

'Utah' Phillips, 'Green Rolling Hills' writer, dies at age 73

- DEREK HALSEY
For The Herald-Dispatch (Huntington)
- Jun 6, 2008

In a story that you may have missed a couple of weeks ago, famed musician and activist Bruce "Utah" Phillips died on May 23 of congestive heart failure.

Living a life that ranged from union advocate to hobo, Phillips is best known as a singer and songwriter who wrote many popular songs in folk and bluegrass music, including one of the most famous songs ever written about the Mountain State, "Green Rolling Hills (Of West Virginia)."

As a young man, Phillips decided to leave his home in Utah when the surrounding conservative way of life cramped his style. He ended up on the road, living the life of a train-hopping hobo. In an interview with Scott Alarik conducted for an article in the Boston Globe in 1999 Phillips talked about those traveling days and the inspiration he found along the way.

"I worked with lots of old drunks only fit to shovel gravel," Phillips said. "But, they all knew songs, and they showed me how to play them. The reason I wound up doing what I do now, I guess, was that the songs these guys sang were so close to their lives, to what they were experiencing in their work and loves and afflictions."

His ability to cull songs from the lives of the people he met on the road led him to write "Green Rolling Hills (of West Virginia)." Emmylou Harris recorded the song on her classic 1978 album "Quarter Moon in a Ten Cent Town," and West Virginia Music Hall of Fame inductee Hazel Dickens recorded it with Alice Garrard on the album "Hazel and Alice." Just this year, Kathy Mattea revived the song on her new post-Sago album titled "Coal."

On his Web site, www.utahphillips.org, Phillips took the time to write down a few of the stories behind the songs he wrote. Here is an excerpt from his explanation for "Green Rolling Hills (of West Virginia)."

"I visited West Virginia a number of years ago," Phillips said. "We were driving in an old car that had a bad leak in the radiator. We stopped every now and then in these hollers to get water and to talk to the people. In one place, there was a woman about 50-years-old who let us use her pump. I commented to her that down in the town, it seemed that everybody I ran into wanted to get out, wanted to go north or go west and find some decent work. The young guys in the bars would ask me where I had come from, and if there was any work out there. Of course, there wasn't.

"But, back in the hollers, it seemed like the people were rooted to the land, didn't want to go anywhere, even though there wasn't any work. She gave me a lot of reasons I didn't understand. But, she gave me one I could understand because I have a great affection for the mountains in my state, and I miss them when I spend a lot of time in the east. She said to me, 'It's these hills. They keep you. And when they've got you, they won't let you go.' "

Phillips, a Korean War veteran, was 73 years old.