

Will Lee

the Big Fish in the Big Apple

by David C. Gross

I have known about Will Lee since the early 1970's. His work with Dreams and the Brecker Brothers was making him a force in the studio musician community. I got to know him personally around 1978 and even had the good fortune to sub a few dates for him when he was too busy.

Will was born in San Antonio, Texas and spent his formative years going from piano, to drums, to trumpet, to French horn, and finally to bass. His parents were both professional musicians and his father was a major educator at the University of Miami. Will went on to obtain a formal musical education at the University of Miami, where he studied French horn for a year and then switched to the electric bass as a major. After classes, he worked on bass fundamentals—listening to not only the Beatles, but also Stevie Wonder, Jimi Hendrix, Steve Miller, The Rascals, Motown, Sly & the Family Stone, etc. He would put it all into practice six sets a night gigging with various local bands, including Goldrush, a modern horn band.

Trumpeter Randy Brecker called Will and invited him to NYC to audition for Dreams. In a short time, Will was a much sought after bassist in the New York scene. As a bassist and singer, he has toured and recorded with an extensive array of top performers including Joe Beck & David Sanborn, Brecker Brothers, James Brown, Mariah Carey, Cher, Dreams, Aretha Franklin, Michael Franks, Mick Jagger, Chaka Khan, Cindi Lauper, Barry Manilow, Pat Metheny, Gloria Estefan, Bette Midler, Horace Silver, Laura Nyro, Nina Simone, Frank Sinatra, Ronnie Spector, Mike Stern, Barbara Streisand, Richard Tee, Luther Vandross, Weather Report, Bruce Willis, Nancy Wilson, and Victor Wooten. In addition, Will played in the New York 24th Street Band which had great success in Japan, giving him a solo artist career that yielded him a top 5 single. Most recently, his solo CD, entitled OH! reached the #1 position on the "Jazz Beyond" chart there.



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Will has been for the last 17 years a member of Paul Shaffer and the CBS Orchestra (formerly known as The World's Most Dangerous Band)—the band that created its own niche performing on the Late Show with David Letterman. Will can also be heard playing, singing and speaking on many commercials on both television and radio. This interview was a lot of fun for me personally. I have been a fan of Will's playing and singing for many years, and as a person he is second to none!

Your father played piano, string bass, and trumpet professionally, and he was a major force at the University of Miami. What influence did he play in your life musically?

There was music in the house at all times. He was a great bebop pianist and when he wasn't playing, he was spinning some kind of record—usually Miles or Cannonball, Nancy Wilson or Sarah Vaughan. He was a big Miles fan. He was always into music education but he never really forced any of it on his kids.

How many kids were there?

I was the oldest of 4 and still am. My mom was a brilliant singer with a real lush voice—a velvety sound. She was like a mellow Sarah Vaughan—really sweet.

Did she sing professionally?

She did—in and around Texas. She was originally from Missouri but when she and my father met, she was doing the Texas radio Big Band circuit. So she was singing with some Big Bands live. I wish I would have gotten a chance to hear her then. There were no recordings made.

A lot of those regional bands were said to be more amazing than some of the bigger known attractions.

I'll bet they had a groove of their own. Texas is renowned for a certain swing or feel. I'm in a Beatle band with people like that—Jimmy Vivino and I, we have a pretty big vocabulary. But as far as being an archivist—I got him in the band because I thought he was an archivist—but these other guys are incredible.

When did you decide to make music a career?

I never did. I just kept doing what I was already doing. I was real lucky in that way because a lot of guys have had to make a decision. They come to a crossroads and they say they have to either do this or do that. They have to weigh the pluses and minuses and come up with a solution. I never had to make that decision. Even Michael Brecker at some point had to make a decision about whether to play music or become a professional basketball player. I on the other hand had no real talents—I would have been the world's worst insurance salesman or plumber.

Let's talk about your musical beginnings.

The first thing I was encouraged to try was the piano. I

didn't like the teacher and I didn't like the vibe. So much of being taught by someone is liking who's teaching you. That person cannot have just knowledge, he or she needs people skills, a rapport. Basically, it's all show biz. Teachers are there to entertain. If you are going to take the entertainment value out of something as beautiful as music, that's destroying the whole process. It's got to have some sort of groove. How serious can a five year old be? I am talking about American kids. There has got to be some kind of attraction.

Even if it is "Mary Had a Little Lamb?"

Yes, it can't be because somebody wanted you to do it. So if you don't already have a lot of that drive on your own, why should any five year old have that kind of discipline. I remember my first piano teacher not having the right vibe with me and I got turned off to piano immediately. I don't think I ever went back after that first lesson. My father then bought a set of drums for me when I was six years old. I had a real set of drums! It was a great set! It sort of sat in my room; all set up for a really long time. I didn't really know what I was going to do with them. They were there and I was going to go out and play. When the Beatles came on the Ed Sullivan Show, that changed everything. As soon as that show ended, I went right into my bedroom and started hitting those drums. I saw this image of these four guys doing this thing that was incredibly exciting. I was 11 years old. I knew exactly what I wanted to do—women screaming, everyone loving you, a real positive thing. The clothes, the hair, everything.

So the drums were happening, and around the same time my father was attempting to give my brother and I trumpet lessons, which was cool. My brother stopped and I continued and ended up playing trumpet in the Huntsville, Texas

Hornets. We did some performances but it was mostly sitting in class and playing. I was always first chair trumpet which was a no-brainer because it wasn't hard stuff. Unfortunately I didn't pursue the trumpet as my main instrument because, what that meant was I didn't really learn any improvisational trumpet. I was just reading. Everything I ever did with the trumpet was about reading music whether it was the concert band or the marching band throughout junior high, high school, and college. Toward the end of high school I moved to the French horn. It was sort of a natural progression.

I seem to find these niches where there are holes in the industry and I jump into those holes. Bass was a classic example: We were in Miami in our little instrumental surf band called The Chances R, named after a Chicago eatery. Kids our age were not really hip to what the function of the bass was. There were guitar players and drummers. Everybody was playing those two instruments. We really wanted to have a bass player and have a full sound. I was the lead singer and the drummer and I ended up being the bass player, and we hired a guy to play drums. It was at that point where I found out how hard it was for me to be both a singer and the bass player. At that point it was too late because we already hired the guy. So I stuck to my direction and kept going.

Another example of a hole in the industry was that there were a lot of trumpet players in high school and not enough French horn players. I then volunteered to play French horn. Our band director was Mr. Bill LeDue who ultimately ended up contracting the music for the Orange Bowl festivities. He talked me into trying French horn and it was cool. That was what I was doing when I was in college. My first semester of college was as a French horn major.

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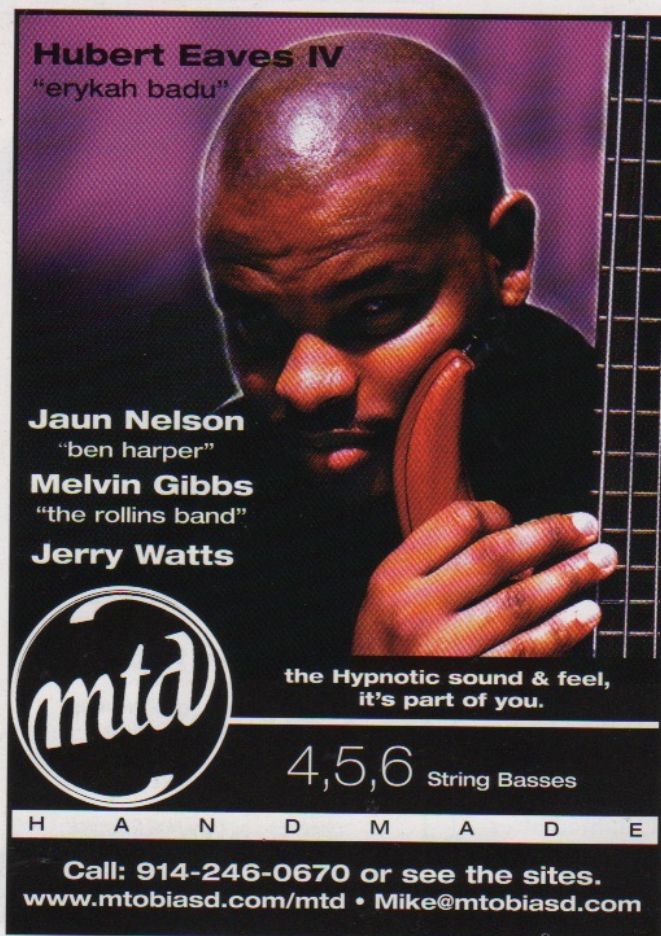
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Not many of those!

One is too many! I started getting disenchanted with the instrument and it wasn't what I wanted to do. I had already been playing bass on gigs at night, and with the help of the assistant dean I changed to bass as my major.

Was that on the electric bass?

Yes.

That's pretty early on.

There weren't any electric bass teachers at the University of Miami. I was called to be the first one. After I came to NY and sort of "made it," my father kept calling me and asked if I would like to become the bass teacher in the school. But I had so much stuff going on I didn't want to give it up. They got a sub who turned out to be Jaco Pastorius. There are a ton of short stories that go along with him teaching. Jaco would have guys vamp and he would solo for an hour. Lesson over. Mark Egan was one of those students, as well as Hiram Bullock and Frank Gravis.

Another hole in the industry story was this sample company I started called Sampleheads. There was a big need—this is jumping ahead to the 1990's—for a good bass sample. You would have your home studio and you would have to settle for a crappy bass synth sound that always sounded like a keyboard. This was because the samples were too clean and they didn't sound like a bass when you soloed the track—no soul, all open stringed.

It is important to look for the holes in the industry. We know the world is overpopulated. There are millions of musicians, millions of everything. When you and I were coming up as musicians, the musician was sort of the oddball. It was quirky to be a musician or just to know one. Since MTV and 24 hours of watching people play close-up, everybody is at least an air guitarist, even accountants.

You could always tell who was the musician. He was the one with the long hair!

Or he had earrings or was doing coke. The competition is really tough now. I would hate to be coming up now. I would definitely function differently. I wouldn't relax as much.

There isn't much of a music scene in NY.

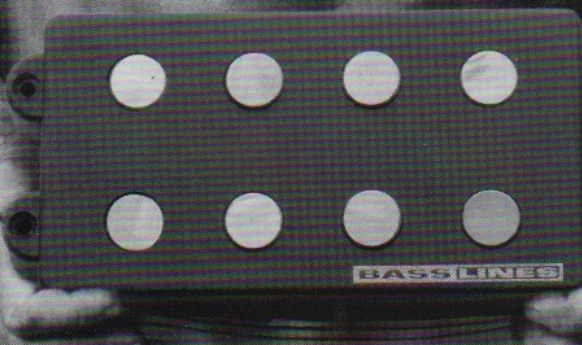
Yeah, there are a bunch of loners in their second bedroom studio staring at a video screen. The reason I wanted to do this sample company was not to take work away from myself or anyone else, but someone was going to do it anyway so I thought it would be healthier and more rational for a musician to get the bread.

Miroslav Vitous did something like that didn't he?

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You know when we were gigging in NY, I would go to see you at Mikells, Seventh Ave South (the Brecker's owned it), the Village Gate, there was a definite scene—a lot of places to hang and network.

I wonder why there isn't that anymore. There are more bands now. I hate it when people put together a music club and music is the last consideration.

What kind of bass were you playing early on?

My dad—now I still haven't to this day figured out whether it was intentional or just a crappy move on his part—but in the window of the Coral Gables Music Shop was a white Fender Precision bass with a red tortoise shell pickguard, and it was Christmas time and I had my heart set on it. So I told my dad what I wanted for Christmas and told him it was in the shop, and you can't miss it, and it is all I want... I didn't have a bass at that point. I know he heard me and it was clear, so when Christmas morning came there was this really goofy, bad Japanese bass with no name leaning up against a Kalamazoo amp (the kind that has the fold out shelf with the controls on it). I thought that my dad just didn't get it but I showed him. I worked real hard for about 3 months and bought myself that white P bass. I still don't know if he was trying to teach me the feeling of earning something for yourself or if he was just playing with me.

Do you still have that bass?

No. I destroyed it. I sanded it down to the natural finish and kept adding pickups to it. I had 3 or 4 pickups on it. It almost cost me my recording career. I auditioned on that bass for Dreams, got the gig, Billy Cobham had me come in and play on the demos for his first solo record *Spectrum*. We did four songs with Jan Hammer and John Abercrombie.

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He ended up using Lee Sklar on the album even after making sure I was available. When I asked him about it he said my sound wasn't happening. At that point I realized my bass sound wasn't happening. So I got rid of it and got a Precision bass. My best Precision bass I bought from Tom Malone. I did all the Spyro Gyra, Manilow and Chaka Kahn records on that bass.

Do you still have that one?

No. It burned up in a fire. I had a fire at my loft and the hit-maker burned in that fire. I haven't found a P bass that sounded as good since. This one really spoke. No two are really alike.

How do you feel about making music on basses that do not speak all that well?

The funny thing is it just takes someone with a great deal of musicality. The Hofner bass isn't exactly the most refined instrument, but it the right hands

it can have magic, and it can do something very special. It can even change the entire face of music. It can make you not only hear new things but also like the Hofner. It's a bit of a cruddy thing, but in the hands of the right genius it can come alive. Paul McCartney gives Brian Wilson the credit for making the bass speak melodically. I can definitely see how these guys were running neck and neck around the *Pet Sounds/Sgt. Pepper* period. I just read that when the Beatles came out with *Sgt. Pepper*, Brian Wilson stayed in bed for 2 years because he didn't know how to top that.

When you think in retrospect, there would have been no Sgt. Pepper if there hadn't been Pet Sounds.

They were definitely competitive. "Good Day Sunshine" was a direct response to "What a Day for a Daydream" by the Lovin' Spoonful. It was a #1 hit over in England and

they said we have to write one too! It apparently spawned a lot of songs in that era about sunshine. "Sunshine Superman", "Sunshine Came Softly Through My Window Today", "Sunny Afternoon," etc. Those were all because of John Sebastian.

Besides your feelings about what Jaco did for music, are there other bassists that you feel are pushing the boundaries?

Victor Wooten. Victor just sits down with his bass and plays all day. When you do that, things are going to happen. I still can't believe the amount of pleasure that can come out of a piece of wood and four strings. I still can't believe the amount of passion that becomes second nature when you are really playing at a level where you stop thinking about anything and just play.

I know the readers will be interested in your ideas about

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making a track happen.

The one thing I would like to say is that the most important thing for a bassist to provide is a groove. When I say provide a groove, it doesn't mean be a bully and let everyone follow you. I believe each one of us has a place in our playing where we are either on top of, right on, or in back of the beat.

Where do you unconsciously lean?

I don't honestly know. It really depends on the situation at hand.

When I just play I think it is in the middle. A lot of times I will hear myself back in the studio and I'll sound like I am rushing or dragging and that usually has a lot to do with what the drummer is doing. There does exist this one groove and only the tempos change. At the bottom of every pocket is a center and if you can find it, that is

what to look for.

Is there something that you can suggest to the readers to do to exercise this concept?

The main thing is to just listen. Don't try to force things to happen. I was just in Germany and I gave a clinic. I don't really teach and have

everyone's an individual and it's a good, but people didn't really listen to the soloist. They had the tendency to just barge on through oblivious to the fact that someone was trying to say something while soloing. I was constantly shushing about nine guys down who were bashing away.

No dynamics?

Yeah, but imagine what that would have been like to the listener? The reason to have music is to have

something to listen to. If there is something to listen to you have the worst of what fusion was. I haven't had much experience teaching but listening would be something I would definitely teach.

What do you listen to when you come home at night?

Usually I have been playing music

“Even Michael Brecker at some point had to make a decision about whether to play music or become a professional basketball player.”

given maybe three clinics in my life. The two main ones I had the participants bring their instruments and we played a blues, or “Purple Haze.” We did a round robin with everybody taking two choruses to solo, and I found that the most disturbing thing about everybody's playing was not that they couldn't play something, and



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most of the day so I try not to listen to too much. I have to listen to stuff for work so I have listened to a great variety of music. This week on the Letterman Show we have Bonnie Raitt, and I also get to play "My Generation" with Roger Daltry. I am trying to get that Entwistle sound for the song. You were saying earlier that after a while everyone has there own sound no matter which bass or amp they play. The greatest example of that was when I was doing the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Awards the year that The Who was inducted. There was always a jam afterwards. I remember there was a Sadowsky bass and a Hartke rig for me and SIR (Studio Instrument Rentals) brought over an additional rig for whomever. So out of my rig I get my sound, which I feel is the sound of the Hartke rig, and Entwistle gets up there with the same equipment and within 10 seconds and a few twists of the knobs the "John Entwistle" sound is there. You couldn't tell the difference between this rig and his usual rig. Whatever he did and his touch and the volume created that sound on the spot.

The solo on "My Generation" could be the very first bass solo in rock history.

What a solo! I am going to try and replicate that sound through tapping. I hope he will be impressed. He was a Rotosound guy. I used to love new Rotosounds but nothing can come close to those SR 2000 Dean Markleys. They have a really long life and I hate changing strings. In order to keep the Rotosounds happening I would have had to have changed strings often.

You are well known for using the Sadowsky bass.

Well, a lot of guys are. Every time I turn on the TV someone is using one.

What is it about that instrument?

Roger would always acquiesce to my needs and requests. When I met him he was basically an acoustic guitar luthier who was dabbling in basses. He took an interest in this project of trying to make a bass that was satisfactory for us guys out there doing it. He would ask questions and I would tell him the things I needed. I've always liked a volume knob that was really clean and had a clean sweep from 0 to 10. Not one that started at zero and jumped to 10 within the first quarter turn. So certain things I needed came together one or two at a time. The instrument is a solid bass that is good for every style. The jazz bass configuration allows me to do anything I need. The pre amp is a great sounding pre amp and I can turn up the highs or turn up the bottom to get a beefy—almost cartoonish—bottom end that is so fat.

I guess Roger has found one of those holes in the industry to fill.

Well, necessity is a motherfucker! When I go to a club and someone spots me and asks me to sit in, I know it's going to be rough because at this point, everything on my bass is custom from top to bottom including the way the tuners tune, with the D tuner and the length of the lever, the graphite nut which allows the D tuner to slip back and forth, to the round wound strings and the fret wire—which is very thin mandolin wire recommended to me by Lee Sklar. He has such perfect intonation. The shape of the neck is custom. The way the pickups are wired and the way the knobs work are a master volume, a blend pot so I can go real Jaco-like or nasally with the bridge pickup or "P-bassy" with the other pickup, and the treble and bass controls. Plus, I am addicted to having the pickup cover over the pickups as a gauge so I know where I am. So when you go to someone else's instrument you have virtually none of these things so you are basically someone who tends gardens who is now asked to do someone's taxes. It looks like a bass but once you start playing it things change.

You also like a high action, don't you?

I don't really like a high action but I have a heavy touch and I find if the action isn't set high it just buzzes for days. I used to have Roger take the body side of the straplock and drill a hole inside the body so the strap is flush.

What's your favorite Beatles song?

"And Your Bird Can Sing", "For No One", "She's Leaving Home." I started loving "Hey Bulldog." There are all these categories for Beatles songs for me particularly after we started this band, the Fab Faux. I try to include one from each category in a set—high energy rockers, something technical from say "Sgt. Pepper," something psychedelic, something heartfelt, something heavy, and something lyrical with doubled harmonies.

Have you heard the new George Martin CD?

No I haven't, but I have heard great things about it.

It's interesting to note that the Beatles needed George Martin while the Beach Boys had Brian Wilson.

The Beatles made so many right decisions. That was a real fortunate time for those guys. Even when they sat down to pen a song, how many times did they get it wrong? We're talking about a really compressed amount of time. They sat down and wrote some killer tunes and very few losers.

Some of the bass lines were interesting in regards to root motion.

Paul had a philosophy about the power the bassist has in the band. He really changed the overall feeling of something by changing that bottom note. You can really do a lot with one note placed properly.

You know Will, you and I might

not be here today talking about music if it weren't for the Beatles. We'd be selling shoes or something.

I don't know, but I get to kiss the floor of the Ed Sullivan Theater every day. That's the location of the thing that gave me my wake up call.

Let's talk a bit about Letterman. Since you moved to CBS what has changed most?

I am a person who likes to be on the edge of my seat in regards to hitting without a rehearsal and being focused because you have to be. Now that we have a horn section the music has to be arranged. With a four piece rhythm section and even better with a three piece you can really fly.

Does this change your ability to sub out?

No it doesn't. Well maybe it does, but I take it for granted that the

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new guy has to be hip to everything that is going on. I will have charts for him. I usually coach him.

What is the process for the musicians doing the show?

Actually, for us it is pretty simple because we have been tweaking it for 17 years. Rather than sitting there all day doing nothing, David and some of the comedy writers rehearse from 2:00 to 3:45 PM. We then have the stage to ourselves from 3:45 to 4 PM to work out any comedy that we do and the play-ons for the guests. What usually ends up happening is they go late, we end up having from 4 to 4:05 to do everything we have to do for the whole day, and then the feature band comes on and uses the stage for the rest of the time until the audience comes in. So we get about 5 minutes and it sometimes can be dangerous when we have to think of something to play a celebrity guest on with. One night comedienne Ellen Kleghorn came on and we had to think of something to play because she wasn't pushing anything, so the only thing we could play off of was her name. So I thought of "Jimmy Crack Corn." The next day Shaffer got slammed in the paper for using a slave song because the lyric is "Jimmy Crack Corn and I don't care, my master's gone away..."

I guess the politically correct police were in operation.

The thing was, it was really my fault but when you have less than 10 seconds to come up with something you go for it! We actually have it pretty easy though. It is not a hard gig. We have outside rehearsals to do bumper songs to go in and out of commercials.

Do you continue to play for the audience through the commercials?

Yes. It is too bad the TV audience only hears the intros and outros.

Do you feel that since Johnny Carson left the Tonight Show that all bands are modeling themselves after your group?

I guess you can say that. Co-hosts are out and bandleaders to bounce off of are in. It is a budgetary thing as well except for Andy Richter. When the 24th Street Band broke up, Steve Jordan, Hiram Bullock, and I were wondering what we were going to do. Paul Shaffer told me he had gotten a call to be the musical director of a new comedy talk show pilot and he had an idea to do instrumental versions of Beatles, James Brown, and Motown and would I be interested in doing it and I said yes. I asked when it would start and he said next week! That concept got copied a lot. That was something that hadn't been done before. I love doing the show not just because it's a steady gig and it's pay, it's something that regulates me. I am basically a person with little discipline and it's a great platform that can insure that I will practice because I practice on the gig. That's always been my thing.

What really juices me is to go out there and get some more stuff to bring into the party by doing live gigs. Over the last year I have been playing live a lot. Even though I have been turning down a bunch of work I still am very busy. I do have to say yes to a lot of gigs. I need to keep it interesting as well as keep out there. Sometimes I will take a goofy little gig just to see what happens.

One of the side benefits from playing bass has been singing on commercials, records, and soundtracks. A couple of weeks ago I was in Cleveland because I sang a promo for a TV station in Ohio. I walk in to the hotel and one of Marilyn Manson's roadies recognizes me and invites me to the show. These guys were great. The live thing was really impressive - this 70's glam thing. The next day I am riding a Harley

all day lip synching the promo. You never know the surprises that happen from just taking a shot. It might not be the instant gratification money-wise but you will find something that you could not have predicted happening.

You just wrote a song for this organization Songs of Love. What is that all about?

It is an organization that people can contact and they will farm out one of their writers to write a specific song for a child with a specific disease. You write the song from the bottom up. It is organized by John Beltzer. They are about to do their 1000th song celebration.

Is there any way for people to contact them?

Absolutely! They need writers all the time to write and produce songs. You can contact them through www.songslove.com. Music and songwriting can do a lot. Love songs are great and I enjoy them and write them, but wouldn't it be great to write a song with a purpose? A bigger purpose. This organization is getting pretty spread out. They are writing for kids in Brazil and all over the world. Once you get the profile of the child the song writes itself. You learn their likes and dislikes, family members names and stuff like that. Sometime these songs end up being sung by the nurses in the hospital as they walk down the hall. These songs can really have healing power.

How would you like people to know you?

What I want to do is what I hope anyone would want to do and that is to look deep inside and realize what you can do that is positive in this short visit that we have on this planet. That is what will help you to make your best statement.

