined up a replacement. “Musically, my heart was not in it,” Rice said. He had his own band

in mind, as well as “The Bluegrass Album,” a 1980 project that has spawned six volumes.

Ninety minutes into our conversation in Reidsville, Rice’s voice began to fail. To give it a rest, I asked to see the “Antique,” his D-28 herringbone guitar, a prewar model sometimes referred to by aficionados as the Holy Grail. As he lifted it, rattlesnake tails bounced around inside. It’s tradition to add them, whether for the subtle sound or, as some say, to keep mice from nesting there.

“I don’t think I can play it right now,” he said. “I picked it up a few days ago, and my hands hurt so bad that I just put it back in the case. It is still mind-blowing to me that the first time I played it was 52 years ago.” Rice was thinking of California, where he made his live-broadcast radio debut at age 9. The show also featured Clarence White, the D-28’s owner at the time, who let the boy play the distinctive guitar with an enlarged sound hole and an extended finger board.

Built in 1935, the guitar’s “D” is a nod to dreadnought battleships, denoting an oversize body squared off for a bass-heavy tone. White dinged the D-28, parked cigarettes on it and once ran it over with his station wagon. White eventually turned to an electrified sound, playing with the Byrds and Gram Parsons. By that time, though, he had popularized the guitar as a lead instrument in bluegrass, and Rice had avidly studied him during dozens of performances on the festival circuit. After White’s death in 1973 at age 29 (he was struck by a drunken driver while loading equipment after a gig), Rice wondered what happened to the guitar. He eventually learned that White had sold it to a friend, Joe Miller, whose father owned liquor stores in Pasadena. Rice looked up “Miller’s Liquors” and found Joe Miller, and in March 1975 flew from Kentucky to LAX with \$550 in cash. Though the strings were green, that sound hole was unmistakable. The D-28 had been lying under Miller’s bed.

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In Rice’s hands, the guitar took on mythical properties, revered for its vitality of sound. The Santa Cruz Guitar Company’s “Tony Rice” line is influenced by its design. Then the guitar was almost lost again, in 1993. When a tropical storm took Rice’s home in Crystal River, Fla., Rice had to quickly move his dog to high ground, leaving his beloved guitar in peril. He gave a young fisherman \$20, asking him to rescue “a big blue case” from the house. The boy brought back the priceless instrument, waterlogged but salvageable.

At the Days Inn, Rice perched on the bed’s edge, leg crossed to cradle his guitar, and played part of “Barbara Allen.” The sound was agile, the pick work economical. He moved on to “Shady Grove” but stopped after only a verse, the pain becoming too much. “That was Garcia’s favorite tune.”

“I certainly hope to have things in my life more stable again,” he said over one last cigarette, as we talked about the canceled gigs and a series of family losses, including the 2011 death of Pamela’s son.

“Where I can start to concentrate on being on the road, with my friends and my musicians, playing good music. It’s a work in progress.” He exhaled. “It just happens to be going a hell of a lot more slower than I wish it would.”

Soon after our conversation, I bought tickets to hear the Tony Rice Unit at the Birchmere, in Virginia — one of the stages where Rice brought up Alison Krauss to play with his band — but the show was canceled, as was every remaining one that year. I called Keith Case to ask what was going on. He hadn’t heard from his client, but that wasn’t a surprise. Rice isn’t much of a phone man.

When the 2013 I.B.M.A. nominations were announced last August, Rice was not only a Hall of Fame inductee; he was once again a finalist for Guitar Player of the Year, which he has been every year since the category was created in 1990. He received the nomination despite not having released an album or mounted a tour.

In fact, Rice had performed only once that year, at a reunion of the Bluegrass Album Band on a February night in Asheville, N.C. I was among the 800-person crowd who watched as Josh Williams, there at Rice’s invitation, took the stage, followed by the band’s original 1980 recording lineup. Born in 1980, Williams has already won I.B.M.A.’s Guitar Player of the Year three times. (Rice has won it six.) Rice walked onstage last, handsome but hollow-cheeked. In the back, hidden among a tangle of equipment, was a wheelchair in case he felt too weak to stand.

The band played like old friends who hadn’t seen one another in a while. Rice occasionally corrected a key. One of the closers was “Freeborn Man,” a song that doesn’t appear on any volume of “The Bluegrass Album” but is a signature tune for Rice. Josh Williams stepped up to handle the vocals for him.

Image





Credit...Jeremy M. Lange for The New York Times





“Well, I was born down in the Southland,” Williams belted. Rice shook his head as if a challenge had been issued between generations. He played a skitter of notes, culminating in a pregnant pause. Williams replied in chorus, “Twenty-some years ago . . .,” and Rice resumed picking. Despite a fumbled note here and there, it was probably the longest he had extended the riff since 1983, on the Bluegrass Album Band’s original tour. At one point, after seeming to finish, Rice wagged a finger and kept going. Williams finally ended his phrase, “I ran away for the first time,” and the rest of the band launched into four minutes of dense, rich music, delighting the crowd.

After the show, I met Pamela Rice backstage. “Come on,” she said, taking my hand and leading me through a maze of hallways to reach their suite. There we found her husband zipping an armful of spare clothes into a leather garment bag. After hours of deliberation whether to come at all, he’d grabbed every tie he owned in his haste to arrive. He was frustrated with his performance, replaying every missed cue, barely noticing as his cigarette dropped ash onto the bedspread. Friends filled the hotel room, talking softly, but there would be no after-hours jam session. The couple left before dawn, stopping only to eat at Denny’s.

Rice missed the next Bluegrass Album Band show, and the one after that. When I later asked Todd Phillips, a bandmate who has known Rice since their days of playing with Grisman in California, about it, he shrugged. That’s Tony.

Halfway through the I.B.M.A. show, Rice’s Hall of Fame induction loomed on the program. The reclusive honoree had not walked the red carpet. Slipping backstage to look for him, I found Pamela first; turning a corner, I saw Rice, in a narrow hallway, tuning the D-28. He smiled a little, embarrassed. “There’s 200 people I owe apologies to,” he told me. Musicians were coming by, one after another, to pay respects. When Rice’s former recording partner Peter Rowan saw him, they embraced. Rowan pressed his hands up and down Rice’s back, making sure he was real.



Rice's arm hurt worse than ever. "Wyatt's going to have to kick off 'Old Train'; there's only a little I can do," he warned a bandmate. A few feet away, his brother knelt on the floor tuning his guitar. Soon only a curtain separated Rice from an audience of bluegrass musicians realizing that, despite rumors of ill health (cancer being the most persistent, though unfounded), Rice was in the house. As Rowan and Sam Bush, a mandolinist, gave an elaborate introduction, Rice squared his shoulders. He tucked his aching left hand into his pocket before stepping into the light.

Rice seemed not to notice the award plaque on an easel beside the lectern. In a hoarse whisper, he delivered thank-yous and a message for someone not present: Alison Krauss. She had withdrawn from scheduled appearances with a reported diagnosis of dysphonia (since treated), and Rice's concern was evident.

"If my heavenly father is willing right now, I might be able to show you a little bit of what I've been working on," he said. "This is not easy; takes some brainpower, getting into this. So bear with me a second." He paused. "I want to be able to tell Alison that now," Rice said, pausing between each word, "I . . . am . . . speaking . . . in my real voice."

His suddenly amber, mellifluous tone was achingly familiar to anyone who listened to his records from the '70s and '80s. "One day again, maybe I'll be able to do what I have missed, at times, for 19 years, which is to express myself poetically through music," he said to the stunned audience.

"It's our duty to allow bluegrass music to grow and flourish," he said, "and at the same time, retain the most important part of it — that is, the essence of the sound." The sentiment might have rung hollow elsewhere, but this audience hung onto every word. "I love you all," he said. Backstage, several men brushed away tears.

He grabbed the D-28 from Nancy Cardwell, the I.B.M.A. executive director, who had hovered by his side for most of the night. The lineup from "Manzanita," his breakthrough album from 1979, assembled onstage. Bush was grinning, bouncing on his toes as he played. Tony stood at the end, turned slightly away from the others, getting through their scheduled song with an occasional grimace. As the ceremony wound down out front, Rice circulated among friends.

"Did you hear me talking?" he asked Doyle Lawson, who played mandolin for the Bluegrass Album Band. "The more I do it, the less it hurts, but the problem has always been in the brain."

Lawson offered to be on the lookout for songs, promising, "I'll sing tenor."

"I love you," Rice said. He never fails to close a conversation with those words.

Rice's appearance so moved the bluegrass community that they started a collection to help cover the income he loses from being unable to tour. He is pursuing treatment for a mass in his elbow blocking a nerve, hoping to improve control of his right thumb and index finger. Rice remains noticeably

skinny, though as Pamela said to me, “He’s like his granddaddy, tall and thin, and his granddaddy lived until he was 90, chain-smoking.”

Rice believes his dysphonia can be defeated. His doctor tells him the voice box is uninjured, though trapped. Freedom comes with relearning muscle postures lost for 20 years. He starts each day by humming whatever tune comes into his head, because “the only way you can hum is in your natural voice.” Once he has summoned his voice, he uses it for his daily prayer. Eventually he hopes to sing again in his instinctive baritone.

“It’s getting a little easier every day,” he told me, “if I think about it” — he focused and his tone shifted, resonated — “yeah, if I think about it, I can do it.” But it’s tiring work. When it gets to be too much, he takes his pick to the strings of the D-28, the one instrument that has never let him down.

“Shady Grove”: Jerry Garcia, vocal and guitar; David Grisman, mandolin; Tony Rice, guitar. “I Know What It Means”: David Grisman, mandolin; Tony Rice, vocal and guitar; Bill Keith, banjo; Todd Phillips, bass; Richard Greene, violin.

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