

# Did You Know Bill Wilson?

*-reflections by Rene Behrend*

Sometimes a single phone call can change your mood, your minute, your week, or your life. We have all been there. This one changed mine.

The call came into the BEF office on an ordinary day. On the other end of the line was a robust, warm voice belonging to Phillip Wolfe, a Brownsburg High School graduate from the Class of 1965 who was looking to reconnect a piece of his friend's legacy with the family to which it belonged. Phil had found some old cassette tapes of original music recorded by his dear friend Bill Wilson, and he wanted to make sure they ended up in the right hands.

That phone call launched me on a weeklong journey to learn about a fascinating and quietly remarkable BHS alumnus.

Phil told me that back at BHS, Bill Wilson was known for a tradition that I had never even heard of – painting Senior Cords. For those unfamiliar, Senior Cords were corduroy pants decorated with pictorial stories of a senior's high school life, worn every Friday by upperclassmen. The tradition was uniquely Indiana, and it peaked in popularity in the 1960s. Bill painted them with an artist's eye and a storyteller's hand, often working in the basement of his family home.

After graduation, the two friends went their separate ways; Phil headed to Ft. Sam Houston for medical training, and Bill landed at Bergstrom Air Force Base in Austin. It was there, in 1967, that Bill invited Phil to see a young, largely unknown guitarist named Jimi Hendrix perform live. Just an ordinary night out with a friend, except it wasn't, not really. That was the kind of life Bill Wilson lived.

After hanging up with Phil, I was too intrigued to let it go. I spent a Saturday at home researching Bill while his folksy music from his album *"Ever Changing Minstrel"* played softly in the background. My search led me to Paul "Pablo" Adams of the CPR Revival, who hosts an annual tribute concert to Bill the night before Thanksgiving, and to Bill Josey of Sonobeat Records, where Bill recorded his music. Both responded almost immediately. Bill Josey recalled Bill bringing the Pleasant Street Band down from Indianapolis to Sonobeat's Central Texas studios to record an album in 1972 and noted that even decades later, the children of Bill's bandmates were still reaching out to piece together the story of that era. Bill Wilson has been gone a long time, but people are still honoring him and finding their way back to him. Paul's response confirmed that Bill

had a sister, and Phil had known her once too, but her contact information had been lost over time. It didn't take me long to find her.

Today Gail lives in Avon, and when we finally connected by phone, it was clear that her love for her brother is as vivid and present as ever. Gail remembered watching Bill paint those Senior Cords in their family basement like it was yesterday. To this day, she keeps an eye out for them at garage sales and thrift stores, hoping to recover a piece of what he created.

***If you have Senior Cords that Bill Wilson may have painted, please reach out to the BEF office. We would love to connect you with Gail.***

Among Bill's many gifts was an uncanny ability to move through the world of music at the highest levels while remaining completely unpretentious about it. Gail mentioned friends like John Mellencamp, Larry Crane, and Mark Knopfler, and said there were likely many others Bill never even mentioned because that simply wasn't his style. He also toured with Jimmy Buffett before Buffett became a household name.

Bill Wilson died of a massive heart attack at just 46 years old in 1993. Forty-six years were not enough time; not for someone who painted the memories of an entire generation onto corduroy, who handed his friend a ticket to see Jimi Hendrix before the world knew his name, and who made music that is still worth finding and returning, decades later. But the people who knew Bill Wilson remember him clearly, warmly, and with a smile.

That is a legacy.

And it is exactly the kind of story that reminds us why Brownsburg High School - its history, its graduates and its traditions – is worth knowing, worth preserving, and worth celebrating. The Brownsburg Education Foundation exists because we believe that education shapes lives. Stories like Bill's remind us that sometimes those lives go on to shape something far bigger than any of us could have planned.

Do you have a BHS story worth telling? We'd love to hear it! Please contact the Brownsburg Education Foundation office to share it with us.