

Discovering Tony Rice

Book Review by Bill Evans

Sebastopol musician Bill Amatneek deserves a place in a New Acoustic Hall of Fame for playing bass on one of the most important albums in our music, *The David Grisman Quintet* (1977). This mind-blowing debut album led by mandolin player David Grisman introduced many listeners to the remarkable guitarist Tony Rice. Now, almost 50 years later, comes this important and unflinching biographical study of Tony Rice from friend and fellow musician, Bill Amatneek.

Discovering Tony Rice is Bill's third music-related book, following in the footsteps of his award-winning *Acoustic Stories: Playing Bass with Peter, Paul & Mary, Jerry Garcia, and Bill Monroe* (2003) and *Acoustic Stories: Pickin' for the Prez and other Unamplified Tales* (2013). *Discovering Tony Rice* breaks new ground in bluegrass research and writing on a number of important levels and provides an important insider's perspective lacking in many bluegrass biographies and histories.

The author not only knew his subject as a friend but as a fellow musician in the David Grisman Quintet, which was just emerging into national recognition at the time of their collaboration on their debut LP. This true insider's perspective enables Bill to write

powerfully of the experience of playing music with Tony Rice as well as sharing road stories that form such an important part of every professional musician's life story. This represents uncharted territory in bluegrass biography and gives this book a vibrancy and immediacy that I have not previously experienced in book-length bluegrass writing.

Bill's extensive research into Tony's family life, his performing and recording career, his guitar style, and even his iconic guitar—"The Antique"—is enhanced by extensive interviews, focusing on direct quotes, from a variety of musicians who also knew Tony well at various points in time, including Jerry Douglas, Sam Bush, Béla Fleck, and Frank Poindexter. It is to Bill's credit as an insider—and as a musician—that he draws forth personal stories from these interview subjects that probably would not have been otherwise revealed to a non-musician journalist. Musicians reserve their best stories to share with each other and Bill was able to capture incredibly well these many stories of Tony Rice in this volume.

Most writing on bluegrass music falters when authors try to describe the act of music making

with great musicians. Here, Bill's prose excels. In the several sections where Bill discusses Tony's guitar style, the reader feels that he is soaring with Tony Rice and comes away more knowledgeable of his approach and technique, in a way that resonates with musicians and non-musicians alike. This is a rare and unique achievement.

Bill's real challenge in writing *Discovering Tony Rice* was to balance Tony's immense artistic achievements with his complex family, personal, and health issues. It is to Bill's credit that Tony's struggles are at the center of this book, especially as it draws to its conclusion, and it should be noted that his interview subjects similarly do not shy away from their own thoughts concerning Tony's declining mental and physical health in the years leading to his untimely death.

As readers, most of us will appreciate Tony Rice more by knowing about his personal struggles. However, Bill suggests at one point that what follows in his book offers difficult insights into Tony's decline and he invites the reader to put the book down if they aren't ready to travel this difficult road with him. This is good advice that many readers may want to follow, as Bill's careful documentation of

Tony's final years is indeed difficult and painful reading, especially given the revelation that no one around him was able to reach through and come to his aid, despite their best efforts. But for those who make this journey, this book helps us to understand more fully the conflicts that surrounded Tony throughout his life and helps us to appreciate all the more his dedication to music and to the guitar.

In conclusion, this is the kind of writing that bluegrass needs much more of: unflinching yet compassionate, truthful but honoring, fearless while also deeply melancholic.

This is a new kind of biography for bluegrass music and is highly recommended. *Discovering Tony Rice* also contains many interesting photographs, from childhood days to some of his last musical associations, and a two-page photo spread of *The Antique* concludes the book. Finally, don't overlook the endnotes with QR codes linking to audio and video performances discussed in the body of the book.



Discovering Tony Rice by Bill Amatneek. Vineyards Press, 2024, 259 pp.

