

A Conversation with Bill Withers
by Bill DeMain (Puremusic.com, 9/2005)

A black man wearing blue jeans and an orange turtleneck sweater sits alone on a stool. He's slightly hunched over his acoustic guitar. Eyes closed, sweat glistening on his brow, he begins to pluck out a progression of soft minor seventh chords. The groove established, he sings, "Ain't no sunshine when she's gone, it's not warm when she's away..."

Thirty years on, the voice is still electrifying, a sound torn directly from the soul. There are no showy mannerisms or melismas. Just pure feeling. It's a classic R & B voice, with echoes of the blues, but a voice that sounds like no other before or since. This is Bill Withers. Inimitable, completely original, riveting.

The clip, from 1972, is featured on *The Best of The Old Grey Whistle Test*, a DVD collection from Britain's acclaimed music television program. It's worth tracking down for many reasons, but the performance by Withers and his band is the kind you just don't see on TV anymore. I must've watched it twenty times in a row before deciding, "I've got to interview Bill Withers."

Easier said than done. After a brief twelve-year career that featured classic hits such as "Lean On Me," "Use Me," "Grandma's Hands," and "Just The Two Of Us," Withers walked away from the music business. With the exception of a few samples that have powered contemporary R & B hits, he hasn't been heard from since. And he does interviews about as often as Halley's Comet does a fly-by.

After trading a few emails and phone calls with Bill's wife Mattie, a date was set for a phone interview. In conversation, Withers comes across as he does in his music: warm, honest, and direct.

Puremusic: When you were growing up in West Virginia, what was the first music that affected you emotionally?

Bill Withers: There wasn't that much radio back there. Mostly country music. And there was music in the church, and whatever they taught you at school. And then there was the old Frank Sinatra-Nat King Cole genre type music. So, whatever I could stand to listen to, I listened to. I don't think I was that conscious of it then, because I wasn't really doing any music or anything. It was just something to listen to. I liked Gospel music like The Five Blind Boys, because when we were kids, that's something that we could do without owning any instruments. You just get three or four guys that want to try to harmonize and you could do it.

PM: Did you sing in church?

BW: I was a stutterer until I was 28. A really chronic stutterer. So in my younger years, I wasn't too inclined to jump up in front of people and try to communicate verbally. I was just one of the kids growing up around there, doing whatever. Whatever some older person came up with an idea to organize some kids to do. You know what I mean? Back then, there weren't many adults involved in kids' activities. Nobody knew where you were most of the day unless you were in school, because it wasn't dangerous, in that sense of the word. Kids just went out and met up with each other and played some kind of way.

PM: In the years since, have you explored your family tree to see if there were any musicians or singers?

BW: Well, that's not a reality for me. My family tree isn't that explorable. My mother's father was born in 1854 in Virginia. He was born a slave. So I can't go back very far. I have no idea of anything beyond my grandparents. It's just not available beyond that. There was my grandmother on my mother's side that I knew, and the other grandparents were just rumors. So I don't have that available to me. Not unless I was one of these library kind of people. I'm not interested in that kind of stuff. I don't want to know. So if there were any musicians back there, I don't know them. I heard rumors that somebody played the fiddle for square dances and stuff, but I don't know.

PM: During your nine years in the navy, you toured around the world. Were there any events along the way that made you consider being a musician or a songwriter?

BW: I had no musical experiences in the navy. If we drank too much, somebody might try to sing something on the way home. [laughs] After I got out, when I'd go to night clubs, I was only trying to meet girls. I wasn't looking for any music.

But I started to see people in those clubs, people like Lou Rawls, and Little Willie John near the end of his life, and here's what made me interested: I remember once this bartender walking up and down the bar, and somebody was late, either Lou Rawls or Little Willie John, and he said, "You know, I'm paying this guy two thousand dollars a week, and he can't even show up on time."

At that time, I think was working at IBM, and my salary was \$102 a week. And I thought, "Wait a minute, they're paying this guy two thousand a week? He doesn't even have to get up in the morning." And it seemed something that was accessible to me. So then I probably started singing in the shower and just kind of seeing if it was something I thought I could do. And I guess there was some latent desire to want to say some things. I probably had some kind of hidden poet buried in my soul somewhere. Sort of a casual interest turned into pursuit.

PM: Was there a particular person who heard you early on and said, "This guy's got something unique?"

BW: There were different people along the way, different friends who would say, “Maybe this is something that you could do.” But I don’t remember anybody that specific. It was just something that sort of gathered. My mother used to tell me I could do it. But everybody’s mother tells them they can do everything. My mother would hear me around the house and tell me that I should look into it. But then, on the other side of the coin, you probably get just as many people telling you to shut up. [laughs]

Gradually something lets you know that maybe you should pursue that. Plus, sometimes you just do stuff because it’s something to do.

PM: I think it’s remarkable that you were 28 years old when you started to make your first demos. Even by the standards of the music business then, that was what A & R men would call “old.”

BW: I was a little older than that, actually. But that’s close enough. I feel really lucky, because I get offered record deals now. The funny thing is, right after I did “Just The Two of Us” with Grover [Washington], I tried to get a record deal and I couldn’t get one. [laughs] Now that I don’t care, I get offers!

I have a funny phrase. I call A & R Departments Antagonistic & Redundant Departments. [laughs] Because there’s always somebody in there who thinks they know what’s going on. They ask you, “How long is the intro? How long is the song? Are you gonna put horns on it?” I’ve always come out of left field anyway, because I know I’ve gotten away with doing songs like “Lean On Me,” which is not about romantic love, it’s just sort of generic feeling for people. Or “Grandma’s Hands.” If you walked up to some guy in a bar and said, “You know, I really love my grandmother,” he’d probably move away from you.

So, the record business has a sort of strange way of evaluating stuff.

PM: Didn’t your record company overlook “Ain’t No Sunshine” as the first single?

BW: That’s a good example. On your first single, they would put the song they thought was most likely to succeed and on the B-side of it they would put a song and say, “Well, we’re not going to need this later, so let’s put it on the B-side.” My first song that anyone knew me by was “Ain’t No Sunshine.” That was a B-side. When the single got out and away from the record companies, disc jockeys turned it over and that’s how my career got started.

I think record companies are a bunch of guys trying to figure out what they think somebody else will like. And if you really think about it, other than Clive Davis and a few people like that, the people who really do that A & R thing are pretty transient. They’re there for a couple of years. Somebody gives them a lot of money and they blow up, and then some of them go to rehab. [laughs] Then something new comes out that somebody likes and then everybody starts looking for one of those.

I've had people say over the years, "You know, we need something like that 'Grandma's Hands.'" Well, shit, I only had one grandmother. [laughs] You know what I mean? There ain't nothing else like that. [laughs]

I don't know, maybe I'm old and kind of crabby now, but there are a few people with a lingering knack for figuring out what the next thing is going to be. When rap came out, you couldn't give it to a major record company. Think about that. There were all these predictions that it was this temporary thing that was going to go away, and now, financially, a large part of the music business is sustained by these kids talking. And sometimes using sections of old records. I've certainly enjoyed it. Things like Black Street using a little bit of one of my songs and making a hit. It's fun for me. But, I don't think anybody knows what somebody's going to like.

PM: There are so many examples in the history of pop music of career-making songs starting out as B-sides or being initially overlooked.

BW: Here's another one. I heard a song that I thought, "Man, I wish I had written this song!" It was a Roberta Flack song called "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" [written by Ewan MacColl]. It came on the radio for about a week, then it went away. Years later, Clint Eastwood made a movie, *Play Misty For Me*. They put the song in the movie and it was a hit. It was like a number one song. After it had been given up on when it was first released. I think people respond to music as it affects them. When somebody wants to dance, they just want to hear something that makes them feel like dancing. When they want to feel something more deeply, they look for something like that song.

PM: You've talked about the importance of seeing a visual image before you write a song. Can you elaborate on that?

BW: Let me flip that on you. I probably evaluate whatever I think I've written if it makes me see something. If there's some kind of visual thing that comes to mind. It's probably something that's maybe peculiar to me or maybe other people do it. Let me just sum up that whole question, because that's sort of a curiosity: how do you write a song? If I knew how to explain that, I wouldn't have time to talk to you right now, because I would be somewhere writing this best-seller book explaining how you write a song. I would probably never have time to think about writing songs for writing this book.

I think the best stories of how songs came about are made up *after* the song is written and people start asking questions about it. Really, for me, the process is, I was walking around scratching myself and something crossed my mind. Now, why it crossed my mind, I don't know. Why it crossed my mind instead of somebody else's mind, I don't know. The process for me is really being a *conduit*.

PM: It sounds like you don't like to analyze the process too much...

BW: I don't really want to know too much about how I do it. Because then it's not magic anymore. Early in my life, I was an airline mechanic, so my life was full of, you know, you attach this to that and you put so much torque on it, and this causes that to happen, and that causes the other, and your life is full of rules. And then you get over 60, and you can't eat nothing that's not green, and you got all of these things to deal with. So the one magical thing for me is when something comes from somewhere and I don't know where it came from. It just crossed my mind.

Probably because of how we are and what we feel, each of us individually, we probably have different data banks that we draw from. James Brown has his data bank. James Taylor has his data bank. Anybody that has written songs has some bank of feelings that they draw from, depending on their values and their personality and their intellect. I think the greatest songwriting tool is probably manic depression. I think some of the greatest uptempo things are written when somebody's manic, and some of the best ballads are written when somebody's in some sort of funk. When you're in a deeper feeling state.

PM: This idea of where songs come from is interesting. I interview a lot of songwriters and they all have different takes on the subject. On the one hand, you have a writer like Smokey Robinson who says that all songs come from God. On the other you have David Gates from Bread who says that songs don't come from an outside source, but rather from his own experiments with melody and chord changes. Both great writers, with different ideas...

BW: I think the whole fun part about it is not really understanding it. [laughs] Like I said, there's enough stuff in our lives. I mean, I'm sitting in here in my wife's office, and everything is a computer and all this kind of stuff. A palm pilot. Everything is something that you've got to do this to make this happen and you push this button and you do this and do that. It's kind of fun just to walk around with something that just happens sometimes. Maybe I might be just lazy about trying to figure everything out, but it's sort of individual. I think when we write songs or books, it's feelings that we have that we would like somebody else to know about, and we hope they kind of feel the same way. And then sometimes it gets down to, you know, what can I say here that rhymes with "fruit."

PM: You gave the world some great songs and albums in your career, and that should be enough. But then there are many fans who say, "But just think of all the great music that Bill Withers could've made or has been making that we haven't heard over the past 20 years."

BW: Well, you know, I'm in the process now of trying to gather up all of these thoughts that I've had and maybe trying to put stuff together. I'm 65 now. Friends of mine are starting to die and nobody really asks why. So I'm at the age of mortality or at least thinking about it. And sometimes I think, "If I don't organize this stuff and do something with it, somebody will probably come in here after I'm dead and throw it in the trash can."

I'm always flattered when somebody like you calls and we have a conversation, because it causes me to think about times when I was a different guy. In other words, that guy in his thirties who did most of the stuff that people bring up to me now, that guy is *gone*.

And I think back, and some things I liked about that guy and some things I didn't. And some things I don't know about that guy. But when I look in the mirror now, I don't see that same guy. You know what I mean? The things that I think about are different now. Then, there was a certain innocence that's not here anymore. A lot of stuff changes in your life. There was an energy that's not here anymore. But there are other things in its place. I like things now that I didn't like then. And I don't like things now that I liked then. My opinions have changed. A lot of things are different. It would be interesting to see what this age and this guy would say now.

PM: Yes, I think so.

BW: I'm using all these self-motivating tools, and when somebody like you says, 'Yeah man, you should do something else,' I try to use that. I try to transfer all of these things into motivation and an energy that will make me move. Art's kind of in your head. I need to move from the art stage, where I just sit around and think, to the craft stage—where I actually start doing stuff. I mean, I built this little studio in my house. I've got all this equipment that I don't know how to operate, because I just haven't felt like sitting around reading books and doing it.

You've heard of the term "borrowed equity"? That's when you take somebody else's energy or notoriety or anything, and you try to incorporate it into yourself. So, just talking to you—you're obviously a young person with energy and a certain amount of ambition—I try to steal some of that so it'll make me get up out of this chair and think about doing something rather than just going and seeing what Judge Judy's talking about today. [laughs] Or the big trap for me, *Court TV*. [laughs] There are all kinds of things. My wife just got me a membership in the gym to start trying get moving around.

PM: I play your records all the time and they still sound fresh to me. I would love to hear you sing again.

BW: I appreciate that. Hopefully, I can get fired up here at least enough to get up out of this chair. Thank you so much for your validation and maybe I can try to live up to some of it.

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[If your listening library lacks Bill Withers and you're looking for something to start with, we suggest *Lean On Me: The Best Of Bill Withers*. Also, the good people at Columbia/Legacy have begun re-releasing newly remastered CDs of his classic albums, with *Menagerie* and *Still Bill* already available and more coming soon. We're eagerly anticipating the mid-October 2005 release of *Just As I Am* in the DualDisc format. (A

DualDisc is a single disc with playable information on both of its sides, in this case a remastered CD of the original 1971 album on side A, with live performances and other extras including a new, half-hour filmed conversation with Bill Withers on the DVD flip-side.)

Interviewer Bill DeMain appeared in these pages originally as an interviewee: he and Molly Felder, who form the duo Swan Dive, were the first artists we interviewed in our premier issue in 2000. We also had Bill and Molly back for another Q & A in issue #40. (Both interviews can be found in our Archives.) For more about Swan Dive, visit their site, at www.swandive.org. Bill has recently been contributing reviews to Puremusic, in this month's issue covering albums by Cibelle and Sam Cooke.]