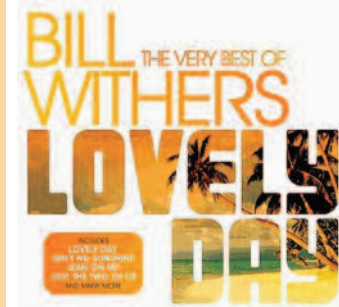


WEST VIRGINIA
MUSIC
HALL OF FAME



Artists'
Stories



Bill Withers



Choosing to make music

Look at Bill Withers in the YouTube videos, sitting at a piano or playing guitar on a stage, handsome and relaxed in a Hawaiian shirt or a turtleneck, as his band plays around him.

Sometimes in our lives, we all have pain. We all have sorrow, he sings. But if we are wise, we know that there is always tomorrow.

He is singing *Lean on Me*, one of his most famous songs.

Just call on me, brother, when you need a hand. We all need somebody to lean on.

In the video, he is Mister Cool. But when Bill Withers was growing up in a little coal town in Raleigh County, West Virginia, he was not Mister Cool. "I stuttered badly. All the girls were taller than me. I had asthma."

"Some people are born cool," he said. "I was not."

He stuttered till he was 28 years old. "I used to avoid the phone and any situation where you had to talk. People would laugh when I stuttered. They'd get up in my face and say 'Spit it out! Just spit it out!' They'd try all kinds of folkly cures on me, like hitting you in the face with a dishrag."

Nobody, back then, would have predicted Bill Withers would grow up to be a famous singer and songwriter. Now he is a musical legend. He has sold millions of records. Michael Jackson, Paul McCartney, Aretha Franklin, Mick Jagger, The Temptations, Barbra Streisand, Linda Ronstadt, Sting, Kenny Rogers – many of the most famous musicians of his time – have recorded songs he wrote.

His songs have been nominated for nine Grammys. He won three. People all around the world sing *Lean on Me* and his other songs.

How did he do that?

"We do get to make a choice."

"We're all accidents of birth," he said. "We don't get to choose what we look like. We don't get to choose how gifted we're going to be, how tall, how strong. But at some point, we do get to make a choice about what we're going to do about it, what we're going to do with what we've got."

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Bill Withers made choices. He decided he would get past his stutter. He decided to play music. He made a choice to work hard on both those decisions. "I was raised not to give up," he said.

His song, *Lean on Me*, has traveled the world, but its seeds were planted when he was a boy growing up in Raleigh County, West Virginia. "People helped each other get by," he said. When times were hard, people leaned on each other.

When you're not strong, I'll be your friend. I'll help you carry on. For it won't be long till I'm gonna need somebody to lean on.

He was born in Slab Fork and raised in Beckley. Neighbors leaned on neighbors when he was growing up. "My family didn't have a refrigerator, and the people across the street across the street from us didn't have a phone. So we helped each other. They gave us ice, and we let them use our phone."

His dad mined coal. In the coal mines too, miners lean on each other, he said. "Coal miners work together in a very dangerous situation, and they have to have a certain trust in each other."

Bill's mother cleaned houses for people while she raised six kids. "She was a worker, a very independent and energetic woman," he said. "She sang around the house. I think I got my music thing from her."

His mom and dad got divorced when he was three years old. He lived with his mom and grandma during the week and with his dad on weekends. "He never missed a weekend."

From his dad, he learned how to tell stories. When his dad wasn't mining coal, he had a little barber shop. "He wasn't a good barber, but he told great stories," Bill said. "I don't know if he had any rhythm or not, but he could tell those stories."

His dad died when Bill was 13. "The last year of his life, I lived with him in Slab Fork all the time. He was slowing down." His dad was still working in the mines. Bill did a lot of the cooking, gave his dad rubdowns and generally did what his dad needed. "We kind of kept each other going."

If there is a load you have to bear that you can't carry, I'm right up the road. I'll share your load if you just call me.

The music leaks into your mind.

After his dad died, Bill moved back in with his mother and grandma. They lived on the edge of the white section of town. "Black people lived on one side of the railroad track, and white people lived on the other side," he said, "but my mother bought a house on the side that she wasn't supposed to buy it on."

It was the 1940s, segregation time. "Black kids and white kids went to separate schools back then, and if we wanted a milkshake or something like that from the restaurant in town, we had to go to the back door."

Bill didn't let that stop him. On his street, he played with kids from both races. He got teased a lot for his stutter, but he made the choice to be friendly. "I was trying to make my life work," he said. "Wherever I heard kids making noise, that's where I went to play.

"Everyone, white and black, called me Little Brother. One night, my mother was looking for me on the side where all the white people lived, and she was calling me by my name, Bill, and people said, 'No, we haven't seen him.' Then she asked if they'd seen Little Brother, and they said, 'Oh yeah, he's right over there.'"



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The kids made their own fun. "Our parents didn't really worry about us. They just let us out of the house and told us when to be back. We'd choose up sides and play ball. We'd play War. Isn't it funny, kids playing war?"

"We found this place where there was a waterfall that made a natural pool. And sometimes we'd dam up the creek and get buck naked and go swimming. The girls would figure out the boys were there and they'd come stand around on the side of the creek so you couldn't get out till they left."

Bill was too skinny and short to be on the football team. All boys can't be on the football team, he said, "just like all girls want to be pretty, but they're not all pretty. And here's the thing. If you find out that you're not the thing you wish you were, you still have to live.

"So you find out what you might be able to do with yourself. You figure out what you can do, then you figure out how much of it you can do. And if you're lucky, something occurs to you and somebody encourages you. If you're resilient enough, you take a whack at it."

Wandering all over town, Little Brother, Bill, heard different music. He loved it. "When I went over to play with the white kids, I listened to country and bluegrass music. I heard all that stuff, sleeping at the foot of the bed at white kids' houses.

"At the black kids' houses, I could hear the blues coming out of somebody's house, or when you went to church on Sunday, you might hear gospel. At the movies, I heard kinds of music I didn't hear where I lived.

"So all that music leaks into your mind, and you start to know what you like. The high school band director was always encouraging me to join the band, but I just wasn't too turned on by those marches. Marching music wasn't making my socks roll up and down. I was looking for music that did that."

Bill and three other guys formed a gospel quartet. They sang in church sometimes. When Bill sang in a group, his stutter wasn't so obvious.

He loved the freeform way people sang at his grandma's church. "If somebody wanted to sing a song, they just got up and sang it, and everyone would sing along. It was spontaneous, you know."

His grandma used to sit on their porch singing gospel songs, clapping her hands. "She called it Getting Happy." He wrote a song about her after he grew up:

Grandma's hands went to church on Sunday. Grandma's hands played a tambourine so well...

While Bill's mom was working, his grandma took care of him.

Grandma's hands picked me up each time I fell. Grandma's hands, boy, they really came in handy. She'd say, 'Matty, don't you whip that boy. What you want to spank him for?...

"She was the most encouraging person in my life," he said. "When you've got people all around you telling you, 'you can't do nothing,' you need somebody who tells you you can.

"That was an age when I needed somebody to say good things about me. Grandma kept me going. She kept saying I was going to be all right."



Bill Withers commissioned re-known artist Ernie Barnes to create a painting representing his song "Grandma's Hands." It is part of the WV Music Hall of Fame's permanent collection.

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“Strength is compassion”

All that music was rolling around inside Bill’s head, but he thought he’d have his stutter forever, so he thought he could never be a singer. Then he met Virgil Miller.

When he was 13 or 14, to get extra money for the family, Bill shined shoes on the street in Beckley. “I worked at Tim’s Shoeshine Parlor. And there was a little man who had a news stand. Virgil Miller was his name. He was less than five feet tall, and he was always on crutches.

“I went to buy a comic book from him, and he noticed I stuttered, that I had trouble telling him what comic book I wanted. And he didn’t laugh at me or get impatient. He volunteered to get me some help.”

Virgil arranged for Bill to see a speech therapist. “Virgil was the first person who opened up the idea to me that maybe I didn’t have to stutter. Because up till then, people mainly thought it was funny. They laughed at me and went on.

“But Virgil saw what was going on, and he took the trouble to help me. So he became my idea of a strong man. One sign of strength is compassion for other people.

“He had more of an effect on me than he will ever know. He planted that first seed in my head that I could possibly do something with my stutter or at least live with it without feeling so much less than other people.”

The therapist suggested that Bill try stuttering on purpose so he could get some insight into the way it happened. “I don’t know how well that worked.” His family couldn’t afford to follow up. “But I had that knowledge, that I didn’t have to stutter, that people get over it.” That changed everything for him.

“Stutterers each have their own style of stuttering. I was one of those people who stopped at their own name. As I thought about it, I realized that a fear of the way the listener will react just stops us, right at the point of trying to speak.”

If you don’t look into your mind and find out what you’re running from, then tomorrow will be just another day to run. – *Just Another Day to Run*

“Later in life, to deal with the fear, I learned to approach people, prepared to forgive them for any way they might react. I’d get that in mind before I spoke. Stutterers have to learn to be more civil than most people we encounter.

“I had to learn to give other people something that wasn’t given to me. In the end, I think it makes you a much bigger person.”

Making choices, making music

After graduation, Bill made other choices. He had decided he never wanted to work in a coal mine. “A lot of people died as a result of coal mining,” he said. “My father did.”

“I’d been labeled a ‘less than’ person at home, so I wanted to leave and start over with some new people.” So he signed up for the Navy. He stayed in for nine years. During that time, he started writing songs.

I will follow my dreams wherever they take me. I will stand on the mountain and look down on the seashores. But I will always remember the family table...

– *The Family Table*

In the Navy, he started singing and writing songs. People liked them. He decided that maybe he really could have a career in music. “I write about whatever I am able to understand and feel,” he said. “Instead of writing about love all the time, you make a song about your grandmother. Or you make a friendship song.”

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We're here today and gone tomorrow. None of us knows when life will end. I've said some things that caused you sorrow, but I want to keep you for my friend.

– For My Friend

"A lot of songwriters are just trying to solve the mystery of life. You're trying to grab something out of the air, an idea or something."

After Bill left the Navy in 1965, he moved to Los Angeles, determined to play music. For money, he got a job at an airplane factory, assembling bathrooms for planes, then working as a mechanic. "I was one of the first black aircraft mechanics a lot of people had ever seen."

At night, after work, he wrote songs and played his music in clubs all over town. "I never owned a guitar till 1970. I don't know an F# from Ninth Street. But I quickly found out the guitar was a good songwriting tool and a good thing to have with you on stage."

During the day, while he worked at the airplane factory, his songs were rolling through his head. "I was writing *Grandma's Hands* while I was working on an aircraft, singing the lines over and over to myself, so I wouldn't forget before I got home."

Grandma's hands sooth the local unwed mother. Grandma's hands used to ache sometimes and swell.

His grandma had died, and he had moved his mother to California to live with him. "And one day we were watching TV, and some singer came on, Nat King Cole or somebody. And my mother said to me, 'You know, if you really tried, I think you could do that.' Just a simple comment she made, but it really stuck with me.

"She had never said anything like that before. And she was talking about secular music, not church music. So not only did I remember that, but it was sort of a license for me that it was OK to try."

In his thirties, he finally found a record producer who loved his music. In 1971, his first record was released nationwide, and his songs, *Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone* and *Grandma's Hands*, started up the charts.

Ain't no sunshine when she's gone. It's not warm when she's away ...

He was suddenly a star, and he appeared on national TV shows without stuttering. "The first audience I sang in front of was about 5,000 people." He won his first Grammy in 1972 for *Ain't No Sunshine*.

It hadn't been easy. But he had decided to do it, and he did it.

Hang in there

Bill Withers has two grown children now. His name and music are internationally known. When he thinks back to his early life in Slab Fork, to his stuttering and asthma, his dad's death and the money problems his family had, it looks like a long road.

He is part of the national National Songwriters Hall of Fame and, in 2007, he became one of the first class of inductees in the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame.

"My teachers never would have predicted I would succeed at anything. One of them called me a handicap.

"So my advice to kids is just to hang in there and try to like yourself. Sometimes it might seem to you like you're the only person who sees the value that you might have. But things change.

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BILL WITHERS™

Still Bill



YOU KNOW THE MUSIC. NOW MEET THE MAN.

INCLUDES HIS CLASSIC HITS

AIN'T NO SUNSHINE • LEAN ON ME
LOVELY DAY • JUST THE TWO OF US

9.02.10 Paramount Cinema Wellington Tickets \$11 from venue plus 'SeatJax' at the party
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RADIO ACTIVE MUSIC



THEATRE

See artists online from <http://www.ticketexpress.co.nz> and check out <http://www.stillbillpress.co.nz> for full details

"It's important for kids to know that, no matter what your circumstance is right now, if you work on yourself every day and try to hold on and learn what you can, you might not only surprise some other people, you might surprise yourself.

"When you're young, everybody wants to be happening right now. But some people's value doesn't show up early in their life. They don't bloom till later.

"When you're 9 or 15 years old, you can't judge what your life is going to be down the road. You just keep plugging away and plugging away. You get as good as you can get at what you love. And eventually, you'll find out who you are.

"And then the funny thing is, after you find out who you are, then adulthood sets in, and some other stuff enters into your life, and then you try to figure out all over again who you are." Bill Withers laughed when he said that. "That's what I'm doing right now," he said, "figuring out who I am now.

"I'm a senior citizen now, and that's OK. I'm OK with my gray hair. I can tell you who I was. Just don't ask me who I am now. Isn't that funny?"

Story by Kate Long. Sources: Interviews with Kate Long, West Virginia Public Broadcasting interview, Still Bill, www.billwithersmusic.com, Bill Withers comments at Rhythm and Blues Pioneers convention.