

WILLARD GAYHEART BIOGRAPHY

Willard Gayheart was born on June 5, 1932, in eastern Kentucky in the tiny mountain community of Cordia, beside Lotts Creek, not far out of Hazard. It was a rugged and modest upbringing in Depression-era Appalachia. Still, despite all the challenges and hardships, Willard looks back on his childhood in Eastern Kentucky fondly. “We didn’t have much but we got by,” Willard remembers. “Most people grew what they ate, we were very resourceful. It seems like nearly everyone was related in one way or another, and it was one of those places where everyone kind of looked after each other.” Willard often returns to his sweet reminiscences of his childhood in eastern Kentucky in his work both as a pencil artist and, as this recording will attest, in his songs.

In contrast to his later adopted home of Galax and Grayson County, Virginia, there were not many people playing music in Cordia when Willard was growing up. Willard’s father, Caney Gayheart, wasn’t a musician, “though he was quite an artist in his own way, a very fine carpenter,” he remembers. But Willard’s mother, Dora Grigsby Gayheart, could play some chords on a guitar, and could tune one by ear, even though the Gayhearts didn’t own one at home:

“Occasionally someone might come by from up the road with a guitar for my mother to tune, and she would play a little bit. Those are probably my earliest memories of music. But what really got me was when my dad brought home that phonograph player. It was one of those old ones, you know, the kind you wind up, and it came with about a dozen or so records. I remember us listening to a new 1936 recording of Mainer’s Mountaineers singing ‘Maple on the Hill.’ I listened to that record over and over. I just couldn’t get enough of it. From that point on, I knew I wanted a guitar. I used to spend hours looking at the guitars in the Sears and Roebuck catalog, or Montgomery Ward—that’s how we’d get most of our merchandise in our community back then—and I’d just wonder what it would feel like to get to own one someday. I just wanted one so bad.”

After years of waiting, Willard would get his wish. At age 12, Willard was given the job of starting the fires each morning in each of the four potbelly stoves in his high school. He had his teacher, Ms. Sloan, save the money he earned and by the end of the year he had accumulated \$3.00, enough to buy a used Montgomery Ward parlor-sized guitar. Dora showed Willard some chords to get going, and he spent the summer practicing religiously. He got to where he could accompany himself singing, and would perform as a duo with his friend, Elmer Ray Combs, for school functions.

Willard was a hard working student, and graduated high school at 16 to attend Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. Though a relatively small school in comparison to other universities, it was pretty overwhelming for a 16-year-old boy from Lotts Creek, and Willard struggled socially and academically. After enduring through a couple years at Berea, Willard left to join the Air Force during the Korean War, where he served as a cryptographer until his discharge in 1955. He returned to Berea after his time in the service and enrolled in an English composition class with a professor named Ms. Faulkner who forever changed his life and greatly contributed to his eventual path as an artist and songwriter.

“I was always struggling with writing, until Ms. Faulkner sat me down. She told me to use my own voice, to write about the life and people I know, and not be ashamed. Looking back, that changed everything for me.”

After Berea, Willard started working in a department store in Mullens, West Virginia, where he met his wife of 52 years Pat Dooley. In 1962 Willard and Pat moved with their first child to Galax, Virginia, where Willard was hired to manage Ammars Department Store. It was in Galax that Willard found his musical home: “When I got here I just had never seen that much music in my life. And it wasn’t long before I joined my first band.” Willard and his friend, three-finger-style-banjo player Jimmy Zeh, joined James Lindsey and the Mountain Ramblers, who, after shifting some members over the years, would become one of Galax’s longest running bands.

In 1970 Willard formed the Highlanders who cut three albums on the Princess Label out of Roanoke. Joining Willard in the Highlanders was Jimmy Zeh on banjo, Warren Casto on mandolin, and Paul Bullins on bass. Bobby Patterson joined the band in 1974, and with him, the band made the first-ever recording on Bobby's legendary Heritage Records Label, and would go on to record two more. With the Highlanders, Willard found his voice as a songwriter, penning many of their numbers.

Willard later joined his daughter Jill's multi-instrumentalist-husband Scott Freeman, the unique clawhammer-banjo stylist Edwin Lacy, and Sandy Grover to form Skeeter and the Skidmarks, a much beloved local group that toured extensively until Lacy left to join the seminary.

Following his time with the Skidmarks, Willard formed Alternate Roots, which featured Scott again on mandolin, Katy Taylor on vocals and guitar, Randy Paisley on dobro, Tony Testerman on fiddle, and the incomparable Steve Lewis on banjo and guitar.

Willard retired from the department store in the mid-90's, and turned his focus to his budding career as a pencil artist. Largely because it was difficult to find a good and affordable framer in the area, he opened the Front Porch Gallery with Jill and Scott. He still plays music locally with family and friends. He can be found picking with Scott most every Friday night at the Frame Shop, and for years he, Scott, and Bobby have volunteered to play for visitors of the Blue Ridge Music Center off the Blue Ridge Parkway, one of the most cherished and visited stops along the Crooked Road. In recent years, Willard has enjoyed playing with his beloved granddaughter, Scott and Jill's daughter, Dori Freeman. Already a brilliant songwriter and performer in her early twenties, Dori's first two releases, the self-titled debut and the follow up Letters Never Read have taken the Americana world by storm. "Just a natural talent. I'm so proud of her," Willard beams.

It was Dori, along with her producer Teddy Thompson, who got the idea to record Willard's first album as a featured artist at age 86. Willard wanted this album to be a family affair. It is recorded live, with no overdubs, in the Frame Shop, with Scott, Dori, and Dori's husband, the fine percussionist Nick Falk. Willard's old pal Jimmy Zeh joins in on a number as well. The result, as you will hear, is a beautifully crafted album by a fine and arguably overlooked songwriter, singing in his own voice about the places and people he knows about, just like Ms. Faulkner encouraged him all those years ago. This recording fittingly joins the countless beautiful images he has created over the years—a collective love letter to his mountains and the souls who have inhabited them. Yet another of Willard's gifts to us all.

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