Hearing Music in All Things: a Causerie

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In August 1963, I sailed on "M/S Kungsholm" from Denmark to New York, a voyage lasting twelve days. It was my first visit to The United States; I was twenty years old. After a short stay in New York City, my trip continued, this time on a Greyhound bus bound for Asheville, North Carolina. My final destination there was Warren Wilson College, Swannanoa, which I attended from 1963–1964.

Approximately a decade earlier, Billy Edd Wheeler had graduated from Warren Wilson College (WWC); but in his poem "Into Swannanoa," he describes his initial feelings and loneliness when first coming to the Swannanoa Valley from West Virginia, where he was born in Whitesville and grew up in the little mining town of Highcoal:

Into this land I sailed
On the good ship Greyhound
Over waves of earth
Hill and tree
Looking for the boy-man me,
I was sixteen
Full of fear and wonder.

I felt very much the same way being far from home on a new continent and in a part of it that I knew very little about: the Southern Appalachians. However, I was fortunate and even privileged to have family at WWC, namely, Dr. Henry W. Jensen and his wife Thekla Regina Jensen, with whom I stayed while in college. "Doc" Jensen, as he was usually called by students, was Dean at WWC.

Through the Jensens, who were good friends of Dr. Arthur M. Bannerman, the College's President, and his wife Lucile Bannerman, I got to know their younger daughter Mary in the months before she

married Billy Edd Wheeler. My family had already told me about the upcoming wedding between Mary and the former student who was making a career in the music business in New York. He had had one or two albums released, and it was clear from the warm and enthusiastic way the Jensens referred to Billy Edd Wheeler that they liked and admired him very much.

That this was mutual appears from the fact that Wheeler's first collection of poems *Song of a Woods Colt*: *The Power and Poetry of Billy Edd Wheeler* (1969) is dedicated to Henry W. Jensen, who was his first inspiration to write songs and poetry from listening to Doc's stories and songs as a student. Doc Jensen also introduced Wheeler to Robert Frost, and the influence of Frost on his poetry is illustrated among others in the fine poem "Accepted Invitation." It not only brings Frost's poem "The Pasture" to mind as an inspiration but quotes it in "You come too." The poem begins and ends:

He went to clean the pasture spring
Inviting me along, a mere boy thing
With You come too, although he thought
I wouldn't accept...

A hidden spring he has, with leaves
He clears and says, "Drink all you please,"
And I say back, drinking past my fill,
"I don't know but what I will."

The way Wheeler here turned the inspiration of Frost into an original and genuine work of his own is also characteristic of the way he as a painter has transformed the inspiration of some of the great masters like Matisse, Manet, and, especially, of Picasso into his own style and expression in a sort of dialogue with them that prevents his interpretations of their works from becoming copies but rather free studies of well-known subjects/paintings. Therefore, it also amuses me when Wheeler signs himself "Billy Picasso."

Well, back in the fall of 1963, it was Mary more than anyone who introduced me to Billy Edd Wheeler's songs. Sometimes just she and I got together for supper in the Jensen home, and as soon as we had

finished, she would say, "Let's go and listen to Billy Edd's record," namely, his *Memories of America*. I liked the songs immediately for their musicality, their lyric quality and sense of humor, but also because they were different from some of the American folk songs and music I was familiar with, like Pete Seeger's. I bought the album *Memories of America* and sent it home to my family in Denmark for Christmas with a note saying that Billy Edd's songs and music capture the life, soul, and character of the people of Southern Appalachia with such impact and so far better and more beautiful than I could ever hope to describe this particular part of the U.S. to them.

This album included such well-known, and now almost classic, songs as "Jackson," "The Rev. Mr. Black," "Coal Tattoo" and "Ode to the Little Brown Shack Out Back." In the latter, Billy Edd Wheeler has masterly used the ode form to celebrate an object that falls outside the category of beautiful objects normally praised in the ode, especially by the Romantic poets. He does it with such startling effect and humor that the little brown shack out back successfully is transformed into an object of beauty "that gives the same relief to rich and poor," a place where one could "hum a happy tune," dream of the future there among Sears and Roebuck catalogues and "be a king upon a golden throne." So like many odes by the Romantics, this one can be seen as an attempt to solve a private and a generally human problem, while at the same time praising the past and expressing a longing for a yesterday that is forever gone.

A similar sense of loss is expressed in "The Coming of The Roads," one of Wheeler's finest songs, since erosion and pollution follow in the tracks of big machines stripping the land of its minerals as the roads are coming into the mountains, filling them with taverns and "people hungry for wealth." And he asks, "How come it's you that's a-goin' / And I'm left alone by myself?" The answer implied is that love and nature are destroyed when industrial development, technology, and human greed combine.

This is also the theme of the anti-strip mining song, "They Can't Put it Back," which, like "The Coming of the Roads," was included in Wheeler's first collection of poems in a chapter entitled "Lyrics for Eight Songs in a Minor Key." I read it in there and first heard it on his fine lyrical album, *Paper Birds,* that came out in 1967.

Wheeler eye-witnessed the environmental catastrophe of strip mining as well as the erosion of the soil that had been going on throughout the Southern Appalachians, since rich or "smart" developers from up north bought up land and fell the mountain forest during the nineteenth century with the result that the poverty of Southern Appalachia has been one of the big social problems that President Lincoln, together with a long line of succeeding presidents, were faced with. Wheeler was one of the first ones to engage in the environmental debate, not by carrying signs or placards, but by drawing attention to the preservation of the earth in his songs and most recently in his beautiful song, "Step Lightly on the Earth." That song also reflects the influence Frost, the naturalist, as well as the Romantic poets have had on his writing. In this cause, Wheeler was not "behind the times," rather a step ahead of even former Vice President Al Gore who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 for his effort to save the environment from present and future pollution. So many of Billy Edd Wheeler's songs and poems, as well as some of his plays like *Mossie and the Strippers,* deal with this question, and therefore it has got a prominent position in this causerie. Another reason for this prominence is that it was through works like the ones just mentioned that I not only became aware of the environmental problems but also became interested in the history and culture of Southern Appalachia.

However, it was not until I had read Wheeler's second collection of poems, *Travis and Other Poems of the Swannanoa Valley* (1977) that I began to dig into his work more closely for my final thesis as a Master of Art student at Aarhus University, Denmark; A digging that also necessitated an upgrade of my knowledge of Southern Appalachian cultural values, ethics, history and geography. The purpose of doing a study on Billy Edd Wheeler's work was first and foremost to get a deeper insight and understanding of it and its background; secondly, to come to grips with my experience in the middle of Southern Appalachia.

As part of the research for the study, I interviewed Wheeler in the fall of 1978, and among other topics we talked about his being a local artist both in the sense that his work was inspired by the world he grew up in as opposed to being nationally or internationally known.

We also talked about the fact that he was commercial. After discussing these questions, he simply concluded the discussion by saying, "Well, commercial is universal."

Today, I see he was right. Having followed his work for forty-four years from songs, music, poetry, musicals, and plays, to novels and the paintings of his mellow years, I have come to realize that the authenticity and human universality of his work are due in part to its being based on his personal experiences emotionally, socially, and culturally, and also to his reverence and humility as expressed in one of my favourite songs, "A Picker's Prayer," from the album *Wild Mountain Flowers* (1979):

I prayed for stardom so I could move the world
You kept me unknown . . . now the world moves me
I wanted a big voice so I could put everything in my music
You gave me big ears so I could hear music in all things
Now I'm over forty and I'm still paying dues
But I've quit trying to sing in somebody else's shoes
I got nothing that I asked for but everything I'd hoped for
Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered
And I am among all people . . . most richly blessed!

The line "Almost despite myself" reveals that Wheeler's humility is in perfect harmony with Old Testament ethics, where humility also means to know one's own worth without bragging.To me, his multi-artistic work shows that Wheeler hears music in all things and that all his life he has listened with the heart and understood with the mind.

I have much appreciated his work in its multiple forms and appreciated the fact that he has been so good at sharing it with me, especially since e-mailing was invented. I am grateful for the friendship that has existed between our two families, since I first met him at Mary's and his wedding in The Old Chapel at Warren Wilson College on November 2, 1963.