

## **Bill Harley Long Biography**

Storytellers were our first magicians, our first history keepers, society builders, culture shapers and spiritual and emotional filters, making sense of the world long before written communication.

For all our sophisticated technology and mass electronic entertainment, we still need those voices in the dark, by the fire, in the hall. A master storyteller connects us and intimately affirms our lives with resonant truths, no matter how embroidered, funny, mysterious or horrific the tale.

Bill Harley is a master storyteller.

The nationally touring, critically-acclaimed singer-songwriter, author, musician and monologist is considered by fans and peers alike to be one of the best storytellers in the country for his celebrations of commonality and humanity through comic narrative songs and confessional spoken works.

Entertainment Weekly labeled Harley, a two-time Grammy Award winner and multiple Grammy nominee, “the Mark Twain of contemporary children’s music.”

But tagging Harley with the “children’s artist” label, even of the top-drawer variety, is as deceptive as this gifted artist’s Puckish demeanor. In slice-of-life vignettes about school, growing up, parenting and family life based on real or imagined personal experience, Harley uses humor and a fine-tuned sense of the ridiculous to illuminate compassionate truths, even while inspiring belly laughs.

Adults absorb a Harley performance through a double filter of past and present. Children respond from the immediacy of their own lives – with vocal appreciation for Harley’s deftly timed comedy and rib-tickling sound effects – as with rubber-faced abandon he examines human foibles, flaws and embarrassments, common fears and simple pleasures.

In Harley’s far-ranging first-person stories about growing up, a second-grader who always follows the rules, for example, faces a moral dilemma when all the adults are in the forbidden *terra incognita* of the teacher’s lounge. An ode to the iconic “National Geographic” magazine and a child’s bike ride to a distant part of town speak to the benefits of traveling outside one’s comfort zone and experiencing how it feels to be “the other.” A boy’s yearning to be accepted as a “cool” kid makes

him party to the ostracization of a child who is “different,” leaving a legacy of regret.

Guiding unsuspecting audiences toward climactic revelations about such characters is part of Harley’s formula to provoke thought. “It has to come to that crisis where there is an inherent plea for tolerance and understanding,” he says. And while words are the storyteller’s stock in trade, so, too, are the spaces between those words: what Harley leaves unsaid during a performance is essential to his purpose.

“Subtext is always important to me – what am I saying underneath this? You’re trying to give enough information so that audiences can draw their own conclusions. And it’s always good,” he notes, “to assume the intelligence of the audience.”

Playwright and author David Kranes was artistic director of the respected Sundance Playwrights’ Lab when he heard one of Harley’s National Public Radio performances and invited him to Sundance in 1990 to participate as a “strong and individual voice” outside the traditional realm of theater.

“Even over the radio,” Kranes remembers, “it was easy to imagine listeners leaning forward to participate in what Bill was offering. His art was an art of closeness.”

Harley “has an instinctive thing that artists have, a unique individuality that transcends any particular box or genre he performs in,” says Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director of New York’s high-profile Public Theater. (Eustis first met Harley at the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab and was head of Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island, when Harley’s first musical, “Lunchroom Tales: A Natural History of the Cafetorium,” was staged there in 1996.)

Harley’s work resonates, Eustis believes, because he is “simultaneously” a son, a father, a husband, a child and a grown up, and has remained true to all those facets of his life.

Harley “has made his mark with his work for kids, but as a versatile and flexible performer with a rich and deep repertoire, his appeal is so much greater than that,” notes Susan O’Connor, Director of Programs at the International Storytelling Center and Artistic Director of the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. “Bill can be in front of a family audience and an audience of kids or he can be in front of seniors and his appeal is equally the same.”

“It’s a rare gift,” agrees children’s music marketing expert Regina Kelland, of Kelland Consulting. “When he steps out on stage, if you’ve seen him before, he seems like an old friend. If not, you feel like you’ve made a new friend. You somehow feel that he’s talking to you.”

Harley, who lives in Seekonk, Massachusetts, with his wife and professional partner Debbie Block with whom he has two grown sons, graduated from Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, in 1977 with honors and a religious studies degree. But he found his calling in community service, not the seminary, leading a program in conflict resolution for families and educators in urban and rural schools and co-founding with Block and others a community-based adult education platform.

An acoustic musician who plays piano, guitar and a variety of other stringed instruments, he was receptive early on to folk artist/activist Pete Seeger’s use of music as an expression of community. Supportive, too, of other musicians, Harley and Block were among the founders of Stone Soup Coffee House in Rhode Island, a music performance venue now in its 28<sup>th</sup> season.

“You build community by creating works of art that make our world a little bit bigger,” observes Cathy Fink, who duos with Marcy Marxer in creating Grammy-winning folk and children’s music. “Bill does that exceptionally well.”

Bringing people together became Harley’s artistic mission, whether in a commercial performance venue or in a school auditorium. (He is helping institutionalize story and song at Rhode Island’s urban Paul Cuffee School, and is exploring its affect on students and teachers. “Our kids think Bill belongs to them,” notes Suzie Shaw, Head of Cuffee’s Lower School.)

As a folk musician in the Seeger, Woody Guthrie tradition, Harley still lends his voice to social justice, environmental and political causes. In 1991, he produced “I’m Gonna Let It Shine: A Gathering of Voices for Freedom,” a well-received chronicle of the Civil Rights Movement through program of freedom songs, presented in association with WGBH-Radio in Boston.

Harley is doing political work, Kranes notes, “but not in any doctrinaire sense; more that the people-of-a-place form a ‘body-politic’; they have common ideals, goals, dreams, hopes.” And Harley “applauds personal evolution and seeks it, always, in himself.”

Harley began his work with children while still in college. His recording career started with the release of his first album, “Monsters in the Bathroom,” on Round River Records, the label he co-founded with Block, in 1984. Twenty-eight albums later, Harley’s work includes song and story collections for adults.

His eclectic mix of musical styles is a diverse mix of world music, reggae, blues, folk, rock, jazz, do-wop and more. “If I’m listening to Afro-Peruvian music, I may want to incorporate those rhythms” he says. “One of the good aspects about being a kid’s music artist is that no one questions whether you ought to be dabbling in different genres. My take on kids’ music is that it has to be strong rhythmically and melodically, which are the elements of a good tune.”

“Most of his songs are stories as well,” says Kelland. “Bill moves so easily between both worlds, it’s a natural way for him to communicate.”

In recent years, Harley has branched out further, as author of eight children’s picture books and two novels for gradeschoolers. Among his theater projects are “My Sarajevo,” a full-length play set during the Bosnian war, and “Stickeen,” a retelling of stories from the life of naturalist John Muir.

Whatever Harley’s forum, it’s always all about story, community and connection.

“Storytelling is such a simple art form, but it goes to the core of who we are as human beings,” says Brian Bemel, Artistic Director for Performances to Grow On in Ventura and the founder of the Ojai Storytelling Festival. “When Bill is telling his story, your own story is happening as you’re listening to his. Storytelling brings people together because you have this common experience. I think people hunger for that.”

The voyeuristic, vicarious, lowest-denominator world that is too often reflected by the media persuades us to devalue ourselves and weakens our sense of community. Through his work, Bill Harley appeals to our better angels, reminding us that we’re human, making us laugh, sometimes making us cry. “As a rule, I have a hard time figuring out where I fit,” he says of his multi-faceted career, “but I got into this because I’m trying to make the world a better place.”

One story and one song at a time.