

The death of singer-songwriter Bill Withers, 1938-2020: “I never tried to be a star, but to be an artist”

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Three-time Grammy award winner Bill Withers, who wrote and sang music that still resonates with millions of people around the world, died from heart complications on March 30 in Los Angeles, at 81. He is best known for his recordings from the 1970s of “Lean On Me,” “Use Me,” “Ain’t No Sunshine” and “Lovely Day.”

The first-named tune is undoubtedly his most widely recognized—it remains consistently listened to and sung in times of crisis, including by health care professionals and others now battling the coronavirus pandemic.

Withers wrote and recorded songs based on his own life experiences and broader social issues. He was, by all accounts, a humble and sincere individual. A deeply soulful performer, he maintained a healthy disdain for the money-obsessed music industry.

Withers’s most active musical career only lasted eight years by his own account, from about 1970 to 1978. In that short period of time, however, he made a powerful impact. The tributes that have appeared in the media and the comments by dozens of artists are well deserved.

At the time of his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2015 (he was voted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2005), Withers commented to *Rolling Stone* magazine, “What few songs I wrote during my brief career, there ain’t a genre that somebody didn’t record them in. I’m not a virtuoso, but I was able to write songs that people could identify with. I don’t think I’ve done bad for a guy from Slab Fork, West Virginia.”

Born William Harrison Withers on July 4, 1938, in Slab Fork, a coal-mining town, he was the youngest of six children and grew up in nearby Beckley. *Rolling Stone* commented: “Withers’ hometown is in a poor rural area in one of the poorest states in the Union. His father, who worked in the coal mines, died when Bill was 13. ‘We lived right on the border of the black and white

neighborhood,’ he says. ‘I heard guys playing country music, and in church I heard gospel. There was music everywhere.’”

Withers was 17 when two white men in Mississippi beat to death Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black youth from Chicago who allegedly whistled at a white woman while visiting relatives in Mississippi. The pair of killers were cleared of all charges. This experience had a big impact on Withers, as did the developing Civil Rights movement.

In addition to the burdens of poverty and racism, Bill suffered from a speech impediment and once explained, “When you stutter, people tend to disregard you.”

Withers joined the US Navy straight out of high school, and worked as an aircraft mechanic in the service for nine years. After his discharge, according to *The Billboard Book of Number One Hits*, Withers “delivered milk, then worked for the Ford Motor Company and IBM. In his spare time, he wrote songs. By 1967, he was confident enough in his ability to move to Los Angeles and record some demo tracks. He was only earning \$3.50 an hour working for Lockheed Aircraft but he spent \$2,500 to make the demos.”

Withers was in his late 20s by the time he got into the music business. Initially, he had no interest in singing and just wanted to write songs. After seeing Lou Rawls perform at a venue in Los Angeles, he bought a cheap guitar at a pawnshop, taught himself to play and began writing between shifts at the factory.

A local recording company, Sussex Records, received a demo tape of “Ain’t No Sunshine” and decided to record the soulful blues song. Executive Clarence Avant organized a session with the talented multi-instrumentalist Booker T. Jones and bassist Donald “Duck” Dunn, both famous for the “Memphis sound” of Stax Records, and Stephen Stills on guitar. Apparently when Withers turned

up at the studio, he was not even expecting to be the lead singer on the song. Though not yet fully aware of his musical gift, he took the lead role and gave stirring emotional power to the blues-based soul song.

“Ain’t No Sunshine” was an instant hit. The former aircraft worker (*The Billboard Book of Number One Hits* claims that when Withers “signed his first record contract, he was manufacturing toilet seats for Boeing 747s”), by now in his early 30s, became famous overnight. He appeared on *Soul Train*, the BBC and on other television programs and headlined a show at Carnegie Hall in New York that was released as a live album. At first, he kept his job in the aircraft factory. (On the cover of his album *Just as I Am* [1971], Withers is pictured standing outside the Weber Aircraft plant in Burbank, California, holding his lunch box.)

Withers’s relationships with major record companies were contentious from the start. He disagreed with their approach to music, which was primarily about image, fame and generating as much revenue as possible. After Sussex went bankrupt, he worked with Columbia Records, but always insisted on overseeing his own work.

Various pointed comments he made to the press reflect his overall outlook. In an interview with Leonard Feather of the *Los Angeles Times*, Withers put his music career in perspective: “When I was repairing airplanes, that was a vital gig, because you can lose a lot of lives if that job isn’t done properly. Even when I was working on bathroom seats, this was at least constructive. I challenge everybody: I won’t sing for a month and you don’t go to the bathroom for a month and let’s see ... who comes off with the less misery.”

His last official recording for Columbia was in 1985, but Withers was not allowed in the studio after an incident in 1978. The record company asked him to record a cover of Elvis Presley’s “In the Ghetto” and when he refused, relations grew very tense.

Withers told *Jet* in 1977: “Every dime I’ve got is from records and I live or die by the radio. I make music, not images. My job is to write songs and to do this, I have to use my imagination to create an environment for the song. My music says one thing but I’m someone else, I never tried to be a star, but to be an artist.”

“I’m not for sale beyond my records. I’m no whore. The only thing I owe my public is good music and the only way I can judge that is by my income.”

Wither’s persona was also shaped by the turbulent social changes internationally of the 1960s and 1970s – particularly the growth of the massive movement against

the horrors and barbarism of the Vietnam War.

After meeting a veteran wounded in the war, he wrote and recorded “I Can’t Write Left-Handed.” The lyrics and the pain in his singing are stirring:

*I can’t write left-handed.
Would you please write a letter-write a letter to my mother?
Tell her to tell-tell her to tell the family lawyer.
Trying to get a deferment for my younger brother. ...
Strange little man over here in Vietnam I ain’t never seen, bless
his heart, ain’t never done nothing to, he done shot me in my shoulder.
You know we talked about fighting-fighting everyday.
And looking through rosy colored glasses, I must admit it seemed exciting anyway.
Oh, but someone that day overlooked to tell me bullets look better.*

A worthwhile 2009 documentary, *Still Bill* (directors Damani Baker and Alex Vlack), provides a portrait of this remarkable singer and songwriter who never abandoned music. In the documentary, he comments, “I didn’t stop, I am just doing something else.”

The artist, who overcame a speech impediment and continued to work with young people who stutter for the rest of his life, made a genuine contribution to the music world.

Until the end of his life he continued to occasionally write music, albeit outside of the traditional studio system. One of the last songs he wrote was the interesting “Mi Amigo Cubano,” intended to be performed in Spanish by the guitarist Raul Midon in 2014.



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