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[Home](#) > Remembering Everett Lilly: A Tribute

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By Caroline Wright

Everett Lilly, a revered member of the International Bluegrass Music Association's Bluegrass Hall of Fame, died on Tuesday, May 8 at his home in West Virginia. He was 87 years old.

Born Charley Edwin Lilly on July 1, 1924, in Clear Creek--the same town in which he'd live most of his life, in West Virginia's remote Raleigh County--Everett and his brother Bea (born December 5, 1921) became interested in mountain-style music when they were young children. Both learned guitar, mandolin and the vocal parts of the "brother duet" style then popular on radio and records. Eventually, Everett became the mandolin player, tenor, and leader of their group. According to family legend, Everett and Bea left their families one Christmas Eve to join up with Bill and Charlie Monroe to play music. When they ran into a blizzard, they gave up and went home.

The brothers began performing on radio station WJLS in 1938. Like many men from Raleigh County at that time, they found it difficult to find regular work that provided a decent living. They tried coal mining for a while, but Everett burned his hands in an electrical accident, and Bea almost lost his life in a cave-in.

EVERETT ALAN LILLY, son: When I was six or seven years old, I went to pick a cucumber from the garden. My dad approached and said that he and his brother Bea were going to play for Pearl and asked if I would like to come. I sat between my Dad and Bea in the green pickup and we headed up McDough Hollow to Pearl's house. Pearl was a member of the close-knit community at Clear Creek and she was dying. Her house sat right by a creek, and the hills were within a few feet of the creek in that narrow hollow. I sat in the truck as the moon rose and listened to the most beautiful sounds I have ever heard--the Lilly Brothers singing the old songs. The mandolin and fiddle sounded especially beautiful on this moonlight night.

It was a defining moment in my life. I had a sudden realization that this music has meaning and that it is part of our culture. It is no coincidence that I now present workshops on the music and its connections to culture and continued relevance in modern society. These presentations always include a performance by The Songcatchers [Everett Alan's multi-generational music group; his 12-year-old daughter, Ashley, is also a member]. My father and Bea contributed greatly to my development on that evening, and many other occasions.

Everett and Bea finally got a break in 1948, with a regular spot on WWVA in Wheeling, WV, where the Saturday night Jamboree reached millions of homes in the Northeast. They also started working with fiddler Tex Logan, then on a break from his graduate engineering studies at MIT.

Though he loved playing music with his brother and Tex, Everett accepted a job with Flatt & Scruggs in the early 1950s, to support his growing family. He helped make 14 historically significant recordings that featured many classics, like "I'm Workin' on a Road (to Glory Land)," "Somehow Tonight," and "Over the Hills to the Poorhouse."



Jody Rainwater, Everett Lilly, Earl Scruggs, Lester Flatt, Art Wooten

(photo courtesy of Jody Rainwater; reposted from Richmond Times-Dispatch)

TIM O'BRIEN, singer/songwriter/instrumentalist: Everett was the reason the Lilly Brothers' music is known internationally. He was not only a wonderful singer and player; he was also a good businessman who had a knack for finding new audiences for bluegrass music in New England and Japan. His powerful mandolin and tenor voice were noted by Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, who hired him to play in their Foggy Mountain Boys. But Everett didn't stay long, knowing he was more vital as a partner with his brother Bea, and together they made their own special brand of bluegrass.

EVERETT ALAN LILLY: My father became an important part of bluegrass history during his two stints with Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. And of course he made their first Columbia recordings with them. They revealed his beautiful and powerful tenor voice to a much wider audience.

I expect that most people don't know this story. Dad and Lester Flatt recorded "Your Love is Like a Flower" under both their names. However, it was actually Bea Lilly who wrote the song! Dad acknowledged this on any number of occasions. Dad took the song to Lester with Bea's permission and they recorded it under their name. Bea wrote the song as a young man, sitting on a large rock in the creek near his home. I believe his goal was to get the song recorded and thus to a wider audience. There was never even a hint of a problem between Dad and Bea about this.

After a visit from Tex Logan, Everett decided to move to Boston to check out New England's active folk and country music scene. Bea and banjo wizard Don Stover, who had been playing together in West Virginia, joined them in short order. Stover and the Lilly Brothers introduced bluegrass music to New England through a long-term, seven-night-a-week engagement at a nightclub called the Hillbilly Ranch, where they played from 1952 till 1970. Musicians like Bill Monroe, Tex Ritter, Doc Watson, and Mike Seeger sat in with them when they were in town. Audiences were electrified by the band's authentic brother-style vocal harmonies, and Stover's three-finger banjo and guitar work. The legendary Joe Val, discussing the band's influence on urban Massachusetts, once told an interviewer, "Those guys hit on like a bombshell. Nobody'd ever heard anything like that before."

EVERETT ALAN LILLY: Tex Logan paved the way for the Lilly Brothers and Don Stover to come to Boston and play with him at the Hillbilly Ranch. They soon had a regular live show on a major radio station, followed by other achievements, despite playing seven nights a week working a grueling schedule. They played a key role in helping to spread bluegrass music in the Northeast region, influencing a new generation of musicians in New England. Their two groundbreaking tours of Japan in the 1970s helped to open up that market.

The Lilly Brothers and Don Stover helped set the standard in bluegrass music during their Boston days. They did not record as much as some groups but their recordings were very well received. They stayed true to their music and never would have changed it for commercial success. My dad's mandolin playing was unquestionably in the Bill Monroe tradition. His right hand was fast and very powerful. One of my favorites was their recording of "John Henry" as it featured Dad's powerful mandolin, and Don Stover's great break on that song. He could switch gears on the very next song and play beautiful breaks on those old tunes the Lilly Brothers were famous for singing. Dad also wrote "Over the Hills to the Poorhouse," recorded with Lester, and "Southern Sky," which he recorded with Bea and Don.

PETER ROWAN, singer/songwriter: When I was a teenage kid up in Massachusetts, I became a big fan of the Lilly Brothers, who I discovered when I was playing at a little rock and roll dance. I had heard about this music, bluegrass, appearing in Boston. And after those little record hops, we used to go between Harvard Square and Park Square to see what music was going on. I was just discovering it all. I didn't realize that as a kid, I'd heard it on the radio.

When I finally started to come more of age when I was 15 or 16--we used to stand outside the door of the Hillbilly Ranch and listen to Don Stover and the Lilly Brothers and occasionally Tex Logan playing fiddle. Tex was instrumental in bringing the Lilly Brothers up to Boston. Post-World War II, there were a lot of Southern troops--sailors and soldiers coming back from the war and landing in Boston. I was actually playing in the Hillbilly Ranch when I was 17. (It was easier in those days to be underage; if you were on the bandstand, nobody really bothered you.) So I became "the kid." Everett Lilly was super-nice to me, as was his brother, Bea, and Don Stover, and of course Tex Logan.



The Lilly Brothers & Don Stover at the Hillbilly Ranch (photo reposted from *BluegrassToday.com*)

TEX LOGAN, fiddler; former Blue Grass Boy; worked with the Lilly Brothers & Don Stover: In the early '50s, we were working a nightclub, the Plaza, on Tremont Street, just across from the Boston Common. On this particular evening, we could not park near the Plaza, and we wound up in front of the high-end department store, Bonwit-Teller.

As we unloaded, Bea Lilly asked, "Everett, what's that buildin'?"

And Everett turned and looked at it, and I could see his lips moving. "Bea, cain't you read? That's where you get your damn *clothestellered!*"

EVERETT ALAN LILLY: When I graduated high school in West Virginia I went to Boston with a one-year plan for college. The plan was I would play music with Dad, Bea, and Don. I played guitar and learned to play the bass on my father's advice because he correctly pointed out that guitar players were common, but good bass players were not. I played bass on Country Songs of the Lilly Brothers, as well as the recordings at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965. I got to do some wonderful things with the Lilly Brothers.

But my playing wasn't that good on my first big concert with them. I remember well Dad and Bea talking with me before the show held in a large auditorium in Boston. They explained that after a break, the applause would be so thunderous that I would be unable to hear anything for several seconds. They emphasized how important it was to keep time so that "when the sound comes back you will still be in time." I thought, "How difficult can that be?"

Well, it happened exactly like they said it would. The audience applauded, and as I watched my Dad, Bea, and Don, I thought everything was just fine. Then the sound came back and I could hear them. And I was completely out of time. My uncle turned and gave me a "look" of disapproval and, turning back to the audience, he simply tapped his right foot to give me the time. Dad gave me a quick, most disapproving "look" as well. At intermission they were their usual friendly, supportive selves. Neither mentioned it, then or ever. And I never again lost time again with them, or anyone else.

TEX LOGAN: The Lilly Brothers, Don Stover and myself were playing a bluegrass festival in Ontario, Canada, near Toronto. We had just opened with a fast instrumental when Everett stepped up to the mic and said something like this: *[in Everett's broad West Virginia drawl]* "Thank yew just a whole lot there, friends and neighbors, for those applause? We are mighty proud to be here at your festival. And I'd like to say if you keep workin' hard on it, you will have the best festival in the whole U-nited States!"

I quickly whistled to him. *?Hey, Everett, we?re in Canada!?*

(in Everett?s voice): ?Weeeeelll, friends and neighbors, Tex Logan tells me we?re in Canada. Now, I want you to know that we think y?all are just as good as we are!

At this point, Sam Bush?who was filling in playing bass with us?nearly fell off the stage laughing.

PETER ROWAN: One afternoon Bea Lilly put his hat down on the table in front of the stage?it was very hot; it was summertime?and sometime in the night, somebody made off with his hat. The next Sunday, they came back to play the same place, and Everett saw somebody wearing Bea?s hat. The story goes that he walked up to the table and laid a 45-caliber pistol on the table and said to the guy, *?Lookee here, dear buddy. I do believe you?re wearing my brother Bea?s hat!?*

TEX LOGAN: Well, first of all, it wasn't a pistol; it was a knife...

In January of 1970, Everett's 16-year-old son Jiles was killed in an auto accident. Everett, heartsick and weary of city living, moved his family back to his home in Clear Creek. Over the years, the Lilly Brothers & Don Stover reunited periodically for festival appearances and a couple of tours of Japan that deepened the country?s fascination with bluegrass music. They would also appear in Bluegrass Country Soul, a documentary filmed over Labor Day weekend in 1971 at Carlton Haney?s legendary Camp Springs, NC bluegrass festival.

EVERETT ALAN LILLY: In 1973, my father, Bea, Don Stover and I went to Japan for our first tour. We were one of the early bluegrass bands to make that trip. They told us in Osaka that, unlike in Tokyo a few days earlier, the crowd would respond politely with applause but it would not be overwhelming as the applause could take time from songs. They said the applause at the end would be like rolling thunder. And it was! We came back out for an extended encore and I will forever remember it. My Dad and Bea stood together in their matching blue jackets shimmering in the bright lights and their usual white hats, and smiled at the ovation they were receiving. Near them stood the great Don Stover, also smiling.

I thought how wonderful it was for these two brothers from Clear Creek, WV--and for Don Stover, who grew up nearby--to be standing here, being so appreciated. They opened the encore with "Open Up Them Pearly Gates" with such obvious happiness, energy, and beauty. I was momentarily taken back to that night, many years ago, when Dad and Bea played for Pearl. Standing to their right, with my old Gibson guitar, I knew this was one of those moments that would forever be etched in my memory.

Back in West Virginia, Everett created a new band called Everett Lilly & the Lilly Mountaineers with his sons Mark, Charles, and Daniel, and occasionally their older brother Everett Alan. Sadly, Everett's son Charles lost his life in an accident while on tour with country music star Billy Walker in 2006; Everett?s son Tennis passed away a few years ago as well. Don Stover died in 1996, two months after the passing of Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music.

Everett and Bea reunited in 2001 as The Lilly Brothers & The Lilly Mountaineers. One year later, on October 17, 2002, the Lilly Brothers and Don Stover were inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame. Bea Lilly, suffering with Alzheimer?s Disease, died in 2005.

IRA GITLIN, instrumentalist, teacher, writer: A bunch of us were jamming by the elevator late one night in the Galt House [at World of Bluegrass]. As I recall, it was the year Stover and the Lilly Brothers were inducted into the Hall of Honor. Anyway, we were just finishing up "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone" when Everett and Bea came by. Right after the song, they asked us--almost apologetically, it seemed--if we would mind doing it again so they could sing it with us. We all looked at each other as if to say "Duh!" and fired up the song again, with the Lilly Brothers on board as vocalists.



*In 2008, Everett proudly accepted an award for IBMA Recorded Event of the Year for his album *Everett Lilly and Everybody & Their Brother*. The delightful celebration included his sons, plus friends like Marty Stuart, Rhonda Vincent, Darrin Vincent, Billy Walker, Ronnie & Rob McCoury, David Ball, Charlie Cushman, Larry Stephenson, Joe Spivey, Eddie Stubbs, Jason Carter, Dickey Lee, Freddy Weller, Mike Bub, Rad Lewis, Andy May, Marcia Campbell, Clay Rigdon, Eric Blankenship and Bill Wolfenbarger. A year later, he received the Vandalia Award, West Virginia's highest folklife honor.*

RHONDA VINCENT, singer/songwriter/instrumentalist: Everett Lilly was one of the sweetest men I've ever met. His entire family welcomed me as I joined them to sing on their project, and performed on a few shows together. He was a man who dearly loved the music. I am proud to have known and performed with him.

BILL WOLFENBARGER, co-producer of *Everett Lilly and Everybody & Their Brother*: Years ago when I first met Everett Lilly, I felt as if I already knew him. His son, Charles, and I were best friends, sort of a "brothers from different mothers" kind of thing. I finally met Everett in person one night at the Station Inn as he was getting ready to perform a show. Within ten minutes of our meeting, he looked me straight in the eyes and very solemnly and seriously said, "Brother, do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" I responded that I certainly did and we spent the next thirty minutes discussing the Bible. I talked with Everett many times over the years by phone calls, visits when he came to Nashville, and our conversations weren't as much about music as they were our love for God.

When we won the IBMA 2008 Recorded Event of the Year award, Everett was too sick at the time to attend, but was listening at home. When he heard the acceptance speech and the fact that God got the glory, he felt that was as important, or more so, than the award.

MARCIA CAMPBELL, on-air personality at WSM: Bluegrass legend Mr. Everett Lilly was a dear friend and great talent. He was a Professor of Entertainment! It was my honor to work with him and participate on the *Everett Lilly and Everybody & Their Brother* project. He will be greatly missed. My love and prayers to the Everett family, friends and legions of fans.

LARRY STEPHENSON, singer/entertainer: It was an honor to record on the Everett Lilly CD. He's one of the pioneers of bluegrass music and I'm always humbled to be around the first generation players and singers. They should never be forgotten!

TEX LOGAN: I don't know what kind of schooling they ever had but they started playing music pretty early; they were taught by their father and mother. They had a tendency to pronounce words *funny*. They'd put extra symbols in a word, like "Minnie-annapolis." "We're goin' up to Minnie-annapolis!"

I don't want to embarrass him, but here's one other little thing. Everett's advice to me: "Tex, never put a new part on an old car, because it'll put a strain on the OTHER old parts and break them!"

TIM O'BRIEN: I had met Everett and his sons at a Mountain Stage radio show taping, and then one Wednesday at the World of Bluegrass in Louisville--I think it was 2000. I ran into him and his son Everett Alan walking down the midway at the Galt House. They were both dressed in the denim jackets the Lilly Mountaineers often wore on stage, and Everett Sr. under his trademark Stetson hat. They had come to test the waters at the IBMA, and I was just one of many who was happy to see them mingling in the greater fold that week. The next day, I invited them to visit my wife and me in our suite after the awards show. Sure enough, they showed up about midnight and we proceeded to visit and pick and sing. I think Pete Wernick and his wife Joan were there, and banjoist Phil Easterbook. Everett played my mandolin, Everett Alan played my guitar, and I tried to follow on the fiddle.

Everett spoke at length about his religion and his strong faith in the Lord. And he told stories about the old days at Boston's Hillbilly Ranch, and of meeting some Japanese businessmen there who eventually booked the Lilly Brothers on a tour of Japan. At one point I asked him, "Do you realize what an honor it is to have you visit with us here?" His response: "Do you have another beer?" Everett wanted you to know who he was as a man, and he was obviously proud of his accomplishments, but he wouldn't let anyone dwell on it.

After they left about 3 a.m. or so, we all kept marveling at the sound of Everett's voice ringing in that room, a voice we'd heard countless times from records and occasionally from the stage. Of course it was a thrill to hear him play my mandolin, but the biggest thrill was to sit beside that venerable musical ambassador from my home state of West Virginia.

In his last decade, Everett Lilly continued to perform occasionally with the Lilly Mountaineers, which included sons Daniel and Mark and several other musicians. He played music right up to the end. Daniel Lilly told a reporter from the New York Times. He was enjoying life and still riding his four-wheeler through the woods at the age of 87. He died at the kitchen table.

EVERETT ALAN LILLY: Dad and I traveled to New England for his brother Bea's service a few years ago. And, as was done at Bea's service, there were Lilly Brothers and Don Stover recordings playing at my dad's service. So it, too, was also a celebration. Of course we are all very sad that it was his appointed time, but he was so very blessed to have such a long fulfilling life.

KITSY KUYKENDALL, Bluegrass Unlimited magazine; IBMM Board of Trustees: Everett will be sorely missed by many of us who knew him. He showed up one year at the Fan Fest in Louisville. I was producing the show that year and immediately asked him if he would like to play on one of the stages. I had a great little roots stage and one of the bands was a conglomeration of several excellent old-time players, and it was the best place for him that year too. He had a ball and so did the other players getting to play with him that day. Tim O'Brien told me the next day that Everett went up to Tim's suite and jammed with him until about three in the morning and really did not want to quit. We should treasure our memories of these pioneers. They are quickly all going away.

TIM O'BRIEN: He loved music and people and was a strong Christian through his life. His faith and his strong sense of humor helped him keep a positive view of things in spite of some terrible tragedies. He will be missed greatly but his music will never die.

BILL WOLFENBARGER: Everett Lilly inspired many people thru his music and his kindness he extended to everyone, no matter their walk in life. But his music was secondary in his life to his love for his family and serving God. Heaven without a doubt got a new angel on Tuesday, May 8th when Everett Lilly closed his eyes here on earth and opened them to the Glory of Heaven!

I think the great Marty Stuart summed it up best when he said, "When we all get to Heaven, we're gonna find out that Everett Lilly is God's favorite mandolin player? and mine too!"

Everett Lilly is survived by his wife of 64 years, JoAnn; sons Everett Alan, Daniel, and Mark; four daughters; a sister; and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The family has asked that donations in his memory be made to the Everett Lilly Memorial Fund, care of City National Bank, One Park Avenue, Beckley, WV 25801.

Written and collected by Caroline Wright for IBMA, May 2012.

Recommended

Everett Lilly, Bluegrass Musician, Dies at 87 (obituary by Bill Friskics-Warren for the *New York Times*)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/14/arts/music/everett-lilly-bluegrass-mus...>^[2]

Everett Lilly Passes (obituary by David Morris for BluegrassToday.com)

<http://bluegrasstoday.com/41494/everett-lilly-passes/>^[3]

International Bluegrass Music Museum: Everett Lilly biography by Fred Bartenstein

<http://www.bluegrass-museum.org/general/zbioEverettLilly.php>^[4]

The Lilly Mountaineers Online

<http://www.lillymountaineersonline.com/>^[5]

Sources:

- International Bluegrass Music Museum?s Bluegrass Masters Gallery bios by Fred Bartenstein
- IBMA Hall of Honor Inductee biographies
- *New York Times* (Everett Lilly obituary by Bill Friskics-Warren)
- *Country Music: The Rough Guide* (Wolff, Kurt - Duane, Orla, 2000, Rough Guides)
- Personal interviews and correspondence with Peter Rowan, Tex Logan, Larry Stephenson, Rhonda Vincent, Marcia Campbell, Everett Alan Lilly, Kitsy Kuykendall, Tim O'Brien, Ira Gitlin, Bill Wolfenbarger

Tags:

[Everett Lilly](#) ^[6]

[Lilly Brothers](#) ^[7]

[Bluegrass Hall of Fame](#) ^[8]

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Links:

[1] <https://ibma.org/press/archives/remembering-everett-lilly-tribute>

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/14/arts/music/everett-lilly-bluegrass-musician-dies-at-87.html>

[3] <http://bluegrasstoday.com/41494/everett-lilly-passes/>

[4] <http://www.bluegrass-museum.org/general/zbioEverettLilly.php>

[5] <http://www.lillymountaineersonline.com/>

[6] <https://ibma.org/tags/everett-lilly>

[7] <https://ibma.org/tags/lilly-brothers>

[8] <https://ibma.org/tags/bluegrass-hall-fame>