



Singer, musician, and storyteller extraordinaire Bill Hairston, 2019. Photo by Emily Hilliard.

“People start looking at people for who they are” W. I. “Bill” Hairston on the Power of Stories

By Emily Hilliard

When the old men would gather to tell stories in the Phenix City, Alabama, neighborhood where W. I. “Bill” Hairston grew up, he would sit at their feet and listen. After his family moved to the Lick Skillet area of St. Albans (Kanawha County) in 1960 when he was 11, storytelling helped him feel at home in a new place.

“Lo and behold, when I got to St. Albans, the same thing was happening on porches, under trees, wherever they were. Back then, it was mostly men who were just telling stories. I mean, these were

tall tales. That’s when it really fascinated me,” Bill says.

Back in Phenix City, Bill’s family resided in a largely Black community, and Bill had a strong understanding of himself within that context. In West Virginia, though, all of that changed for him, as the Hairstons were one of the few Black families in the area.

“I was trying my best to identify with my Hairston family, which at that time, I really didn’t have a good understanding of. I just knew that they were from McDowell County. But I remembered the banjo was at



In 1967, Bill (far right) helped represent West Virginia at a national 4-H conference in Washington, D.C., where he had tea with First Lady “Lady Bird” Johnson and met President Lyndon Johnson. Courtesy of Bill Hairston.

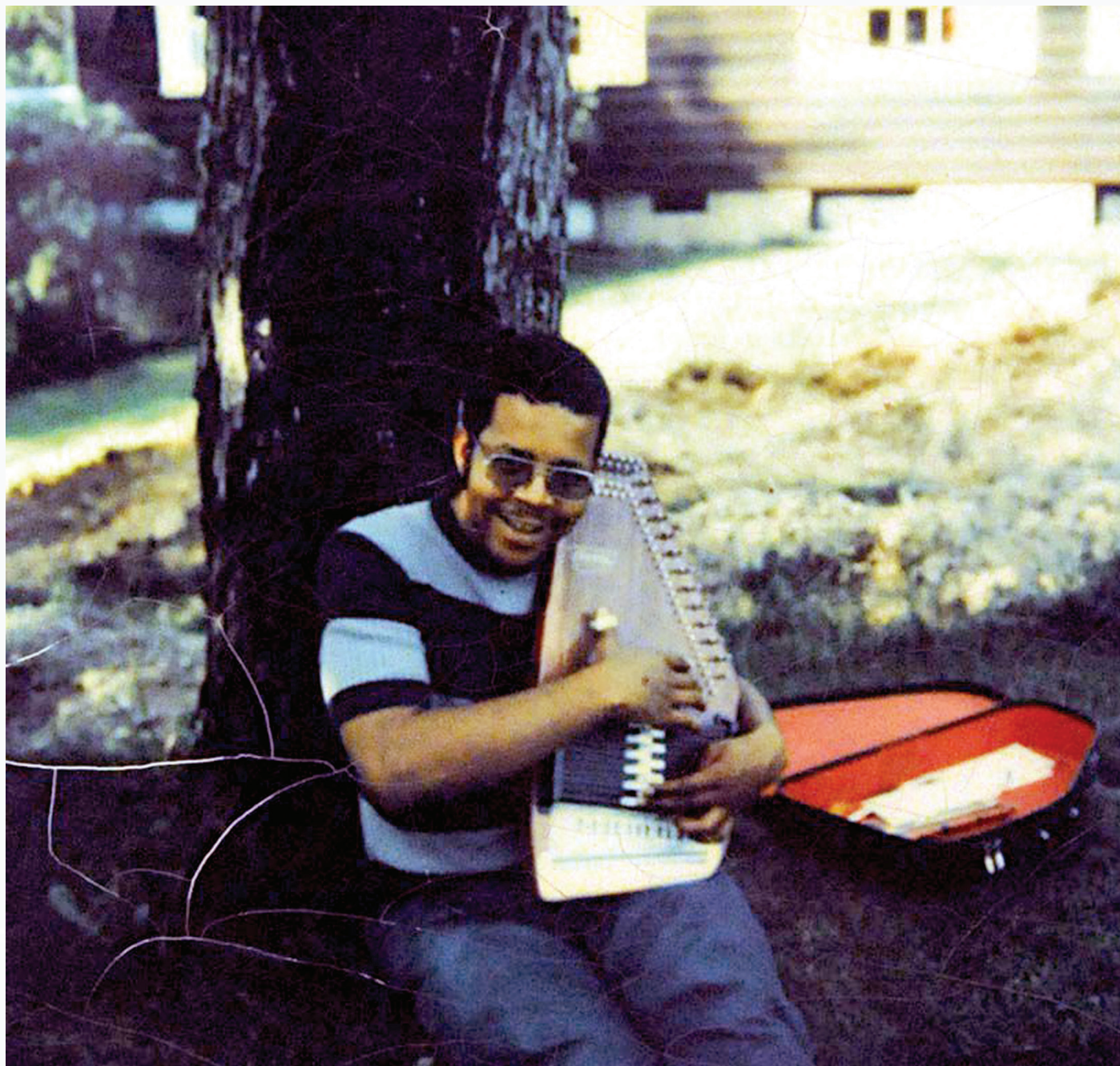
my grandfather’s house, and so there was that connection. So I think a lot of what happened to me and a lot of my interests and understanding and zest to learn came out of a desire to just identify.”

Like many rural kids in West Virginia, Bill soon became involved in 4-H. Though the Kanawha County 4-H camp was already integrated by the early ‘60s when Bill was part of the program, not all county 4-H programs in our state were, and there were still two state 4-H camps—the Black camp at Camp Washington-Carver at Clifftop (Fayette County) and the all-white camp at Jackson’s Mill (Lewis County). Bill attended the last Black 4-H camp at Washington-Carver and the first integrated 4-H camp at Jackson’s Mill the same year.

On his attendance at Washington-Carver, Bill says, “It was a great experience for me. Keep in mind I had left Alabama in a segregated situation, and I had been put into this integrated situation—being one of very few Black children—and then boom! There I was with all the Black kids all over the state. I mean I loved it! And I wished it continued.”

Though he also enjoyed his experience at Jackson’s Mill and wasn’t aware of any issues with the integration of the camps, the Black camp had a specific focus on Black artists and culture that was lost in the integrated camp.

“There was a lot of art and poetry—Black poets, Black artists, Black history, Black music—all of those factors were a part of Washington-Carver that certainly



Bill playing his autoharp, 1972. Courtesy of Bill Hairston.

were not a part of any of the other 4-H camps, countywide or statewide.”

Bill drew from that programmatic emphasis on Black culture he experienced at Washington-Carver and incorporated it into the music and art he explored at the integrated 4-H camp and in other parts of his life.

“I remember one of the things that I did in the white camp was [sing the Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and

Sing,” by] James Weldon Johnson because I picked that up in the Black camp. . . . Even throughout high school, whenever I was given an assignment, I was picking Black poets and Black [artists]—but I think that’s where that came from.”

Bill has continued to be involved in 4-H throughout his life. In 1967, he participated in a national 4-H conference in Washington, D.C., where he had tea with “Lady Bird” Johnson and met



(Left-right) Bill performs with David Perry of Wayne County at the Mountain State Art & Craft Fair at Cedar Lakes, 1970s. Courtesy of the GOLDENSEAL Archives.

President Lyndon Johnson. He also worked in 4-H camps in the summer as a college student, worked briefly in the extension service, and became a volunteer 4-H leader. "I'm what they call a West Virginia 4-H All Star, which is a specific honorary organization that you're chosen for. I'm part of the West Virginia 4-H Hall of Fame; I mean I'm a 4-Her in West Virginia!" he remarks.

Propelled by his desire to connect with his father's family, along with his budding curiosity in West Virginia culture, Bill became interested in old-time

music through his involvement in 4-H. At camp, Bill was always drawn to the guest musicians who'd come and play for the campers. "It seemed as though I just connected to those guys. I wasn't playing or anything, I just connected."

Under the mentorship of 4-H instructor Jane George [see Summer 2018], Bill was able to explore this interest further. "Little by little, she started introducing me to this and that and different music, particularly starting with Scottish music and dance," Bill shares. "She believed, and it later on turned out to be right, that

there was a Scottish background within the Hairston family."

With Jane and her husband, Frank, Bill was soon traveling extensively around West Virginia, visiting fiddlers, banjo players, ballad singers, and dancers.

"I not only visited [Frank and Jane], I stayed with them every chance I got. I spent tremendous hours with them. I'd just hop in the car and go with them wherever they went. Again, picking up on the music, picking up on the people, picking up on the culture."

Bill was with Frank and Jane when they first met Uncle Homer Walker, a Black banjo player originally from Mercer County. "He remembered a time when lots of Black people played those instruments. When radio became really popular and banjo in particular was picked up by this whole new group of musicians, Black folks were either overshadowed or just didn't want to play. They didn't want to identify," Bill says. "Once it was affiliated with white 'hillbillies,' it wasn't attractive, I don't believe, to some Blacks. So, little by little, guys like my granddaddy [Colonel Isaac Hairston] just sort of put it aside and went on to something else. That's a sad thing, but it happened."

Bill initially started playing fiddle, and then tried guitar and banjo, but landed on the autoharp as his main instrument. At age 18, when he was a freshman at Glenville State College, he was asked to emcee a Mountain Heritage Weekend. Through that gig, which happened 8-9 times a year, he made more connections with musicians, writers, and scholars in folklore, and began developing his storytelling skills.

"As a part of all of that, I started reading, I started studying, I started interviewing people, and so I have this vast knowledge of folklore and folklife in West Virginia. I've visited everybody, and I've been in some places, particularly

in the '60s and '70s, where it might not have been wise for a young Black man to go, but my interest sort of overtook that."

As Bill was surrounding himself with West Virginia traditional musicians, most of whom were white, he also was exploring African-American traditions. He says, "Still to this day, I can be at the Glenville State Folk Festival one day and then back here in Charleston singing with [the] Martin Luther King Jr. Male Chorus in a little African-American church, just enjoying that."

Finding connections between those cultural traditions has long inspired him and is a main theme in his storytelling today. "If you see my promotions, it says, 'Bill Hairston combines the Appalachian culture that he was exposed to on the Coal River to the African-American culture that he is a part of.' So one of the things that I'm always doing, particularly with children and also with adults, without saying it, is putting together a storyline where it makes the person understand that the Appalachian culture that you're sitting in down in Monroe County or up in Gilmer County or wherever isn't that different from the African-American culture as far as the expectations, as far as the people, as far as the food, etc."

In the mid-'70s, Bill began emceeing the Stonewall Jackson Jubilee at Jackson's Mill, where he'd been one of the first Black 4-H campers. He also became a prominent emcee at the Appalachian String Band Music Festival ("Clifftop") at Washington-Carver, where he'd attended the last Black 4-H camp. Speaking of his emcee roles, where he's worked closely with traditional musicians and dancers, Bill says, "With all my interest and all my exposure, I doubt seriously if there's a traditional musician that exists in West Virginia now that I haven't experienced, know personally, sang with, or even played with at one point." He adds, "I've been a part of



Bill Hairston emcees the Vandalia Gathering Liars Contest, 2016. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

W. I. “Bill” Hairston, 71, is a storyteller, old-time musician, and pastor living in Charleston. Through his storytelling, Bill combines the Appalachian culture he was exposed to on the Coal River with the African-American culture he’s part of. You can get in touch with Bill for storytelling appearances at bhairston@ntelos.net.

weekends where you just run into people that you’ve known for over 45 years. So that’s essentially who I am.”

From his emcee duties at the Jubilee, Bill built his storytelling career. Today, Bill Hairston is a celebrated storyteller across Appalachia and the country. He’s coordinator of the Vandalia Gathering’s West Virginia Liar’s Contest and an active member of the West Virginia Storytelling Guild, the Kentucky Storytelling Association, the Ohio Storytelling Network, and the National Association of Black Storytellers and serves as West Virginia’s liaison to the National Storytelling Network. In March 2020, he was a featured storyteller at The Moth Mainstage event in Charleston.

Never straying from his initial interest in stories as a point of connection across cultures, Bill says that his main goal when he tells a story is to build a bridge with the listener. “I learned through stories

that people will listen. And when people listen, then they start understanding you. When they can laugh with you, when they can cry with you, when they can be shocked with you, they tend to start identifying. If you can introduce people to a new way of looking at something, particularly race, particularly when they’re not saddled with the—I’m trying to think of a word for it—the arrogance, the hate that people bring with it, or that people share, people then start looking at people for who they are.” 🍁

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