

The Melancholy Space of Peter Rowan

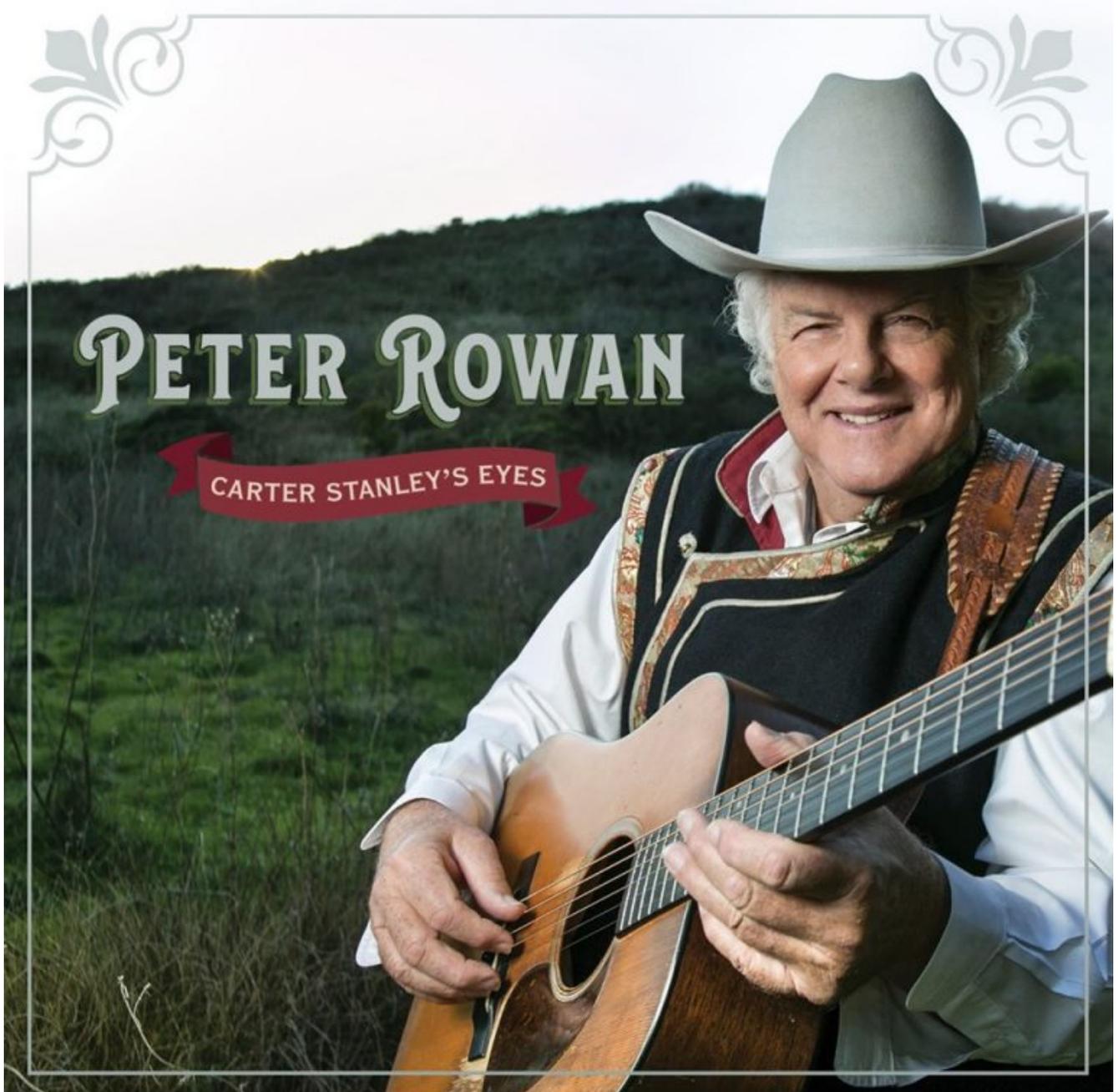
The Melancholy Space of Peter Rowan

by Kara Martinez Bachman

Grammy Award-winning bluegrass performer Peter Rowan is learning and changing due to the social distancing of Covid-19. The lessons are spiritual, putting him better in touch with a contemplative state that encourages meaningful work. He's turning lemons into lemonade, toying with deeper ideas and more nuanced, gentler methods for making his guitar sing.

Rowan's writing and performance chops stretch as far back as five decades and supply as solid a grounding as exists anywhere in bluegrass. Back in the early 1960s, he performed with Bill Monroe, eventually becoming lead singer and guitarist for the legend's Bluegrass Boys. He cites dudes such as Carter and Ralph Stanley as his early influences (he even wrote an album about them). He was once in a band with the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia, a bluegrass outfit called Old & In the Way. As a songwriter, he's penned hit songs such as the marijuana-infused-classic recording, "Panama Red." That's just the tip of the iceberg.

With so much under his belt, you'd think by now, Rowan would have experienced just about everything. There's one certainty in life, though: There's always a new curveball. For Rowan, the recent curveball is Covid-19.



“Since I play a lot of bluegrass, acoustic guitar has a lot of beautiful qualities about it,” he explained. “Exploring it during this new time has opened a new door.” He’s noticed his playing is a little different. “I’ve been playing lighter and lighter these days since there’s no need to project.”



He said more “space” is appearing in his music, and that “honestly, I’ve been playing more with my fingers now than with a flatpick.”

He said his songwriting has evolved since the social distancing and lockdowns began. Just one change is that when he’s plugged-in, he’s found himself writing things that are “soaked in reverb and echo.” He’s been pickin’ differently. Strummin’ differently. Playing around with different ideas and ways of making music that are more nuanced and contemplative. There’s something to the isolation from audiences that has done this to many musicians, and Rowan is not at all immune. He’s acutely aware of the change both in the world and in himself.

“As soon as this happened, I started to instinctively rethink what kind of bluegrass record I would make for Rebel Records,” he explained, of upcoming work for the label he’s recorded with previously. He’d been scheduled to go into the studio in

April and was to include some jamming with musicians such as Molly Tuttle and Billy Strings. The virus put it on hold.

Rowan said the delay has allowed him to think more about what he'll do. He realized this record "really has to have some meaning."

"Mortality is the theme that is emerging more," he said, hinting at what occupies his mind at the present.





Rowan seems to have a comprehensive view of life that's perhaps informed by his interest in Buddhist ideas. When he speaks of both the wider world and of music, you can sense he sees the interconnectedness of things.

It's there even when he talks about his guitar: "Wood is still alive, it's not dead..you're in touch with the natural world through an instrument."

Even though the isolation has given him new experiences as a musician, he's not overlooking other growth opportunities that arrived with the social distancing. It's forcing him to explore technology that helps reach audiences in new ways.

“It’s such a weird time. There’s just no gigs at all unless you play online,” he said.

He’s done that recently, connecting his high-quality recording mics to the internet to participate in a video with three other musicians, each performing their parts from the safety of their homes.

He liked doing it and might do another soon. He said it feels a little like making short films:

“I get a little tickle of creativity from it.”

On that topic of short films, Rowan has been enjoying watching films about people stuck at home. He relates to them.

“I’ve been watching some socially-distant films, and they’re melancholy,” he said. “I do feel that melancholy myself.”

<https://youtu.be/WW0lQ0n-khU>