

# Mac Wiseman, Bluegrass Star Who Was More Than That, Dies at 93

Mac Wiseman, right, and the country crooner Sonny James before performing sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Mr. Wiseman performed in a wide range of venues, from bluegrass bandshells to Carnegie Hall.

Elmer Williams/Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, via Getty Images

By Bill Friskics-Warren

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Mac Wiseman, the bluegrass balladeer and banjo player known as “the Voice With a Heart,” whose hallmark was crossing musical genre lines, died on Sunday in Nashville. He was 93.

The cause was kidney failure, his companion and caregiver, Janie Boy, said.

Mr. Wiseman first made his mark in the 1940s playing with bluegrass legends, first as a founding member of [Lester Flatt](#) and [Earl Scruggs](#)’s Foggy Mountain Boys, and then with [Bill Monroe](#)’s Blue Grass Boys.

As a sometime lead singer with Monroe’s group, Mr. Wiseman was featured on classics like “Can’t You Hear Me Callin’ ” and “Travelin’ This Lonesome Road.” He appeared as a headlining act on the bluegrass circuit in the 1950s and ’60s.

But his musical instincts were always too wide-ranging to rest comfortably within the sometimes hermetic confines of bluegrass.

“Not to sound too critical, but the ‘bluegrass’ classification was the worst damned thing ever happened to me,” Mr. Wiseman said, talking about his first decade as a solo artist, in an interview with the roots music magazine *No Depression* in 2006. “Up until then I was getting as much airplay as Marty Robbins or Ray Price.”

Mr. Wiseman’s biggest hits as a solo artist were [“The Ballad of Davy Crockett”](#) in 1955 and [“Jimmy Brown, the Newsboy”](#) in 1959, both of which reached the Top 10 of the country chart. His other early successes included interpretations of songs like [“Love Letters in the Sand,”](#) which had been a No. 1 pop hit for Pat Boone, and [“I Wonder How the Old Folks Are at Home,”](#) a parlor favorite recorded by the Carter Family.

Mr. Wiseman’s signature song, “ ’Tis Sweet to Be Remembered,” was written in 1902, and his version owed as much to vintage pop and swing music as it did to country or bluegrass. “ ’Tis sweet to be remembered, on a bright or a gloomy day / ’Tis sweet to be remembered, by a dear one far away,” he crooned in a limpid tenor in the song’s waltzing chorus.

The record, his first release as a solo artist, was typical of the earnest,

reverberating delivery that would sustain him in a seven-decade solo career, in which he released more than 60 albums.

Not merely a gifted singer, Mr. Wiseman was also a successful music producer and entrepreneur. He was the founding secretary of the board of the Country Music Foundation in 1958. Before that he spent four years as the creative director of the West Coast office of Dot Records. He also managed the WWVA Jamboree, a weekly barn dance and radio broadcast in Wheeling, W.Va., from 1966 to 1970.

Despite feeling hemmed in by the bluegrass label, Mr. Wiseman was elected to the International Bluegrass Music Association's Hall of Fame in 1993 and was for decades regarded as one of the idiom's elder statesmen.

Robert Shelton of The New York Times, reviewing an appearance by Mr. Wiseman at Carnegie Hall in 1962, wrote that he "used the penetrating, driving idiom of the bluegrass vocal leader in a most winning fashion." Sharing the bill that evening were Mother Maybelle Carter, Johnny Cash and other popular country and bluegrass entertainers.

Malcolm Bell Wiseman was born on May 23, 1925, in Crimora, Va., in the foothills of the Shenandoah Mountains. His parents, Howard Bell Wiseman, a miller, and Myra Ruth (Humphreys) Wiseman, oversaw a musical household; Mac first performed in public as an adolescent.

Afflicted with polio as a teenager, he went on to win a scholarship from the National Foundation for Polio to study piano, music theory and radio broadcasting at a conservatory in Dayton, Va., in the northwest part of the state.

In 1946, after a brief stint as a singer and disc jockey in nearby Harrisonburg, Va., the young Mr. Wiseman moved to Knoxville, Tenn., to work as a harmony vocalist and upright bass player for the country singer [Molly O'Day](#). He appeared both on her popular radio show and on the recordings she made for Columbia that year.

In 1947 he began performing on WCYB in Bristol, Va., where he met Lester Flatt. A friendship ensued, and Mr. Wiseman joined the first edition of Flatt & Scruggs's Foggy Mountain Boys in 1948, with Flatt on guitar and Scruggs on banjo. After that apprenticeship and his subsequent time in Bill Monroe's band, he formed his own group, the Country Boys, who headlined the Old Dominion Barn Dance in Richmond, Va., from 1953 to 1956. He reunited with Flatt to record three albums for RCA Records in the early 1970s.

Mr. Wiseman after he was introduced as one of three inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2014. The others were Ronnie Milsap and the late Hank Cochran.

Mark Humphrey/Associated Press

Mr. Wiseman recorded for Capitol, MGM and a number of other labels after leaving Dot in 1963, creating versions of songs as varied as the New Orleans rhythm-and-blues standard "I Hear You Knockin'" and Fleetwood Mac's "Never Going Back Again." He performed in venues of all stripes, from college campuses and bluegrass band shells to the Hollywood Bowl.

Mr. Wiseman hosted an annual bluegrass festival in Renfro Valley, Ky., from 1970 to 1983. He received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2008.

Survivors include two sons, Scott and Randy; three daughters, Maxine Wiseman, Chris Haynes and Linda Parr; a brother, Kenny; a sister, Virginia Davis; three grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Mr. Wiseman was a harbinger of a crossover sensibility in bluegrass, as later heard in the repertoires of artists like [the Dillards](#) and [Alison Krauss](#). He recorded with everyone from the big-band leader Woody Herman to the folk iconoclast John Prine. Emotional resonance, rather than the constraints of a particular genre, was his guiding principle when selecting collaborators and material.

“I liked all kinds of music,” Mr. Wiseman said in 2006, reflecting on his years growing up in the music-steeped Shenandoah Valley. “I liked Bing Crosby and Montana Slim, and the reason that I mention those two is that they both had network radio shows, two 15-minute programs in the morning, back to back out of New York, when I was 8, 9 years old — and it just struck me that I liked one as well as the other.”

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