

“VERSATILE IS BILLY EDD WHEELER”

George Brosi

Billy Edd Wheeler was born December 9, 1932, at Whitesville in Boone County, West Virginia, at the home of his maternal grandparents, Leda Jane and Samuel “Steptoe” Wheeler, a railroad worker. The household included three uncles, James, Garland, and Vincent, as well as two aunts, Jean and Louise, and his mother, Mary Isabelle. Like his aunts and uncles, Billy Edd called Leda Jane “mommy” and called his birth mother “sister.” She worked at a glass factory in Charleston, so “mommy” tended Billy Edd. A couple of years after Billy Edd was born, the senior Wheelers had a daughter, Shirley Faye, who became his playmate. By that time, the Wheelers had relocated to Jarold’s Valley. When Billy Edd was thirty-seven years old, he asked his mother about his birth father, Dutch Perdew. “Oh, well, he liked to have a good time,” she volunteered. Further pressing revealed only, “he was the best dancer in West Virginia.”

When Billy Edd was five, his mother married Arthur Stewart, and the new family moved to a nearby coal camp called Highcoal where Stewart worked as a miner for Anchor Coal Company. Billy Edd grew to despise his stepfather, who was abusive to both his mother and himself. But he was exposed to shape-note singing in church there, and when he was eleven, he got a Kay guitar for Christmas and began singing and writing his own songs. His first song was “Paper Boy Blues,” written when he was about fourteen and inspired by his work as a newspaper carrier. He first performed musically when he was a sophomore at Sherman High School.

A Presbyterian missionary came to Highcoal to teach vacation Bible school and told Billy Edd about Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina, a work college that allowed promising students not only to finish high school, but also to work their way through junior college. So, at the tender age of sixteen, he left Sherman High to finish up at Warren Wilson. There he met the legendary folklorist, Richard Chase, who coached him on how to tell Jack tales. He also met Mary Bannerman, the daughter of the college

president, and the woman who would become his wife. He graduated from Warren Wilson College in 1953. At Warren Wilson, Billy Edd met Willis D. Weatherford, Sr., Chairman of the Board from Berea College, who was going door-to-door in Wheeler's dorm recruiting students to work their way through a four-year degree at Berea. When Billy Edd decided to become an English major there, his stepfather asked, "Why? Are you going to write for a newspaper?" Billy Edd's reply that he didn't know elicited this response: "Well, then, you ought to go to Charleston and get a job in one of them chemical plants there. Some day you might work up to be a foreman."

Instead of taking that advice, right after graduating from Berea College in 1955, Billy Edd enlisted in the Navy, figuring he would be drafted anyway. He signed up to be a pilot, but in October 1957, all student pilots were given the choice of signing up for two more years or getting out, and he opted for the latter. Berea College Alumni Director, Dr. Norris Woodie, hired him as his assistant, and when Woodie returned to the philosophy department, Billy Edd became Alumni Director for about three years. He enjoyed editing the alumni magazine and traveling around the country, but he continued with his song-writing and singing. Billy Edd knew Betty Foley, a daughter of Red Foley, the country music singer who lived in Berea. Her sister, Shirley, married Pat Boone, the hottest thing in the music business at the time, so Betty passed Billy Edd's song, "Rock Boll Weevil" on to Shirley, who gave it to Pat in 1959. It became the first song written by Billy Edd Wheeler to be performed by another artist, and the first one to make him any money. Another coincidence led Billy Edd to meet Harold Newman, a New York music publisher who attended Berea's Christmas County Dance School. The result was that Monitor Records released *Billy Edd U.S.A.*, his first solo album.

Billy Edd's success as a singer and songwriter and his frustration with the fund-raising aspect of his job led him to move on, and he was accepted into the Yale Drama School. Arriving in New Haven in 1961, he rented the same room that Paul Newman had while studying there. Billy Edd worked in the darkroom to earn his scholarship, and in October of 1962, after reading the script of Edward Albee's Broadway hit, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, he was inspired to write the first draft of the song, "Jackson," which in 2005, Country Music

Television voted one of the ten greatest love songs of country music. On a trip to New York City that same year to try to find a folk-singing gig, Billy Edd met Norman Gimbel, a world class songwriter whose wife had purchased *Billy Edd U.S.A.* Gimbel introduced him to Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who at the time were producing Elvis Presley, Peggy Lee and others. They hired him as a songwriter. After a year at Yale, he followed his instructor's advice who said, "If you're going to be a playwright, go out and write plays, live, learn, experience life." He left Yale and moved to a one-room apartment on 83rd Street in New York City. His first hit was "The Revered Mr. Black," inspired by a picture he saw of John C. Campbell on horseback. It was recorded by the Kingston Trio, and its success caused Lieber and Stoller to raise his weekly pay from \$50 to \$100. In 1962, Billy Edd released his second solo album, *Billy Edd and Bluegrass, Too*, recorded with Lily May Pennington and Rosie Foley of Berea, two of the original Coon Creek Girls.

On November 3, 1963, Billy Edd Wheeler married Mary Bannerman at The Old Chapel at Warren Wilson College. Billy Edd was able to keep his New York job but moved to Swannanoa, North Carolina. In 1964, he wrote "The Coming of the Roads" that was recorded by Judy Collins. He had his biggest hit as a singer the next year with "The Little Brown Shack Out Back," and followed that up with several solo albums. In 1967, June Carter and Johnny Cash won a Grammy Award for their duet of Billy Edd's song, "Jackson." In 1968, United Artists Music Group bought Billy Edd's songwriting contract from Leiber and Stoller and hired him to open and manage their first office in Nashville. He and Mary moved to Nashville for a couple of years, continuing to write songs and release solo albums. Their daughter Lucy was born there in 1969. During that time, his first book, a collection of poetry entitled *Song of a Woods Colt* was released.

In 1970, Billy Edd moved back to Swannanoa. That same year, his outdoor drama, *The Hatfields and McCoys*, began its run in Beckley, West Virginia. It is still running. In 1975, Elvis performed in Asheville and introduced his song, "It's Midnight," as being written by "a local boy, Billy Edd Wheeler." At the end of the decade, another outdoor drama, *A Song of Cumberland Gap*, began its continuing run in

Pineville, Kentucky, and his play, *Mossie and the Strippers*, premiered in Charleston, West Virginia. During the '70s, Billy Edd released four solo albums and a second poetry book, *Travis and Other Poems of the Swannanoa Valley*, named after his son Travis, born in 1973.

In 1980, Billy Edd's song, "The Coward of the County," became a huge hit for Kenny Rogers, and the next year the movie by the same name, with Rogers playing the starring role, was released. The outdoor drama, *Young Abe Lincoln*, began its continuing run in southern Indiana in 1987. During the 1980s, Billy Edd released two solo CDs and he collaborated with Loyal Jones, then Director of the Berea College Appalachian Center, in co-authoring two humor books. He served as the sole author of *Outhouse Humor*.

In 1990, Billy Edd's musical, *Wings Over Appalachia*, was produced at Cumberland County Playhouse, Crossville, Tennessee. Later that decade, two more humor books, co-edited with Loyal Jones, were released. Billy Edd's deep friendship and collaboration with Chet Atkins were recognized in Wheeler's solo album, *Songs I Wrote with Chet*.

When songwriter Jerry Chesnut inducted Wheeler into the Nashville Songwriters Association International's Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2001, he summed him up most succinctly: "Billy Edd Wheeler is not versatile," Chesnut said. "Versatile is Billy Edd Wheeler." The following year, Billy Edd's sixth humor book, *Real Country Humor*, was released, and in 2003 it was followed by a novel, *Star of Appalachia*. The next year, Billy Edd was presented an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters by Berea College and his outdoor drama, *Johnny Appleseed*, opened near Mansfield, Ohio. Two new solo CDs were released in 2006.

In November 2007, Billy Edd Wheeler was inducted into the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame as part of its very first class. He claims 2007 to be the best year of his life creatively and financially, despite two surgeries on his vocal cords at Vanderbilt's Voice Clinic in Nashville. He looks forward to 2008 when another exhibit of his paintings, this time at the Blue Spiral 1 Gallery, opens in Asheville on January third and when he hopes to work not only on his memoir, but also on a couple of children's books with companion CDs. Billy Edd and Mary continue to live in Swannanoa.