

GOLDENSEAL Good-Byes

Remembering Labor Singer-Songwriter Elaine Purkey (1949 – 2020)

By Emily Hilliard

West Virginians deeply mourn the great loss of labor songwriter, musician, activist, radio host, teacher, and devoted mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother Elaine Purkey, who passed away on September 2. Elaine was a commanding advocate for our state's working people through her resonant original labor songs and interpretations of traditional and gospel tunes that enhanced her grassroots organizing. In addition, Elaine was a dynamic music educator of the next generation in her home community. Speaking of her role in Appalachian labor music, Pete Seeger said, "Elaine Purkey's songs carry on the great tradition of Ella May Wiggins of Gastonia, North Carolina, and Aunt Molly Jackson of Harlan County, Kentucky."

A native of Lincoln County, Elaine was raised in a family of musicians and flatfoot dancers. She attributed her powerful, electrifying voice to the a capella singing she learned as a member of the Church of Christ. She recalls that as early as age five, she would stand on a rock in her grandfather's yard and sing "Frankie and Johnny" for family and friends. As a teenager, she played in bands with her brother, and in early adulthood, she was the lead singer of a local country band. When her husband, Bethel, a third-generation coal miner, got involved in the United Mine Workers of America strike against the Pittston Coal Company in 1988, Elaine began writing songs for the cause. Commenting on the



Photo by Emily Hilliard.

role of her labor songwriting in birthing a new identity, Elaine said, "My actual natural birthday was May 29, 1949, but I really wasn't born until the 1980s after I . . . got involved in all of this stuff because that's when my blood really started pumpin'. Before that, I mean I was just mundane, I did all this singing and went to church, did all the things I was supposed to do, had babies and raised 'em, and I cooked and I cleaned

You can read more about Elaine Purkey's life and career in our Summer 2006 issue.

and took care of everything, and that was it! I was known by the company I kept, you know, nobody knew who I was. But that changed everything."

When Ronnie Gilbert of The Weavers came to sing for the striking miners, she invited Elaine to play. It was there that Elaine first performed one of her original songs, "America, Our Union," which became, as she said, a "national anthem" for the movement. When union steelworkers were locked out of Ravenswood Aluminum in the infamous lockout of the early 1990s, Elaine once again wrote a rallying cry for the workers in "One Day More." It would become her most famous song. Organizer and director of the American Friends Service Committee's West Virginia Economic Justice Project, Rick Wilson, spoke of the song's resonance, "Nothing could have prepared me for the effect Elaine's song had on the union families of the Ravenswood Lockout, a huge labor struggle. The first time she sang it at the union hall, people sprang to their feet, clapped, cried, sang along. At a time when the odds of success seemed small and when morale mattered, this gave people a boost that lasted. And they won." That performance was filmed by director Barbara Kopple and used in her PBS special "Locked Out in America: Voices from Ravenswood" for her labor series *We Do the Work*.

"One Day More" appears on the 2006 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings compilation *Classic Labor Songs*, alongside songs by Woody Guthrie, fellow West Virginian Hazel Dickens, and Pete Seeger. In the liner notes, Elaine explains the title phrase, coined during the Pittston strike, "No matter how long the company or the corporations can stick around, we have enough strength, friendship, camaraderie

about us and enough belief in what we're doing, we can be there one day more; whatever they do, we'll be there the day after."

In 1996, Elaine released a solo album, *Mountain Music, Mountain Struggle*, which includes her original labor songs, traditional folk songs, gospel, and country. She performed at regional and national festivals, including the 1995 Ralph Rinzler Memorial Festival at the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee; the 1997 Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C.; and in the Appalachia Program at the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. She is also included in folklorist Mary Hufford's Coal River Folklife Collection at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in her role as an organizer in the grassroots West Virginia Organizing Project. For her work with that project, Elaine was portrayed in Penny Loeb's 2014 film *Moving Mountains*, based on the *Bragg v. Robertson* federal case, which restored clean water and temporarily halted mountaintop removal in a Mingo County community.

But nowhere is her impact felt more than in her home in southern West Virginia. Beginning in the 1980s, Elaine was a featured performer on the *Wallace Horn Friendly Neighbors Show*, a Logan County live radio program that has been on the air since 1967. After Horn died in 2013, Elaine took over as the show's host. When she was organizing with the West Virginia Organizing Project, her local radio celebrity was her calling card; while those in other communities may not have known her personally, they knew her name and voice. For the last 10 years, Elaine taught songwriting and traditional song after-school and summer programs to children at Lincoln County's Big Ugly Community Center, the site of the former elementary school that was consolidated in 1993. Elaine said, "They're trying to cut the performing arts out of schools?

That's a big mistake. The performing arts are a way for kids to see, 'You know, I may not be able to play ball, I may not be able to jump the highest of anybody else, and I may not make straight A's, but hey, I can write a song and I can sing it! I can let people know I've got a voice!'"

For Elaine, activism and music were not separate entities but part and parcel of the cultural heritage and sustainability of her community. That's the lesson she hoped to instill in the children of her home county.

For the last 40 years, Elaine Purkey was engaged in the hard work of labor organizing in West Virginia coalfield communities through her profound songs, committed teaching, and tireless community activism. While her national and international profile may not be as far-reaching as other folk singers of her generation, that's all the more a testament to her commitment to what was always her singular cause—making life better for working people. Ever that "little girl standing on the rock," Elaine believed that songwriting, storytelling, and creative work were powerful tools for both personal and collective liberation. She said, "I don't know who this is gonna go out to, but if there's anybody listening to this or reading this and you've got any idea that you can do anything—write a story about what you're going through, tell it, write it in a poem, just put it on paper and try to put music to it or put it on paper and try to get somebody else to put music to it. Just get it out there! Just get it out there and let people know what you're thinking. And you'll be surprised how much it will free you up and help you out. 'Cause it did me. It made a monster out of me."

EMILY HILLIARD is West Virginia's first official state folklorist with the West Virginia Folklife Program at the West Virginia Humanities Council. She writes a regular column for GOLDENSEAL. Learn more about the West Virginia Folklife Program at wvfolklife.org.



Robin Hammer, self-portrait.

Robin Hammer **(1946 – 2020)**

On January 23, we lost one of our most talented artists. Robin was a fine-arts painter, sculptor, photographer, and a graphic artist and website designer / administrator. His career as a Charleston-area artist totaled some 50 years. A member of the Allied Artists of West Virginia, he helped found our state's International Film Festival. He also was a founder and president of the Professional Artist Cooperative Trust, which operated Artspace, a gallery on Charleston's Capitol Street, for many years. He worked for West Virginia State College (now University) and the state Division of Rehabilitation Services, retiring in 2009. In 1991, he and artist Chris Dutch began an artistic collaboration, DutchHammer. Their sculptures and wall pieces received major awards. They had solo shows at Charleston's Sunrise Museum and the Clay Center for the Arts & Sciences and were shown on an ongoing basis at The Art Store in Charleston. A multi-award-winner, Robin's artwork is in the permanent collections of the West Virginia State Museum and the Clay Center, among others. He and Dutch had a long-running Best of West Virginia exhibit pod at Tamarack in Beckley, and both received Master Artist Fellowship Awards from the Tamarack Foundation. *—ed.*



Photo by Rafael Barker.

Bill Withers

(1938 – 2020)

By Ciarra Johnston

Bill Withers was a singer-songwriter who died on March 30 at age 81. He was raised in Slab Fork (Raleigh County) and claimed that his background had a large impact on his music.

Bill was born with a stutter, making it a challenge for him to talk or sing. It also made him a target for bullying, so it was difficult for him to make friends as a kid. But a kind man in Beckley showed him a way to sing without stuttering, and the stutter soon went away, even when he talked. He always credited this man with changing his life.

Bill moved from the mining community of Slab Fork to Beckley when he was just three years old. He had a tough childhood, being the youngest of six and his dad dying when Bill was just 13. Bill was 17 when he enlisted in the Navy, where he developed his interest in songwriting. After his service was over, he

got a day job and performed his music in clubs at night.

In 1971, he partnered with Sussex Records and released his debut album: *Just As I Am*. One of the songs on that album, "Ain't No Sunshine," rose to No. 3 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 pop charts. His producer, Booker T. Jones, was proud when he and Bill received the Best Rhythm & Blues (R&B) Song Grammy for it. The next year, he released his second album, *Still Bill*, which included his classic "Lean on Me." Many consider *Still Bill* one of the best R&B albums ever. He later had another big hit, partnering with Grover Washington Jr., on "Just the Two of Us."

Bill was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame (2001), West Virginia Music Hall of Fame (2007), and, at long last, the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame (2015).

CIARRA JOHNSTON is a 9th-grade student at Hurricane High School. She originally wrote this as a class paper. This is her first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.



Photo by Tyler Evert.

Jack Fowler (1934 – 2020)

A lifelong resident of Point Pleasant, Jack passed away on August 10. A man of many talents and great intellect, he was a pipefitter for Marietta Manufacturing, an installer repairman for C&P Telephone, an employee at Celanese Chemical, and then a product marketing manager at Kaiser Aluminum in Ravenswood. In his second career(s), he served on Point Pleasant's city council and received that city's Community Service Award. His dream was to build a riverboat museum on the banks of the Ohio. In 2003, he opened the Point Pleasant River Museum [see our Summer 2014 and Winter 2017 issues], which was educational and fun for children and adults of all ages—something Jack made sure of. Sadly, it burned down on July 1, 2018. The *Point Pleasant Register* quoted Jack that day, "Nineteen years working on that building and then to have it all just disappear like that . . . it was difficult to watch." But even at 83 years old, Jack tried to save what remained and rebuild, but the building was essentially a total loss. —*ed.*



Photo by Barb Howe.

Dr. Emory Kemp (1931 – 2020)

Dr. Kemp passed away on January 20 at age 88. He was featured in an article by Dr. Barb Howe in our Spring 2017 issue. Before coming to West Virginia, he was already a noted structural engineer, having worked on the roof design of the famed Sydney Opera House in Australia. In 1962, he earned a Ph.D. in theoretical and applied mechanics. He soon moved to Morgantown, where he became a professor of civil engineering at West Virginia University and later chaired that department. He worked closely with Dr. Howe in building WVU's Public History Program. In 1989, he also formed the Institute for the History of Technology and Industrial Archaeology, which documented and helped preserve historic sites related to industry and structural engineering. He played key roles in the restoration of West Virginia Independence Hall and the Suspension Bridge in Wheeling and the Philippi Covered Bridge after a fire nearly destroyed it. In addition, he founded the Preservation Alliance of West Virginia. In all, some two generations of students learned from this brilliant professor, who patiently explained the most complicated engineering concepts to history students, including our editor. Thank you, Dr. Kemp, for everything. —*ed.*

Mike Fahey (1942 – 2020)

Mike was featured in our Fall 2019 issue in Mark Swiger's article "Living the American Dream at Wheeling-Pitt." He was a native of Glen Dale and resident of Moundsville (Marshall County) at the time of his passing on February 26. He was a retired employee of Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel in Beech Bottom and Bayer Corporation in New Martinsville. He also was a fast-pitch softball pitcher, coached girls' softball for years, and researched ways to reduce severe injuries in that sport. As Mark wrote in his article, "[Mike] sees himself as a steelworker who's lived through the ebbs and flows of life and work while raising a family." —*ed.*



Mike and Karen Fahey.
Courtesy of the family.

Phillip L. Crane (1948 – 2020)

Phillip was a public schoolteacher for 36 years. He wrote an article in our Winter 2019 issue about a school consolidation battle that erupted in Ritchie County in the 1950s and 1960s. He had an up-close view of the struggle, as both a student and the son of two teachers who fell on opposite sides of their principal, leading to conflict. Phillip realized he didn't have long to live when he was researching and writing the article. This seemed to drive him even harder to finish it because he felt this important story might die with him. Every story matters. —*ed.*



Courtesy of the family.

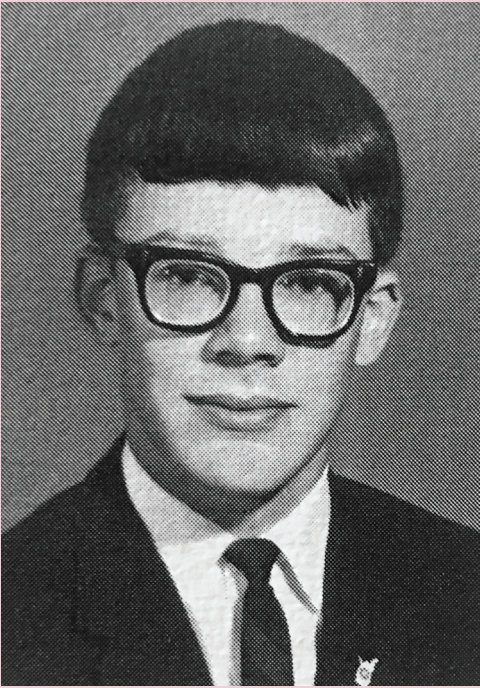
Ed Hicks (1948 – 2020) and David Husband (1950 - 2020)

By Stan Bumgardner

In our Spring 2020 issue, we paid tribute to two members of our work family we lost this year. Sadly, two more have passed: Ed Hicks and David Husband.

Ed was the *photo guy* for the West Virginia State Archives. These days, state government has generic titles that rarely explain what the employee does. So, to us, Ed was the "photo guy." We worked closely with him on the West Virginia State Museum renovation and in my first couple years at GOLDENSEAL before his retirement. When I say "photo guy," it wasn't just because he was in charge of the photos; he had a stellar eye for a good photo: the historic, the scenic, the abstract, and especially the humorous. With all the trillions of photos on smartphones out there, you'd think we'd have an unlimited number to choose from. But Ed cared more about the quality and composition of the picture. He also knew a lot about history. He could take what looked like a mundane street scene from the 1950s and pick out governors, legislators, and celebrities the sizes of gnats in the photo. On the museum project, it got to the point where we'd just say, "Ed, give us your five best oil or gas photos." They were always the best five—and we'd double-check just to make sure. Likewise, he could point out flaws in photos that we'd completely missed. He was also a font of tales about folks—history, gossip, and, quite often, really good jokes.

I first got to know David Husband through his son, Darren, one of the finest exhibit designers I've ever known. Both father and son—and a slew of others—helped us renovate the museum. Before it was completed in 2009, Darren literally



Despite being the *photo guy*, Ed Hicks (left) was notoriously elusive about having his own picture taken. The only photo of him we could find was in his St. Albans High School Yearbook (1966). Knowing his sense of humor, we think he'd be both slightly embarrassed by and doubled-over laughing at this. David Husband (right) was an artist, craftsman, exhibit fabricator, and all-around tremendous guy. Here, he's building a dragster for a car show. Photo courtesy of the family.

created mock-up elevations, including artifacts, of every wall in the museum—nearly 300 displays by our count. But when it came time to hang an 800-pound rock (with a petroglyph) on a gypsum-board wall, my first call went to David; as a side note, the rock is still firmly attached to the wall 11 years later. David was head of what we call the Tech Crew, which builds and sets up about everything the public sees at the Culture Center—from art exhibits to the Vandalia Gathering stages. The folks in the Tech Crew, now under another fine leader, Doug Litton, are the most unsung stars of everything we do. Every time you visit Vandalia or come to the Culture Center, please think about them. When everything goes right (99% of the time), they are the main reason.

During the museum project, engineers asked for the weight of a huge block of bituminous coal—an artifact near the start of the museum path. My question

(likely said less civilly): “How am I going to weigh a giant block of coal? My bathroom scales don't go past 300?” David, standing nearby, measures the coal and, without a word, disappears for less than a minute, comes back with an index card, and says, “It weighs about 3,200 pounds. Approximately.” Asked how he came up with that so quickly, Dave replied, “It's just algebra.” Until that moment, I never knew what purpose algebra served. David was also good at sizing people up—not in a condescending, judgmental way—but in knowing the best person to entrust with certain tasks.

Ed Hicks and David Husband consistently made my job easier and made me laugh—a tall order these days for a grouch like me. But most of all, I considered them good friends, and they always treated me as one of their own. As we say in West Virginia, “They were good souls.”