

BILL NEELY

Blackland Farm Boy



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Bill Neely was born near McKinley in Collin County, Texas, on September 19, 1916. His parents were sharecroppers in those flat lands just north of Dallas. Bill's father Charlie King Neely came to Texas when he was 18 after growing up and working on tobacco plantations in Kentucky. His mother, Cary Helen Burleson, was from Nashville, Tennessee, and she sang, played guitar, organ, piano, and accordion and taught many a song to her son Bill while sitting on the porch after work. When Bill was growing up there were square dances almost every Saturday night at the Neely house or at somebody else's place. He also heard Negro field workers sing blues and spirituals and picked up the "Graveyard Dreams Blues." In recent years Bill has learned some of Mance Lipscomb's numbers and the two have become good friends. They have visited each other several times and this past spring Bill appeared at the big benefit for Mance held at Austin's Armadillo World Headquarters with Taj Mahal as the headliner.

With the Great Depression of the early 1930s and dropping prices for farm products, sharecroppers could no longer make ends meet. The Neely family moved into town but most of them continued to work on the outlying farms. For a ten hour day they would now make \$1 a day chopping cotton. Bill quit school with the 8th grade and went off in 1930 hoping to find a way to survive and only returned to visit from time to time. "Seemed like the depression lasted 100 years to me—I got tired of it all—caught me a freight train and rode 'em for three years. I went all over the United States. I liked Colorado—almost froze to death near Amarillo one January. They had hobo camps where you could get a meal. I stayed in Tucson, Arizona, a month and worked in the fields and in kitchens as a cook. I got tired of one place—moved on—met lots of musicians riding the rails. Went to California one time—tried three times to get in but immigration officers sent us back—last

time they made us walk back to Yuma, Arizona, which was about 80 miles—took us about 4 or 5 days without anything to eat. Finally I got on a flat car and there was a man and his wife—had a whole bunch of kids—eight or ten—and he told me: If you want to get into California you just get under this here wagon sheet with my kids and I'll tell 'em you belong to me—and that's how I finally got into California! I washed dishes—worked some in C.C. camps—ran a jack hammer for \$30.00 a month."

In 1939 Bill Neely joined the U.S. army and upon discharge in 1941 they drafted him right back and he was sent to the Philippines as an infantry soldier. In 1943 he got out and went on the road again—to Arizona where he picked cotton for \$3 a hundred. Then while working in the copper mines near Lowell, Arizona, he met Bobby Minnie Belle Hamilton whose father had a cafe. They got married in 1948 and he quit the mines. Bill had learned carpentry and his wife's uncle was a builder in Austin and so they moved there in 1949. The Korean War caught Bill again and he served a year in Korea and upon discharge bought his house with a GI loan.

Bill Neely has been singing and picking guitar since 1929 when Jimmie Rodgers showed him a few basics. In the late 1940s he started writing his own songs and has been doing it ever since. The songs on this, Bill's first album, are almost all his own compositions. Like most real folk artists Bill can't read or write music but once a song is formed in his head it stays there and when he plays for an audience or a recording microphone they come to him one after the other. Perhaps the most powerful song on this album is "Law and Justice" made by Ira McKee who was a brother to Bill's aunt Eulah McKee. Written in 1930 on death row at Huntsville Prison, this song is the last statement from a man who was sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. Ira's wife went all over Texas to get a petition signed in an attempt to get her husband a life instead of the death sentence. All to no avail. Ira McKee was electrocuted although later proven innocent of the crime for which he paid the ultimate penalty.

(Chris Strachwitz—1974)

My best guess is that I first met Bill Neely at Threadgill's Tavern in Austin in 1963. I was drawn there, as were numerous others in those days, by the prospects of country music, a crowd of friends, and a cold beer.

It was the country music that brought Bill Neely to Threadgill's. More specifically, the country music of the legendary Jimmie Rodgers. The shadow of the famous Blue Yodeler hung heavily over Threadgill's. This man deeply influenced the course of popular music in America and nowhere was that influence more keenly felt than in the music of both Ken Threadgill and Bill Neely. Jimmie Rodgers showed Bill how to make a C chord on the guitar at a tent show once many years ago. That chord rings in Bill's ears to this day.

Threadgill's bar had once been a filling station back before the depression. As a bar it still retained the flavor of the country filling station, general mercantile, meeting place characteristic of Texas in the 30s and 40s. It could have been a set out of Bonnie and Clyde. An ancient jukebox stood against one wall and for a nickel a play one could hear vintage Hank Williams, Ernest Tubbs, and of course Jimmie Rodgers. On Wednesday night the place overflowed with working men and their families, farmers, truck drivers and a large contingent of faculty and students from the University of Texas. Wednesday was the night Threadgill provided beer to anyone with a guitar and a song, and thirsty pickers gathered from miles around.

There, amid the smoke and din of such a Wednesday night, I met Bill Neely. My first impression was of a man approaching middle age with wavy grey hair, a ruddy complexion and an easy grin. His tailored Western shirt, starched jeans, and gleaming Tony Lamas was a distinct contrast to the "early post beatnik" attire of the students, or "just off work" look of the regulars. Bill played a big red Gibson Hummingbird guitar and it suited his personality perfectly. This was the instrument he used to compose his songs. Above all else Bill was a songwriter. He regularly composed and performed his own material; something that few of his fellow musicians did.

As an outgrowth of those Wednesday night sessions, Threadgill put together a small string band

SATAN'S BURNING HELL
CRYING THE BLUES OVER YOU
AUSTIN BREAKDOWN
LONELY MANSION
PFLUGERVILLE BOOGIE
LAW AND JUSTICE

DON'T WASTE YOUR TEARS OVER ME
BLACKLAND FARM
BIG YELLOW MOON OVER TEXAS
MY TENNESSEE HOME
DEEP ELM BLUES
SUN SETTING TIME IN YOUR LIFE

Bill Neely — vocals and guitar

Larry Kirbo — second guitar
on Side A: 2, 3, 4 & 5

Mary Egan — violin
on "Lonely Mansion"

R. Powell St. John — harmonica
on Side B: 4 & 5

John Moyer — bass on Side B: 4 & 5

All titles on Side A and #1 on Side B were recorded on portable equipment by Chris Strachwitz at Bill Neely's home in Austin, Texas, on April 22 and 24, 1973. All other titles recorded at previous occasions and supplied by Terry Owen, Houston White, and Henry Carr.

Cover Photo by Chris Strachwitz

Liner Photo by Vince Foster

Cover by Wayne Pope

Produced by Chris Strachwitz

Thanks to Henry Carr for bringing Bill Neely to Arhoolie's attention!

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called Ken Threadgill and the Hootenanny Hoots with Threadgill as vocalist, Bill as first guitar and vocals, Shorty Zieger on rhythm guitar and R. Powell St. John on harmonica and vocals. This group played very relaxed highly impromptu sets based on requests, favorites, and mostly whatever anyone felt like playing or hearing. The Hootenanneys played regularly in and around Austin during the mid-1960s, political rallies, barbecues, honky tonks, birthday parties, and almost any other occasion or excuse. Bill's guitar and vocals were a central element in the group. Apart from the Hootenanneys, Bill also worked as a single in the Austin area during this time and later. He always had a song about his life or life in general. He always had a comment or a mellow word. I haven't seen or heard Bill in seven years now, but this record will change all that. I've been waiting to hear it for a long time. Now here it is at last!

(R. Powell St. John—Berkeley 1974)