

## Ben Keith, Neil Young's steel guitarist: 1937-2010

July 27, 2010 | 1:25 pm



Ben Keith, the veteran steel guitarist who played on Patsy Cline's 1961 hit "I Fall to Pieces" before befriending Neil Young and going on to play on more than a dozen of the Canadian rocker's albums, has died. He was 73.

He died of a heart attack, director Jonathan Demme said Tuesday. Demme, who directed Young's concert films "Neil Young Trunk Show" from earlier this year and 2006's "[Heart of Gold](#)," said Keith had been staying at Young's ranch in Northern California, working on

new projects with his longtime collaborator.

Keith was featured prominently in both. In "Neil Young Trunk Show," shot in Pennsylvania at a stop on Young's 2007-2008 concert tour, Young said a key reason he chose to tour with Keith, bassist Rick Rosas and Crazy Horse drummer Ralph Molina, rather than convening the full, hard-rocking Crazy Horse trio, was that "I can do more variety this way, because Ben plays so many instruments."

Demme called Keith "an elegant, beautiful dude, and obviously a genius. He could play every instrument. He was literally the bandleader on any of that stuff... Neil has all the confidence in the world, but with Ben on board, there were no limits. Neil has a fair measure of the greatness of his music, but he knew he was even better when Ben was there."

Most recently, Keith had been touring with Young's wife, Pegi, in support of her second solo album, "[Foul Deeds](#)," for a handful of West Coast performances in June. He also had played earlier this year with Neil Young on his first totally acoustic tour in several years.

Keith met Young in 1971 in Nashville, where the rocker was working on what would become his commercial breakthrough album, "[Harvest](#)." Keith came to the recording studio at the invitation of drummer Tim Drummond, whom Young had asked to find a steel player for the sessions. When Keith arrived, "I didn't know who anyone was, so I asked, 'Who's that guy over there?'" and was told "That's Neil Young."

"I came in and quietly set up my guitar -- they had already started playing -- and started playing," Keith recalled in a 2006 interview. "We did five songs that were on the 'Harvest' record, just one right after the other, before I even said hello to him."

Young, in a 2005 interview, remembered that "When we did 'Old Man' and talked about what he could play, I said, 'Try to play those single notes and make it sound doubled. Just ride those babies all the way through there, that's a great sound.'" That sound Keith came up with became a signature of Young's folk and country-slanted material.

Their association continued through Young's albums "Tonight's the Night," "Comes a Time," "Harvest Moon," "Greendale" and "Chrome Dreams II," among others. He also was featured as an actor, in the role of Grandpa Green, in Young's film of the stage production of the "Greendale" concept album.

Keith, who was born in 1937, became a popular session player in Nashville for years, both before and after connecting with Young. He also played live or in the studio with artists including Emmylou Harris, Linda Ronstadt, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Ringo Starr and Crosby, Stills & Nash. Keith also produced singer-songwriter Jewel's 1995 debut album, "Pieces of You," which has sold 7.4 million copies in the U.S., according to Nielsen SoundScan.

Among his own recordings, Keith released "Seven Gates" in 1994, a holiday collection in which he accompanied such high-profile friends as Johnny Cash, songwriter J.J. Cale and Neil and Pegi Young.

Information on Keith's survivors and funeral services were not immediately available. A full obituary will appear in Wednesday's paper.

-- Randy Lewis

*Photo of Ben Keith in 2008 at Neil Young's Bridge School Concert in Mountain View, Calif. Credit: Craig Abaya*

---