

Saying 'Good-bye' to an Old Friend - William Earl Barnes

The popular Bluegrass musician died May 30th at the age of 90

The floors of northern Clark County's small country market Cliffside Grocery were rocking and those gathered were stomping last Sunday, June 21, 2020 as owners Frank and Audrey Puckett and friends celebrated the life of the last of the Cumberland Rangers, William Earl Barnes, who died recently at the age of 91. The Pucketts were long-time friends of Barnes who was one of Bluegrass music's best kept secrets and had played and written songs since he was only about four years old. Mike Maggard lifted up the spirits at Cliffside with his rendition of "Old Rattler," which was one of Barnes' signature songs and was played frequently by Bluegrass great Earl Monroe and Jackson County legend David String Bean Akins as well. "Rattler was a good old dog, as blind as he could be; But every night at supertime, I believe that dog could see."

Barnes died May 30, 2020 in Richmond, Kentucky. He was born July 13, 1928 in Madison County, but he was always proud to say he was from Estill County where his family was living at that time. His mother was visiting their family on Jackson Branch in Madison County when he was born. Earl is the eldest son of the late Jacob B. and Mary Goldie Chamberlain Barnes. They were originally from Estill County and returned there to Barnes Mountain the following year. In 1935, his father moved the family to the end of Boggs Lane on the farm of Lem C. Rowlett where he worked for fifty cents a day, and Earl lived in Madison County unto his death at the Hospice Plus Compassionate Care Center which is also on Boggs Lane.

Earl became interested in music after his father brought home an old "crank-style" Victrola phonograph along with three records of the Carter Family, Blue Sky Boys, and Bill Monroe. They had no radio, so Earl began using an old broom for his guitar and his mother would play the comb and they would sing and play for the whole family.

Earl's father played the banjo, claw-hammer style and was said to walk miles to barn raisings or square dances. The music intrigued Earl and he initially learn some mountain ballads like, "Frankie and Johnnie," "A Little Log Cabin in the Lane," and "Meet Me Tonight in the Moonlight."

His father traded for an old D28 Martin guitar in 1938 and told Earl if he learned to play it, they would give it to him. He practiced when his parents were out of the house and when they came home one day and caught him, his father gave him the guitar. He began performing at family gatherings and a preacher asked him to play and sing gospel music at tent revivals.

He bought his first new guitar in Lexington at the age of 17. His father was saved and became a Baptist preacher where he let Earl open the service with a couple of songs each Sunday morning on his radio programs on Richmond radio stations WEKY and WCBR.

Earl met Slim Miller who played fiddle at Renfro Valley, and he invited him to play with him the following weekend. He met the music house's founder John Lair who wanted to hear him play. He performed "A Little Log Cabin in the Lane" and "Meet Me Tonight in the Moonlight", two songs that he had learned from his mother. Liking what he heard, Mr. Lair offered him a job performing on Saturday nights for sixty cents to one dollar, depending on the crowd. Here he met and became friends with Emery Martin, Smokey Ward, Little Eller, Randall Parker, and Lillie May Ledford.

Earl went from Renfro to play country music at Woodland Auditorium in Lexington where he had the opportunity to play with big names such as Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs, and Jimmy Martin for about a year. In 1948, he met his wife, Jane Reed, and he "laid down" his music for 2-3 years, playing only in local settings.

Country music would have made a better living for him, but Earl felt like the atmosphere at the events was undesirable where many became intoxicated. His biography says he made the decision, "If I have to play in that kind of environment, I will quit."

He eventually began organizing festivals and booked numerous bands including Bill Monroe and organized Bluegrass festivals including the Bob Evans Farm Festival in southern Ohio, Booneville, Russell Springs, the Irvin McDowell Park and the White Hall



Earl Barnes, musician, and the Becknerville Travelers visited Morning Pointe Assisted Living of Richmond every third Saturday in 2016, sharing their talents for homegrown bluegrass and gospel music. Earl is a former band mate of Leonard Abner, Morning Pointe resident who passed away earlier that year. The senior living community learned about Earl through Leonard, and since Earl and his band perform every month for all the residents to enjoy. Earl has performed with Renfro Valley alongside the likes of Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. And Madison County residents remember his Saturday night shows at Four Mile Avenue in the stockyard show ring. He has written and recorded more than 200 songs, given more than 400 radio performances and has been on stage in festivals all over the country. He recently received the honor of being registered with the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame at Renfro Valley and will be inducted soon.

FROM LEFT: Charles Dixson, guitar, Lowell Dickerson, mandolin, Earl Barnes, guitar, J. R. Dickerson, bass, and Garland Banks, banjo, play for residents at Morning Pointe of Richmond every third Saturday in 2016. (Photo courtesy of Morning Pointe Assisted Living)

Festival in Richmond, the McClain Family Festival and the Crab Orchard, Tennessee Festival. Ricky Skaggs, Keith Whitley, and Emma Lou Harris got their start at Earl's festivals.

Earl was talented with just about any instrument he chose to play and began teaching students in the 1960's throughout the area. He recorded numerous albums, several which were recordings of his group "The Bluegrass Travelers" and "The Richmond Ramblers" in the sixties. Around 1970, Earl began playing banjo for the Cumberland Rangers with Estill County residents Asa Martin, leader, Jim Gaskin, fiddle, Grady "Buzz" Brazeale, auto harp, and Gilbert Thomas, mandolin. Many of the other instruments they played included a brown jug, hand saw, and washboard. They put on quite a show he recalls while promoting folk and country music over the country. He traveled with this group for approximately 14 years playing all over the United States and doing around 460 performances on WIRV Irvine radio station.

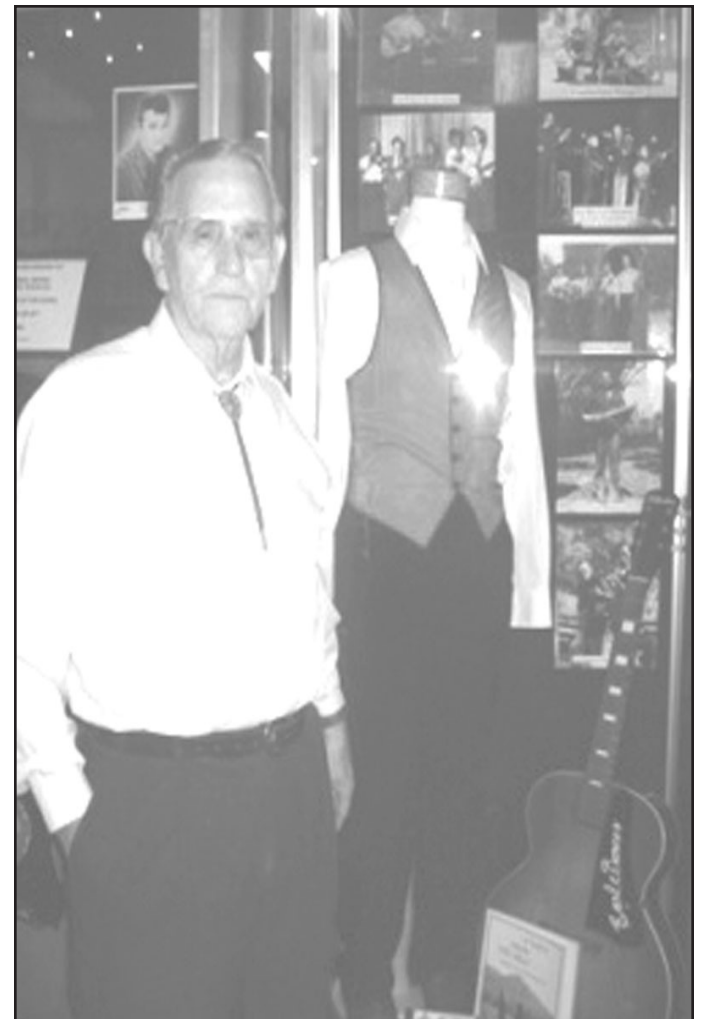
Over the years, Earl had written and recorded over 200 songs, and continued to receive royalties. He saw the technology improve from 45 records to 33 albums, cassette tapes to compact discs. He also had played roles in several movies including a 1970's KET production where he appeared as a fiddle player in the movie "This Other Eden". He also played in two other movies, "Fifty Years of Country Music" by Patsy Montana, and a Virginia Bicentennial production. Neither of the latter were ever released.

Earl was a former band mate of Leonard Abner, a Morning Pointe Assisted Living resident in Richmond; and through Leonard, Earl and his band began performing every month for all the residents to enjoy. He also was inducted into the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame at Renfro Valley.

Barnes grew up poor but spent his final years living the "good life," seeing his kids, grand kids and great grand kids and enjoying jam sessions in his basement.

He talked to Shannon Holbrook in a Richmond Register interview in 2019, "I didn't have a pair of shoes until I was nine," he recalls. "My parents gave us their love when they had very little else to give, though."

"I came from a log cabin in Estill to a stage in Renfro



Earl is shown standing in front of his showcase at the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame in Renfro Valley. (Photo courtesy of Yolasite.com)

Valley to Woodland Auditorium in Lexington to the Grand Ole Opry," he added with a smile.

"Now old Rattler's dead and gone like all the good dogs do. Don't put on the dog yourself for you'll be going there too."

The Yolasite biography of Earl said he is proud of his two sons, Danny and Randall, as they became a part of their father's music and traveled in the 1970's, and also his other children, Edward Earl "Pee Wee" Barnes and Brenda Sue Lowery who both made good listeners and supporters.

Thanks to Yolasite.com and Shannon Holbrook of the Richmond Register for their contributions to this story.

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Community News

Mail announcements to The Estill Tribune, 6135 Winchester Road, Irvine, KY 40336. Call (606) 723-5012; Fax to (606) 723-2743; or E-mail it to <News@EstillTribune.Com>

IHS Reunion Cancelled

Irvine High School Reunion

Attention IHS Alumni: The IHS Reunion planned for September has been cancelled due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Stay safe and we will see you next year 2021. Reunion Committee

July 2nd to 6th

Health Department Closed

The Estill County Health Department will close at 12:30 on Thursday, July 2nd for the 4th of July Holiday. We will re-open at 8:00 am on Monday, July 6th.