

LATE NIGHT AND WEEKENDS PRESENTS

A SLAB FORK FILMS PRODUCTION

BILL WITHERS IN

Still Bill



“Ain’t No Sunshine”
“Lean On Me”
“Just the Two of Us”

EDITORS
JON FINE and SAKAE ISHIKAWA

PRODUCERS
DAMANI BAKER, ALEX VLACK and JON FINE

DIRECTORS OF PHOTOGRAPHY
JON FINE, DAMANI BAKER and EDWARD MARRITZ

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
ALEX VLACK and ANDREW ZUCKERMAN

WRITTEN BY
DAMANI BAKER and ALEX VLACK

EDITED BY
DAMANI BAKER and ALEX VLACK

stillbillthemovie.com

Still Bill

**Directed by:
Damani Baker and Alex Vlack**

**Produced by:
Damani Baker, Alex Vlack, and Jon Fine**

**Executive Produced by:
Alex Vlack and Andrew Zuckerman**

**Cinematography by:
Jon Fine, Damani Baker, Edward Marritz**

**Editors:
Jon Fine and Sakae Ishikawa**

**Cast:
Bill Withers, Dr. Cornel West, Tavis Smiley, Raul Midon, Angelique Kidjo,
Jim James, Sting, Ralph MacDonald, Kori Withers**

Production Company

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Still Bill Synopsis

Eight years ago, filmmakers Damani Baker and Alex Vlack had what seemed like a simple idea: make a film about Bill Withers. Little was known about Withers since he'd left the business of music behind, and his music, which includes the classics "Ain't No Sunhine", "Lean On Me", and "Just the Two of Us", had left its mark on the world in general and these two filmmakers in particular. But they soon found that access to Withers was not freely granted, and that many doors would open, only to slam back shut. With such limited access, their attentions shifted to trying to produce a concert of his music, which would provide a narrative thread for a discussion of his influence. For while his songs are part of the American fabric, his name is not well known.

Then things changed. His door cracked slightly open. First, a four-hour interview. Then a trip to his hometown of Slab Fork, West Virginia, the place to which he swore he'd never return. Four hours became forty. Forty is now three hundred hours, filmed over two years—a personal journey into the life of a complex, fascinating, and profound man.

No one knows why someone of such enormous talent left the business; the answer, it turns out, lies in Slab Fork. As a child, he was a small, asthmatic, stutterer. He was bullied and ignored by girls. His greatest influence was the woman he would immortalize later with the classic "Grandma's Hands": Grandma Galloway, who nurtured him and let him know that he had a gift, and that once he went out into the world, people would appreciate what he had to offer.

His ticket out of town was the Navy, where he spent nine years before ending up with odd jobs in California as a clerk at IBM, a milkman, and a mechanic installing toilets on airplanes. He sang to himself in the shower and wrote songs on a guitar he'd borrowed from his sister. People started telling him they liked what they heard, and he made a demo. Shortly afterward he was signed to Sussex Records, where he recorded his first record after his day shifts at McDonnell-Douglass. Then, "Ain't No Sunshine" rose to the top of the charts, and he followed it with a string of hits, tours, and television appearances.

The music business, however, is not always the most nurturing place, and when Sussex folded and Withers went to a major label, he grew frustrated with a new set of twisted expectations. But Withers wasn't like most stars, whose lives are defined by fame. He'd come to music late in life, after learning how to be a man on his own terms. And when he saw a corrupt and unfulfilling life of entertainment on the one hand, and his new family on the other, the choice was clear. It was more important to be a husband and a father than a hitmaker.

For nearly a quarter of a century, Withers has lived a simple life, raising his children with his wife in Los Angeles. His son, who has Asperger's syndrome, is just starting law school; and his daughter, whose own dreams of being a singer and songwriter have been overshadowed by the legend of her father, has started to come out of her shell with a clear and resonant voice. Withers nurtures them both, as his grandmother nurtured him.

And when Dr. Cornel West asks him what he'd like his legacy to be, the answer lies with them.

Through interviews with Dr. Cornel West, Sting, Angelique Kidjo, Jim James of My Morning Jacket, Withers' family and his oldest friends, and through countless hours of Withers living a full and contemplative life, the film presents a man who in his seventieth year continues to bring a rich understanding of the heart and soul of a man.

Directors
Damani Baker and Alex Vlack



Damani Baker, a native of the San Francisco Bay Area, was selected by Filmmaker Magazine as one of "25 new faces in independent film". His career spans documentaries, music videos, and advertisements. Some of Baker's documentaries include *Grenada: A Dream Deferred*, which revisits the events and circumstances of the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada, and *Return*, an award-winning film that explores the genius of traditional African medicine. This year Baker directed music videos for Maiysha's single "Wanna Be", nominated for a 2009 Grammy, and Morley's "Women of Hope", inspired by pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi. As a director his commercial clients have included Nike/Wieden & Kennedy and their 2006 World Cup 'Play Beautiful' campaign. Baker has also shot several viral campaigns for Puma, Wired Magazine and BMW for Late Night and Weekends. In addition to his professional work as a director, Baker is a guest professor at Sarah Lawrence College's Film and New Media Department and the director of the Quest for Global Healing Film Series in Bali, Indonesia. In 2009, he completed *Still Bill*, about the life and music of Bill Withers. The film premiered in the United States at South by Southwest in March 2009 and features a soundtrack with previously unreleased tracks.



Alex Vlack co-founded Late Night and Weekends with director Andrew Zuckerman, where they make documentaries, commercials, branded content, books, media installations and narrative films. His credits include New York Times Television's *Raising the Flag* and NOVA's *Battle Plan Under Fire*; media installations at the Centers for Disease Control and the National Museum of the Marine Corps; advertising campaigns and content for Puma, BMW, and Wired; a short film, *High Falls*, directed by Andrew Zuckerman, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and won Best Narrative Short at the Woodstock Film Festival. *Wisdom*, a book, film, and exhibition of Zuckerman's portraits and interviews conducted, which he produced and edited, was released in the fall of 2008. In 2009 he completed *Still Bill*, a documentary about Bill Withers nearly a decade in the making.

Production Stills



Bill Withers performs “Grandma’s Hands” with Cornell Dupree at Celebrate Brooklyn’s Tribute to Bill Withers.



Bill Withers in his studio.



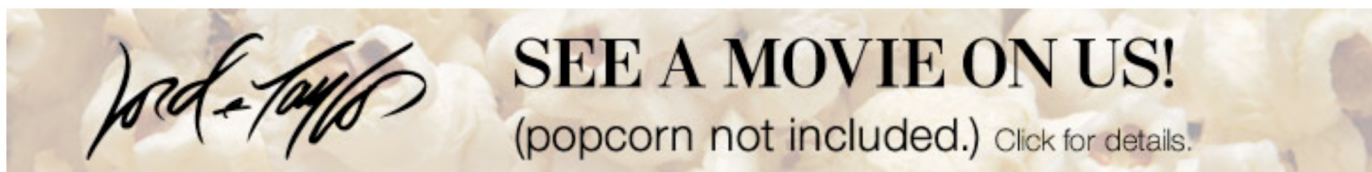
Bill Withers returns to Slab Fork, West Virginia.



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Overall Rating



Awesome: 0%
Worth A
Look: **100%**
Average: 0%
Pretty Bad: 0%
Total Crap: 0%

1 review, 0 user ratings

Still Bill

by **Jay Seaver**

"... and he's always gone too long."



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USA
N/A

UK
N/A

Australia
N/A

Directed by
Damani Baker

Written by
(documentary)

Cast
Bill Withers

SCREENED AT THE 2009 SXSW FILM FESTIVAL:

The recording studio that occupies a fair-sized chunk of Bill Withers's Los Angeles home in "Still Bill" is a tremendous tease. It's new-looking, with plenty of digital tools, which certainly suggests that the man behind "Lean on Me" and "Just the Two of Us" has written and recorded new music relatively recently, even though his last album came out in 1985.

Still Bill doesn't get into the specifics of the conflicts between Withers and Columbia Records back then; that information is out there for those who want to look. Instead, it gives us a look at Withers' life and personality to perhaps explain why he was able to just walk away from show business when many other men would fight the labels or do whatever was necessary to stay in the public eye. It's not so much that he's a man at peace with himself - indeed, he's wise enough to say, in a roundabout sort of way, that his calm demeanor owes as much to shyness as it does to contentment. He is fairly content; one of the aphorisms he offers to the camera and to his children is "on the way to wonderful, you'll pass through all right. Stop and take a look around, because you may be staying," and he does seem to be all right with all right.

Indeed, he seems to have come to that realization before he made it in show business. We learn about his childhood in Slab Fork, West Virginia, a played-out coal town, followed by stints in the Navy and working for various aerospace companies. not only is Bill a fine storyteller, but we go on trips with him, back to Slab Fork to visit a childhood friend and to reunions with Navy buddies and high-school classmates. A scene where Bill walks through a white graveyard to visit the overgrown patch where his father and other relations are buried says more about the segregation of his youth than words could; it's close to being randomly placed stones in the middle of the woods.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the film is the relationship between Bill and his daughter Kori. Though son Todd is in law school, Kori wants to follow in her father's footsteps. We see her operating the production equipment when her father does a song with Raul Midon (as far as I know, "Mi Amigo Cubano" has not appeared any place other than this film), and we see her writing her own music. It seems like a tricky subject, though - as the camera pans past pictures of Kori and Bill on stage or otherwise playing music, Kori's voiceover paints Bill as something less than fully encouraging - he does not dole out praise lightly.

That's the closest the film comes to having anything negative to say about Withers, although even that isn't as one-sided as it sounds; Bill has great pride in his children. The interview footage in taken in his home is sharp and bright, emphasizing how sharp and clean all the lines are. Withers's post-music industry life is orderly and prosperous, it seems, and he's happy enough to not want to do much to upset that.

I can respect that, even if I'd really like to know what he's got on tape and hard drive in that home recording studio. It's odd; we see so many stories of musicians who fell prey to drugs or living it up that Bill Withers, with his 30-year marriage, nice kids, and comfortable life, seems unusual.

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Wednesday, March 18th, 2009 at 11:41 pm

SXSW GETS COVERED or The Fortune Cookie Diet, No Sunshine Rocks and British Soccer Thuggery

By robert.samardick@vimooz.com

STILL BILL

This film is incredible. After the audience was done wiping away their tears, they clapped and hooted throughout the credits. It was like seeing hardcore Spingsteen fans watching the Super Bowl performance. Except the music was much better.

Bill Withers is part legend- part unknown one hit wonder, depending on who you talk to. The man behind such r&b classics as “Just The Two Of Us” and “Ain’t No Sunshine” is the star of the film. What looks like a typical rockumentary bio pic is actually a much more intimate look at who he is. Instead of giving a corny synopsis of his life the film follows who he is now, and what made him that way. Withers has not released a song since 1985 after a huge fallout with the record industry. He claims to have no desire to record again but that statement is tested throughout the film, resulting in him going into the studio and getting down.

Withers is as emotional as he is strong. Hailing from a small town in Virginia, he was able to overcome chronic stuttering to become a huge icon. Withers is a charming devil, a dictionary of inspiration and just really cool to hang out with. You’ll clap along with the songs and reflect on the current state of the music industry. Withers is the ultimate artist, a man who cares little about fame and avoids it at all costs.

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21 March 2009

Film: Still Bill

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Director: Alex Vlack & Damani Baker; Cast: Bill Withers, Dr. Cornel West, Tavis Smiley, Sting, Jim James; Runtime: 77 minutes

The saddest part about talent is that far too many people take it personally. Everyone has had a hero die in biography, particularly in the arts where the trend has been toward creating a culture of decadence and sacrificial tyrants. We raise them up, they fuck up their lives and talent, and we feed them to the collective volcano called Fame. Watching *Still Bill*, I can't remember being so moved by an artist's life and words. I can't remember the last time I learned about someone both gifted and wise. *Still Bill* paints an earnest portrait of the artist as modest craftsman. In *Still Bill*, truth actually is beauty and beauty is truth.

Having Bill Withers as the narrative guide would present more quandaries for a different kind of person. But his warmth and vulnerability disarm many of the questions about allowing someone to shape so much of their own story arc. Withers speaks in Southern koans, disarming in his humility, depth, and philosophical perspective on life. The directors take us walking with Withers through the old, ivied segregated graveyard where he looks for the graves of his family. We visit the rural, coal mining town of his youth and talk to friends he's had since childhood or old neighbors who yell from their porch for a few lines of "Ain't No Sunshine". What works so well in *Still Bill* is the slow flow and the unobtrusiveness of the directors. It has clear structure and even something of a climactic moment, but every frame has the arresting rocking chair cadence of true intimacy. There's no persona in Bill Withers, no sense that he remade himself to make music, a concept so foreign in a contemporary culture of icons like Madonna, Michael Jackson, and Prince.

It's clear that Withers never had the caste of the superstar. A stuttering asthmatic in his youth, Withers didn't seem to be destined for music as he made his way through the military and several aircraft mechanic jobs. Vlack and Baker know how to convey ideas with perfects shot: Bill Withers lifetime of hard work gets shown by a gentle gliding close up on his knotty, weathered hands. Withers seems every bit the devoted family man, winding down his touring as he began having children with his wife. Repeated references are made to Withers' issues with the music business, but the specifics are never really given. The absence takes nothing away from the documentary, but it's the viewer's natural instinct to get the dirt on his disillusionment. His family life appears placid and healthy. There's an evolving tension between Withers and his daughter who also wants to be a singer, but his initial critical eye toward her work appears only to have been a push toward greatness as they eventually end up in the studio with him in tears over the beauty his daughter has created. Where's the rehab? There are no backstage blowjobs, junkies, violent run-ins with the police, or self-entitled Caligulation.










It's hard to sit through this documentary and not want to simply flood the page with superlatives. Withers is such a wise and moving figure that epiphanies frequently spill out of his mouth, though with the reined concision of a former stutterer. When he accepts an award at an arts theater dedicated to young people who stutter, he moves everyone in the room with his insight, grace, and eloquence, drawing out lessons from life like the ones he learned at his Grandma's knee. He cold calls Cuban musician Raul Midon and asks him to jam in his home studio. He reflects on the natural cycle out of being the center of attention and how artists should realize when "it", whatever "it" is, has left the building. He's fully human and adult, without artifice or some arch sense of his own place in musical history. I have written about music for so long that I have become jaded to the entire concept of having a concept. Bill Withers realness was penetrating, revelatory, and leaves me effusively speechless. *Still Bill* is the antidote for every toxic seep of the TMZ-ification of the arts.



Only one small piece of the documentary broke the pulling spell. I mention it only because I've seen it too many times before in too many music documentaries. In the Joe Strummer documentary, *The Future Is Unwritten*, we got to hear rootless and platitudinous commentary from people like Matt Dillon and Johnny Depp. Not because of their relevant insights to the life of the artist, but simply to fumigate the story with the stench of celebrity. It's just an extravagance that adds nothing significant to the story unless you are trying in some way to have a contemporary map of influences as part of the story. So why do Vlack and Baker give us Sting's ethereal commentary on Bill Withers? He could have been talking about clotted cream for all the specificity given in his adoration. There is no historic or musical connection and it runs completely counter to Withers' approach to life, the industry, and his critique of the adulation of celebrities over hard, working folks with underappreciated talents. I don't even care what Sting has to say about Sting; here, this Lazy Susan of talking pop heads should burn on the cutting room floor. Similarly, Cornel West and Tavis Smiley falling over themselves to adore Withers added nothing to the documentary but an opportunity for West and Smiley to appear to be "on" the Bill Withers tip. Who cares?

Bill Withers seems to me to be the "Working Class Hero" that Lennon aspired to be, but never really was. He was an artist that learned a life away from his craft, only to return to playful experimentation in his golden years. He is brilliant and decent, a man who loved making music, but never confused the burning desire to create with the fame whore's will-to-power.

—[Terry Sawyer](#)

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THE PLAYLIST

A place ostensibly dedicated to that sweet spot where movies and music meet
but a place to discuss whatever the f we want.

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Here's who runs and works on **The Playlist**.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Ideally, The Playlist will be a locale to discuss film scores and soundtracks, movie music, dvd releases, regular film news, reviews and all that jazz, but you'll have to forgive and tolerate a digression or two at our whims and discretions. Secondly, The Playlist is the official home to The Playlist Soundtrack Series.

3 / 20 / 2009

The Playlist SXSW Recap Pt 3: 'Observe & Report,' 'Best Worst Movie' 'Still Bill' & More...



Yes, we're long gone from the **SXSW Film Festival** personally, but we did write three reports from the 10-something films we saw.

However, As promised, our trustworthy pals **Bridget Palardy** (cinematographer and *Nylon* magazine video contributor) and **Katie Walsh** (former Lionsgate PR flack) were both on the ground and they sent us their thoughts on the films they also saw. Much appreciated, ladies.



"Still Bill"

It was fitting that the kickoff day of **SXSW Music** was the day we decided to hit three music documentaries. Starting off with "Still Bill," a sweet and moving tribute to underrated singer/songwriter **Bill Withers**, of "Lean On Me" and "Just the Two of Us" fame. The man behind the music is a wise, sensitive soul, and this film presents him in an elegant, quiet

way, though not without emotion or humor. Our group was tearing up watching Bill and his talented daughter Kori record a song together. "Still Bill" brings the audience on a simple narrative journey, and you'll have Bill's words of wisdom and "Ain't No Sunshine" stuck in your head for the rest of the day.

[B+] - KW