Saying good-bye to a legend

BY GEORGE FISH

Bill Wilson was one of those magical persons who touched everyone he met, even those who knew him only through his music. Or was it more a matter of touching those who came to him through his music? Beki Brindle, singer/guitarist for Badkitty, for instance, was not closely acquainted with Wilson. Yet she vividly recalls the first time she heard him, when she was 11 or 12, and how he moved her to tears when he sang “Rebecca” from his first album. Dave Mac, Wilson’s manager, remembers the first time he met Wilson, and how what was to be a five-minute meeting turned into a three-hour conversation. Magically enough, neither one got a parking ticket that time in Bloomington—a town where the police pounce on any car parked over two hours!

Bill Wilson seemed the model of health when he died of a massive heart attack on Thanksgiving Day at age 46. He wasn’t known as a heavy drinker or drug user, and only occasionally smoked a pipe. He was recording a new demo he felt contained his best music ever, and his career seemed poised on the threshold of breakthrough. Hal Yeagy, owner of the Slippery Noodle, a frequent performing place for Wilson in the mid-1980s, was “pretty much dumbfounded” when he heard of Wilson’s death. Bill Wilson was not supposed to die, not at that time, and not that young. Such is the fragility of life.

Bill Wilson was born in Lebanon, Indiana on March 14, 1947, and grew up in Brownsburg, attending high school there. In 1966, he enlisted in the Air Force, served in Vietnam, and was discharged in Austin, Texas in 1970. He spent much of that year in Austin, then returned to Indiana, settling in Bloomington. In 1983 he embarked on an extended stay in Florida, but returned in 1986 to Indiana, his home for the rest of his life.

Wilson’s musical career started in 1969, and he had a brush with national stardom in 1972, when he was under contract as the next Dylan with Columbia records. But national fame eluded him then, and he built a career instead as a regional artist in Indiana. Even when he lived in Florida, he would drive back to Indiana to play gigs. He also found air time and performance time in Texas and Florida. So while his musical career was hardly meteoric, it was substantial, with solid song writing credits, such as “Made In the U.S.A.,” “Soldier’s Song” and “Indiana Song” and a significant contribution to Dire Straits’ hit, “Sultans of Swing,” although he was not given co-writer’s credit.

Wilson also felt deeply about his Vietnam experience, and reached out to other Vietnam vets, especially those traumatized by the war. He sings with simple eloquence in “Soldier’s Song” of coming home “on a day when the band forgot to play.”

LEGEND CONTINUES ON PAGE 33
should I be a second-rate Jimmy Buffett
when I can be a first-rate Bill Wilson?"
And that he was — till the very end.

Bill Wilson Discography

1969 — unreleased demo
1972 — *The Ever-Changing Minstrel* (Columbia)
1975 or 1976 — *Bloomington I*, compilation — one song
1976 — *Talking To Stars* (Bar-B-Q)
1980 — *Made In The U.S.A.* (Rosebud)
1980 — WFBQ compilation. One Song: “Boat To Jamaica”
1992 — *Traction In The Rain* (independently released)
1993 — *Live From Bloomington 1993*, compilation — contains “Traction In The Rain” which was just lines to a poem when the album of the same name was recorded.

In addition, numerous cuts were recorded for air play on radio stations WNAP, WFBQ and WTTS over the years. A large collection of tapes was also found at Wilson’s death, including a demo with John Mellencamp’s band when it was Bill Wilson’s band.

Special thanks to Dave Mac in helping with the compilation of this discography.

— Compiled By George Fish