

One last song for guitar great Atkins

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Under a spotlight on the Ryman Auditorium stage was Chet Atkins' guitar, his trademark white hat resting on a small pedestal table.

His gray casket, covered with white roses, was at the front of the auditorium filled with entertainers and fans who gathered at the "Mother Church of Country Music" on Tuesday to pay their last respects to the soft-spoken guitar great.

Atkins, 77, died Saturday at his home after a long bout with cancer.

"You could tell anytime he picked up a guitar how it fit," said his friend Garrison Keillor of the radio show "A Prairie Home Companion," who delivered the eulogy as guitar music was played softly in the background.

"His upper body was shaped to it from a lifetime of playing. His back was slightly hunched, his shoulders slightly rounded and the guitar — you could see when he played — was the missing piece.

"He was an artist, and there was not a bit of pretense. He never waved the flag. He never held up a cross. He never traded on his own sorrows."

Keillor said Atkins was a man who personally knew music icons — Hank Williams, Patsy Cline and Elvis Presley — but never considered himself one.

"He was a great giant," Keillor said. "He was the guitar player of the 20th century, the model of who you should be and what you should look like.

Among the other tributes, Vince Gill and Steve Wariner performed a medley of songs in Atkins' guitar style while Connie Smith sang an old gospel funeral song, "Farther Along."

Atkins' close friend, Eddy Arnold, who made classic records like "Make the World Go Away" with Atkins as producer, said when people talk about who is the greatest guitar player, Chet always takes first place.

"I've lost a friend, a cohort and a fellow artist in Chet Atkins," said Arnold, who had a difficult time control-



AP photos

Vince Gill (left seated) Paul Yandell (center front), David Hungate (center back-ground), and Steve Wariner, play a tribute during funeral services for Chet Atkins Tuesday at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tenn.

ling his emotions. "We will never see the likes of this talent in one man again."

Born June 20, 1924, on a farm in Luttrell, Tenn., near Knoxville, Chester Burton Atkins started playing the guitar at age 9 and eventually developed a widely imitated style, influenced by Merle Travis and Django Reinhardt. He used a thumb pick for the bass note and two to three fingers to play the melody.

After touring with Hank Williams and The Carter Family early in his career, Atkins became a producer and record executive at

RCA.

As a musician, producer and executive, he helped the careers of numerous country singers, including Dolly Parton, Roy Orbison, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Suzy Bogguss, Charley Pride and The Everly Brothers.

When rock 'n' roll challenged country music in the 1950s, Atkins and fellow producer Owen Bradley developed the Nashville Sound. The easy listening style replaced the twang of banjos and fiddles with lush orchestras, to appeal to adults.



AP photo

Garrison Keillor delivers the eulogy Tuesday for Chet Atkins at the Ryman Auditorium.