



A young Bobby McMillon, Photo Courtesy of Lori Allison

On November 28th at the age of 69, we lost Robert Lynn McMillon, a “folklorists’ folklorist” and keeper and inheritor of an incredibly deep ocean of lore, music, and knowledge. “Bobby’s” grinning face, keen eyes, long beautiful ballads, and longer windy tales were a familiar sight at schools and folklife events in and around North Carolina. The NC Folk Heritage Award and Brown-Hudson Award winner performed at the Smithsonian’s 1976 Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife, the 1982 Knoxville World’s Fair, and was featured in the 1999 Tom Davenport film *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*.¹ That film was the seed for Daniel W. Patterson and

¹ *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* (1999), a documentary in The American Traditional Culture Series, jointly produced by Tom Davenport Films and the Curriculum in Folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill. It can be watched on the not-for-profit website Folkstreams.net. The film closes with a 9-minute Epilogue, “The Making of the Ballad Singer,” in which Bobby and his sister-in-law Marina Trivette tell of learning the old songs and how much the songs mean to them. The Library of Congress has posted online a 2018 video interview with Bobby. He also sang in one scene in the commercial film *Songcatcher*, loosely based on the life of Olive Dame Campbell, an early folksong collector in Appalachia. Bobby was also the sole performer on one published CD, *Lords and Merry Maids All: Mountain Love Songs and Child Ballads* (Hickory, N.C.: Ivy Creek Recordings, 2008).

McMillon's book *A Tree Accurst: Stories of Frankie Silver*.² It would be impossible to overstate the treasure that was Bobby McMillon, of him Patterson wrote'

As soon as he started singing and talking about ballads, it was obvious to me that he was one of the most important Appalachian tradition bearers of his generation...As a singer and storyteller he was very different from the performers so popular then in the "folk scene:" slick college boys like the Kingston Trio, or political activists like Joan Baez who took up the guitar, went on the concert stage, and sang a repertory of songs learned from books and recordings, dressing them up in harmonies and vocal stylings calculated to win a middle class audience. Bobby was more akin to Almeda Riddle, Roscoe Holcomb... Doc Watson and other traditional artists...These musicians performed the music of their own families, regions, occupations, and religious demonstrations (p2 *Tree Accurst*).

In other parlance, Bobby was the "real deal," and one of the last firm connections to the bygone world he celebrated in performance and in casual conversation. He was also a keenly self-aware, intelligent, skoal-dipping, Braves-rooting, mountain man with a voracious appetite for reading. The walls of his house (and other flat surfaces) were covered with J.R.R. Tolkien, H. Rider Haggard, and folklore and folk song collections from around the world.

For a man who so loved to talk, Bobby was a devoted listener—whether he was leaning in to decipher the singing of an elder on a scratchy field recording, or asking to hear more about a niece's birthday party. His long and full versions of tales and ballads were a reflection of his earnest interest in the "details." He recorded tales, ballads, folk songs, and religious pieces from heroes, relatives, or friends like Rolf Ellison, Stanley Hicks, Aunt Lou Brookshire, and his great aunt Mae "Maw Maw" Phillips.³

Bobby was a great documenter, but also an excellent writer and "repairer" of songs. Like a brilliant mechanic or antique restorer, who could build back to a fully functional and beautiful old ballad with spare parts. He enjoyed thoughtfully constructing "collated" texts of old love songs that he carefully wrote down in his "Blue Book" college-ruled notebooks. Many people add verses to ballads from various sources, but Bobby's work was informed by a lifetime of experience as a cultural insider but also his own dedicated and wide-ranging research. His collated texts were usually rooted in a version he had heard first-hand, but if the song was fragmentary, he could make it whole again. He similarly added details and context to his

² Patterson, Daniel W.. *A Tree Accurst: Bobby McMillon and Stories of Frankie Silver*. United States: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

³ Bobby McMillon Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina Library. His collection holds both manuscripts and recordings and includes copies of both Bobby's own field tapes as well as recordings made of him. Many additional recordings of Bobby are also at the SFC in the collections of the Pattersons and others. Numerous tapes in these collections have been digitized and made available online through the website of the Southern Folklife Collection. Other libraries, including that of Mars Hill University, also hold significant materials relating to Bobby McMillon.

sprawling tales, fleshing them out with his keen observations about mountain culture and folk idioms. Speaking to Daniel Patterson about his “Hunting Tale,” Bobby said,

“The part about living with my grandparents and my first cousin living at Green Mountain was true, and about his wife. But I just didn’t tell about the railroad track coming down through the valley. I wanted it to sound like wilderness. If I tell it around up here, I don’t even mention the Toe River, because they’d know about the railroad. I just say it happened in a river gorge back in the mountains.” I do the same thing when I tell the scary story about “Who’s got my big toe?” I introduce things about how people lived in the old times. A lot of times I’m telling the story to school children, and this makes the story informative as well as interesting.” Bobby seems even to want hearers to experience the sound of the older people—their phrasing, their pronunciations—from whom he learned the tales. As he gets well into a story he begins—consciously or unconsciously—to slip in more of the vocabulary and grammar and pronunciations used by the people from whom he learned it. When he reviewed my transcription of his tale, he showed his keen interest in such details. Where he had said he had come out of the water and climbed up on rock, I spelled his pronunciation as “clumb.” Bobby asked me to change that to “clomb,” which was always how he would pronounce it. And he added that over near Cosby in east Tennessee his kinfolks would pronounce the word as “clim” and people in the Beach Creek section of Avery and Watauga Counties would say “cloomb.”⁴

In addition to his wife Joyce, his son James, step-daughters, two brothers, three orange cats, and many friends, Bobby has left behind a legacy of recorded material, papers, numerous “Blue Books,” and extensive book collection (to be placed in the care of a regional institution), and memories of a gentle and generous genius. His work will continue to inspire and inform generations of musicians, singers, storytellers, and historians.

Following are excerpts from reminiscences of Bobby’s friends and family on Facebook, words shared at a celebration of Bobby’s life, and also the monthly ballad Zoom circle formed during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic—of which Bobby was an active participant.

Derek Piotr, 12/29/2021 Email Correspondence

Though he graced my life for just under two years, I would count Bobby McMillon as one of the dearest friends I've ever made. We had instant sympatico. Bobby was not only a world-class singer, but, like, an aficionado for the obscurest wisps of folklore: name a song, no matter how little-sung or local, and Bobby could point you to a version recorded in 19xx by such-and-such, and moreover sing you the fragment he recalled, typically from meeting said such-and-such. It was incredible how widely this man had cast his folklore net, and how freely he'd share even the remotest facts he'd gathered. He was truly my North star and partner-in-crime as I've done

⁴ Daniel W. Patterson, “Contexts: Bobby McMILLON's Tall Tale--Transcription and Commentary,” Folkstreams, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.folkstreams.net/contexts/bobby-mcmillions-tall-tale-transcription-and-commentary>.

obscure folklife research. More importantly, he was one of the warmest, most genteel fellows on the planet, often interrupting one of his long explanations of Western North Carolina with a meek, dear chuckle at some detail or other. I was blessed to know him. His loss is insurmountable.

Sheila Kay Adams, 12/4/2021 Private Gathering At Sheila's to Remember Bobby

We're here in the middle of a grieving process. I know from all the time I've spent with grief, it has come through my door an unwanted stranger but always left a trusted friend. They say there's 7 stages of grief.. shock and denial, pain and guilt, anger and bargaining, depression, the upward turn, reconstructing and working through and finally acceptance and hope. My experience is that you bounce back and forth feeling all the stages, sometimes in one day. You can't just tick them off one at a time and be done with them. It's a process and sometimes it takes a long time to reach the upward turn but it does come and we start to examine that big hole that's left in our heart that we will never lose but we will find a way to live our lives around it. The other thing about grief is the knowledge that it's not a mine field that we have to keep running through. The one guarantee we have is that we'll never have to grieve Bobby's passing ever again. There'll be times when we miss him dreadfully but memories are the healing balm for our broken hearts. I've had so many memories of Bobby during the last week that I'd forgotten all about. I have thought of little else but him and every day brings a new awareness as to all I have lost. Then I'll have a memory that sets me to laughing and then the tears come for my brain interjects, "Remember this for it'll never be again." Right now I guess I'm still in the denial, pain and guilt. Some of you might be as well. Part of the reason I've not bounced to another stage, like anger and there's certainly been some of that to work through, but I was cleaning out my voice mail, which might surprise some of you, the next to the last message was from Bobby. He called me at 2:05 on Sunday afternoon and passed away at 5:06. He wanted me to come the next day because he needed to talk to me, tell me something important. I guess I'm a little mad at the hospital because I was up there by 9:00 and due to Covid rules and regulations, I didn't get to see him. I should've spent more time on the phone with him, visiting with him but I didn't and that can't be undone. Ain't it strange all of us say when we lose someone we care so much about, "I'm going to change this in the future. I'm going to spend more time with the people I love." But don't you find that time goes faster and faster? I no more than get up and put my clothes on, look at the clock and it's quarter to 10:00! And the rest of the day goes even faster. I still feel pain and guilt, though. Bobby was my best friend. We had a connection with our love of the old folks, the old days, the old songs, the old ways. It was a love that bound us together for over 50 years. My questions are many like who am I going to call now to find out how to spell garden the way they said it over home? Or how would they have mentioned that a women was pregnant since pregnant was considered a nasty word? I don't have that resource anymore. Our friendship was much more than that. This was no amorous or romantic relationship, we decided that early on. We transcended that early on. I suffered with all the romance in my life for the next 40 years and it was Bobby I talked to. Marriages came and went but not Bobby McMillon. Bobby came and he stayed. We used to joke that we should've married because we had so much in common but we both knew better than to mess with this special, almost ethereal relationship we had throughout those many years. I shared secrets with

him that he took to his grave. I'll take some to mine that he shared with me. What was between Bobby and me will forever stay between the two of us. We performed a lot on stage together but my Bobby story has nothing to do with performing... One summer I was having a pool party when I lived up on Terry's Fork and of course Bobby came early to help me get ready. He wanted to know how I was calling it a pool party when I didn't have a pool? So we decided to fix that small problem by going to Roses and getting one. It was so hot and the little kid's pools were outside. We wandered around for a few minutes and Bobby said I'll be right back and disappeared. Fifteen minutes later with sweat running into my eyes I started to head back in the store to find him. I was pissed and hot as hell. Right as I got up to the door there stood Bobby on the other side of the misted glass waving at me as he enjoyed a cold drink and all the sweet cool air from the air conditioner. He laughed all the way home and by the time we got back to the house I was laughing too. He said, "Why I trusted your ability to find the best kiddy pool and didn't need my help at all. And it was nice and cool in the store!" I learned a lot from Bobby. Wherever he is, I hope he knows how much I appreciate his special presence in my life and how I'll keep on loving him till I join up with him again.

Don Pedi, 11/29/21 Facebook

So sad to hear of Bobby McMillon's passing. He was a dear man, with a good sense of humor. He was always willing to share his incredible knowledge of Appalachian culture and seemingly endless repertoire of traditional songs and stories. He'll be missed.

Lori Allison, 11/28/2021

I'm going to miss you so, so much my uncle. You were one of my favorite people and my very, very best friends. I am so blessed to have had an entire 30 years of memories with you. You taught me so much and so many old songs/stories. The Appalachian folk world will never be the same without your knowledge. I will never be the same without your silly jokes and picking on times and love. I will forever be proud of the way you taught me to say words like Yellar (yellow) and arish (Irish). I will strive everywhere I go to share what makes those stories and songs special because that's what you did. I regret not being able to see you as often as I should have the past few years. I'll miss calling you every day or so just catching up on the latest gossip and hearing you sing a song over the phone to me. I mostly am so upset that Maggie doesn't get to meet you this side of forever but I will make sure you are a part of her little life from the moment she is born. Until we meet again my sweet uncle I will sing for you. I love you.

Saro Lynch Thomason, 12/1/2021 Facebook

Bobby, it will take a while to understand the depth of your passing. There was no one else like you. Your encyclopedic knowledge of regional lore, songs, family names, geography...your humor and sweetness. You were always so welcoming and warm, so ready to sing, so ready to gossip about who did what and why in an old ballad or in some true crime scenario of centuries past (which is all I ever want to talk about anyway). You are dearly missed, and will continue to be missed for countless years. I hope to sing with you again somewhere somehow.

Susan Pepper, 12/15/21 Ballad Zoom Circle

We are going to miss Bobby at our sessions. It won't be the same without him. He always had a spark about him and something interesting he wanted to share with us. He enriched our time together with his spirit, knowledge and generosity. He kept us on track. I'll never forget I was just gabbing at the start of one our singing sessions like I usually do, this was the first session he came to—and he interjected pretty quickly, “Okay, whose turn is it—someone going to sing?”

About a year ago, Bobby told me about a singer (Ethel Brown, 1910-1992) he and Sheila had known that lived up the road from me, and I wrote a short play—and thirty years later, Ethel Brown's signature song was sung once again in Jackson County when three thespians took to the stage and brought her songs and stories to life. That's just my story of what I learned within the last year from Bobby. Imagine all the threads he spun and connected among singers, songs and lore over a lifetime of dedicated work.

The two songs that I'll probably most associate with Bobby are “Black is the Color” and “Young Emily.” I first heard him perform back in 2005 and I remember being struck by that amazing verse “the fish that swims in the ocean swims over my true love's breast, his body's in a gentle motion and I pray that his soul's at rest.” There are others too “Dickie and Johnson,” “The Old Grey Mare” and “The Old Churchyard”.

I think I remember Bobby saying around the time that I met him that he doesn't perform the ballads, he presents them. That's the truth. He was so at home in the old love songs. The songs were intertwined with his life, and his life intertwined with them. He was true to those songs through his last days, continuing to share them with us in our sessions, with his niece Lori with William, Derek and I am sure many, many others who sought him out or found themselves in his company. He even performed at Ferrum College after he had recently come home from the hospital with oxygen (and just weeks before his passing); his commitment to sharing the songs was clear.

I feel a knowing in my heart that he had peace around passing on so many songs to others who are actually singing them—keeping it as they say a living tradition. We are so lucky to have known Bobby and to think of him when we sing.

Amy Tipton Cortner, 11/29/2021 Facebook

Lots of folks will be sharing memories of Bobby McMillon today. Here's one of mine. Late one afternoon at the Swannanoa Gathering, I came on Bobby sitting by himself on a stone wall. He was the master artist of the day, but instead of being surrounded by minders and students and other artists, he was alone. He waved, so I hopped up on the wall with him. We had a wonderful talk about our mutual ancestral stomping grounds. And we had an even better discussion of what the early settlers, who got here right after the buffalo vanished, might actually have been seeing in the woods. Bobby's theory was wild hogs. As we pondered the mysteries of names, he told me that “tiger” was another word for panther--the word my grandmother used for mountain lion. Then we discussed which restaurants to avoid in Black Mountain. That was Bobby. He

could talk as entertainingly about "cold fajitas" as he could provide a scholarly rumination on how feral hogs could be mistaken for bison--while throwing in a sidebar about tigers.

Cassy Robins, 11/29/2021 Facebook

We lost an amazing person yesterday. I have known Bobby since about 2004—we hit it off immediately! We spent an untold number of hours talking and laughing and researching songs in the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Handwritten Ballad Collection. We became fast friends and stayed in touch long after I had left Mars Hill. I was so excited to have Damon meet his Uncle Bobby this summer, where he sang to us for several hours and we caught up after a long spell of not seeing each other. He was dear to me and to so many others and the world is a little more dim today. My heart is sad, but I am rejoicing that he is in heaven and can just see him flirting around from one old ballad singer to the next and catching tunes.

Rodney Sutton, 11/30/2021 Facebook

The voice of one of America's iconic folk performers and keeper of the old love songs fell silent today - Booby McMillon died this afternoon of heart failure at Mission Hospital in Asheville, NC. Bobby was a close friend for years and I began recording him back in 2011 thinking I was capturing dozens of the hundreds of songs that Bobby told me he had never "recorded"! I cherish the many hours I spent with him at his and Joyce's home in Celo, NC, though I learned that Dan Patterson and Wayne Martin among many others had in fact recorded most of these ballads years ago! When I asked Bobby about this - he said - "Oh yeah, these have all been recorded, I thought you were asking me if they were on CD's". But, I did ask him to include where he learned the songs from and the history of each song. Bobby was one of the smartest, sweetest people I have ever met - and his recall of songs, tunes and stories was as strong as ever up to his last days! Rest in Peace my friend!

Denise O'Sullivan, 11/28/2021 Facebook

I always loved hanging out with Bobby! He was such a great performer and an even better person. He was so humble and an encyclopedia of ballads & storytelling. I remember the first time I met him and he sang Farmer's Curst Wife.

Luke Hoilman, 12/12/2021 Life Celebration for Bobby McMillon at Mars Hill College

The world has lost a piece of itself today and all of us have lost a piece of our world. One can't be a good storyteller without first being a good listener. That's what Bobby was for me. What I most appreciated about him wasn't his singing or storytelling, as great as we all knew these abilities to be in him. It was his ability to listen. It was his willingness to listen without prejudice and the interest that he took in whatever I was saying that always made me feel loved and warm when talking to Bob and spending time with him. His way of hearing you out, empathizing and sympathizing with you, then laughing or sighing at the perfect moment, always drew me to him. Bobby treasured those who came before him because of their wisdom and wit. I long for his presence today for those same reasons.

Bobby was very close to his family and grandparents. He was very sentimental. He could recall distant memories that changed his life like they'd just taken place yesterday. He collected family artifacts and music memorabilia. It was on these things that Bobby and I bonded and based our relationship. We shared a nostalgic love for the past and the memories that we created with our respective families and friends. We talked about what it means to be "Appalachian."

I've heard others say that Bobby was born at the wrong time, that his love and interest in traditions and the way things used to be would've made him better suited to have lived decades prior. He sought to understand the stories and context of old songs and stories from generations prior. Bobby filled his time researching and trying to reconcile how and why songs had multiple versions and lyrical incarnations. In doing so, he not only connected music, he connected people and their stories. In collecting ballads and tales, he saved and lifted up the memories, livelihoods & emotions of our ancestors and predecessors. His work wasn't just intellectual or academic. His passion wasn't just based on melodic interests or a hobby of reading. Everything he did was emblematic of his quest to remember and honor his loved ones that were no longer with him or slowly fading away. He sought to preserve their lives and feelings. Bobby was a champion for those who came before us. His focus on family and those who laid the groundwork for him drove him to be as successful and wise as he we all knew him to be with his work. That memory you have of your grandparents spending time with you during the summer, or the feeling of Christmas morning with your parents, or the piercing chill that overtakes you when you remember the last words spoken to you by a dear friend, the butterflies you get when you hug the person you love most, the guttural sentimental reaction you have when hearing a song that you haven't heard in twenty years, how the smell of a meal during Thanksgiving can take you back to your childhood, the pride of a hard day's work, the tears brought on by an old ballad sang by one of the world's last true treasures...all of these emotions and feelings were rescued, documented and safeguarded by Bobby's work. In doing so, he not only chronicled the stories and struggles of those who came before us, he captured all of those feelings and emotions that we still have today.

Branson Raines, 11/28/2021 Facebook

Found out that one of my ballad singing heroes died today. Bobby McMillon or as Sheila and I called him Bobby Smithsonian, knew more ballads than any one person I know and probably more than all those I know combined. Sat many times on Sheila Kay's porch sitting with Bobby and just listening and asking questions. Truly will miss you Bobby.

William Ritter, 11/29/2021 Facebook

For the first time, I have a present all boxed up and wrapped for someone, but I'll never get the chance to give it to them. Inside is a Braves championship hat (that sure took its sweet time to get here). Also inside, was the hope for a little gift to cheer someone up who had just had another tough go at the hospital. Inside was soon celebrating the 70th birthday of a dear sweet and hilarious man, a little visit on Christmas, and that drive around Kona we never did get to embark on.

Late last night as I laid awake in my bed, deliriously tired from the grief still pouring out of me, but also unable to cross over into sleep, I had one of those dream-visions found on the borders of rest. In it, I saw Bobby board an old black steam train that wove its way up into the mountains, snake-like, deep into a holler where a little cabin full of old-faces-made-young-again waited to greet Bobby with grins and tales and songs.

If anybody would want a little “Cabin in the Corner of Gloryland,” full of friendly faces, with a big wide porch for visiting, it would be Bobby McMillon. I’m grateful to have known the man, the myth, the keeper of old ways and old knowings. I did record a good number of songs and stories from him, (still a drop in the ocean of his knowledge) but whenever I would sit down to do anything with them, a little voice would say: “instead of doing this right now, why don’t you call him while you still can.” So I would ring him up, and he’d say, “Will-am C. Ritter!” Or I would go over for a visit and help feed his and Joyce’s little herd of orange porch cats--fluffy, beautiful and kind of aloof Fuzz, sweet snuggly Yeller, and that other little skittish one. My last visit to Bobby, we didn’t really talk folklore. The three stooges were on, and muted. Their bodily humor was so genius that you really didn’t need to know what was going on at all to be tickled.

I’ve learned so many songs from Bobby, and I will always treasure them. I could have tried to record him more, and I know I’ll have those little regrets for not learning this or that, but I certainly do not regret choosing first and foremost to be his friend more than his documenter. I am grateful that Bobby got to see the Braves win the World Series. I am grateful too for his family and his dear friends. I’m also grateful for the words to this old song, “My Dearest Dear” that Bobby sang for me in an old tobacco barn-turned cabin in Winston-Salem years ago. Our paths diverge, dear friend. As I walk through these mountains, I feel blessed that your voice will still ring in my ears.

“My Dearest Dear”

My dearest dear the time draws near
 When you and I must part
 And no one knows the grief and woe
 Of my poor aching heart
 Or what I suffered for your sake
 It’s you I love so dear
 I wish that you would go with me
 Or I could tarry here

Your company my dearest dear
 Is so sweet unto me
 If makes me think when we’re apart
 That every day is three
 That every day is three my love
 And every hour is ten
 It makes me weep when I should sleep

And think I've lost a friend

I wish my breast were made of glass
Wherein you might behold
Your name in secret I would write
In letters of bright gold
In letters of bright gold my dear
Believe me what I say
You are the darling of my heart
Until my dying day

I wish I were ten thousand miles
Or on some distant shore
Or down in some lone valley place
Where the wild beasts howl and roar
Where the wild beasts howl and roar my love
Believe me what I say
You are the one that I love best
Until my dying day

And when I'm far from you my love
Think on your absent friend
And when the wind blows high and clear
A line or two please send
And when the wind blows high and clear
A line please send to me
Make sure you may
That I'll repay when the wind blows fair to thee

About the Author

William Ritter is a musician, seed saver, and independent folklorist living in Bakersville, NC. In 2019, he and Bobby McMillon received the SouthArts *In These Mountains* Folklife Apprenticeship Grant to work together as Mentor and Apprentice.



Bobby McMillon, Photo Courtesy of Lori Allison