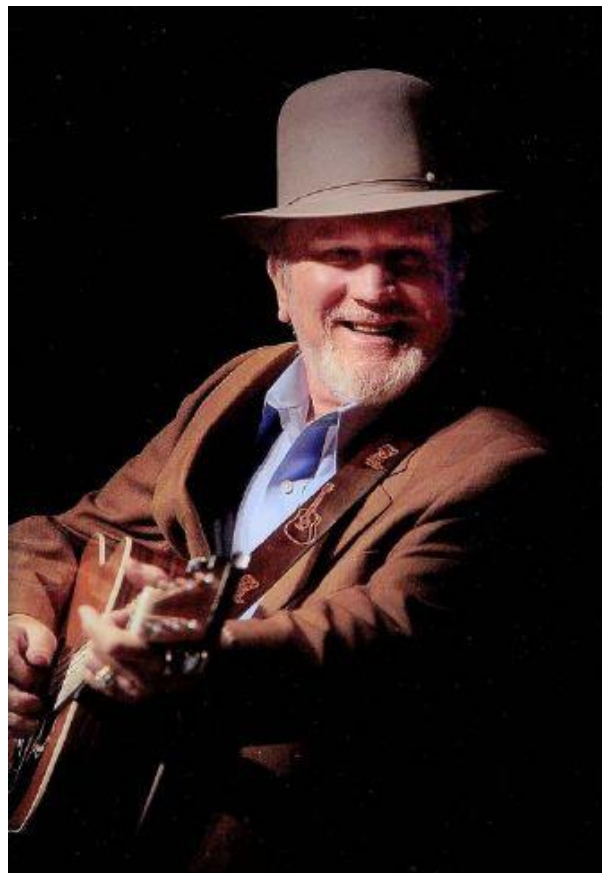


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Ray Whisnant

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'Cornerstone' of Caldwell's music dies



“Carolina Ray” Whisnant was an encyclopedia of music knowledge.

He could spend hours talking about classic country singers, their songs, his love of playing the banjo and his past playing music all over the country, and Patrick Crouch, who played with Whisnant for years, was often on the other side of those conversations.

“You’d learn as much about the people as you learn about music,” Crouch said.

Crouch sees Whisnant as part of the foundation of music in Caldwell County — a performer of classic country and vintage bluegrass and a teacher for many musicians in town. On Wednesday, Caldwell County lost Whisnant, who was 86. He had been ill, but Whisnant never lost his love of music, Crouch said.

“Even after he no longer wanted food, he still wanted music,” he said. “When you talk about passion, that’s passion.”



Whisnant, a native of the Valmead area, leaves a legacy in the hearts of many in Caldwell, including Crouch, who only started playing with Whisnant in 1985, late into Whisnant’s career.



Whisnant started playing guitar at around 12 years old and developed his skills over the years. In 1952, he joined the Navy and served on an aircraft carrier, where he and another musician would pick strings in their spare time, and they later toured together, Crouch said.

“He said the only thing that would really relieve his homesickness (on the ship) was when he played music,” Crouch said.

When he got out of the Navy, he toured in California, St. Louis and Florida, which is where he got his nickname.

“He was appearing on a live radio show in Florida, and the disc jockey was having a difficult time with his last name,” Crouch said. “So they started calling him ‘Carolina’ Ray.”

Ray also wrote and recorded his own music during his career, including “Rock That Rhythm,” which was inducted into the International Rock-A-Billy Hall of Fame.

While Whisnant was known for his music and by many who heard him play, Crouch said his impact was even larger on local players who learned and were influenced by him after Whisnant settled back down in his hometown of Lenoir.

“Carolina Ray, I think his (legacy) is more than popular music, I think Ray’s impact was more on the musicians,” Crouch said. “The serious musicians would seek out Carolina Ray not only for lessons but also as inspiration.”

For Crouch, Whisnant was the perfect example of a performer. He learned from him how to dress for a gig, how to interact with an audience, how to take requests, how to be gracious with a compliment and how to love the music.

“Some musicians, they’ll look at you and say, ‘How long do I have to play?’” Crouch said. “When you’d hire Carolina Ray and me, we’d say, ‘How long do I get to play?’”

Whisnant loved the music so much, he could play for hours, Crouch said. One day, the pair performed at a bluegrass music festival under a hot summer sun at 3 p.m., then stayed around and played with others for several more hours. Around 9 p.m., Whisnant turned to Crouch and said, “I’ll meet you at 11 p.m. at a house concert,” and the pair played until 2 a.m.

“You hear the saying, ‘Picking all night’ — Carolina Ray would do that,” Crouch said.

But there didn’t have to be a crowd for Whisnant to enjoy himself, said Reggie Harris, a member of the Harris Brothers, who played with Whisnant from a young age. Whether it was at home with a group of friends or on stage in front of a crowd, Whisnant was happy.

“He was a true lover of real country music and old music he liked so much,” Harris said. “It was just a solid thing. Playing with him, you felt like you were playing with someone who was really into it — the real deal. He really loved it, he loved music so much”

Virgie Whisnant, who is married to Whisnant’s nephew Eddie Whisnant, said the entire family will miss him, including his partner of 40 years, his “soulmate,” Sheila Whisnant.

The family is working with the Caldwell Heritage Museum to put together an exhibit about Whisnant, which would be the museum’s first about an individual musician.

Harris sees Whisnant as a founder of country music in Caldwell.

“I was just thinking, ... we lost one of the pioneers in our county,” Harris said. “One of the people who’ve been a cornerstone of the old musicians.”

Crouch said what made Whisnant so impactful was his love of music. It wasn’t about business, making money or getting famous, it was about his desire to learn any and everything he could about music, Crouch said. It was what made him happy, and it’s the legacy he leaves behind.

“We could have been sitting in the living room picking and the house could be burning down around us and he’d say, ‘What do you want to play next?’” Crouch said. “That’s what he lived for. The happiest time in his life was when he played music.”

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