

# MUSIC MAKER **RAG**

The Official Newsletter of the Music Maker Relief Foundation

Summer 2000



Jerry "Boogie" McCain

© Tim Duffy

Music Maker Relief Foundation, Inc.  
P.O. Box 367 Pinnacle, NC 27043

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## Dear Friends,

The Music Maker Relief Foundation is proud to be continuing its work. Since our inception in 1994 we have raised \$750,000 for our programs through private and corporate donations. We have served 107 recipient artists and we steadily provide assistance to our constituency with prescription medicine, food, instruments, emergency relief and tour support. As the number of potential eligible recipients is enormous, we are steadfast in our commitment to MMRF until it becomes an institution that can thrive in perpetuity.

On May 13th, Willie King held his annual Freedom Creek Festival. We are proud to have helped sponsor this most real and rooted blues picnic for the past three years. Willie is the executive director of a non-profit organization called the Rural Members Association. Located in Pickens County, Alabama this program strives to teach the community's children their heritage through classes such as gardening, quilt-making, blues music and jelly-making. To learn more call Willie at 205.373.2521.

We wish to thank Taj Mahal for his tireless campaigning for our cause. His eloquent presence on CNN's recent Worldbeat program which featured MMRF was greatly appreciated. Taj continues to help the artists with fund-raising activities, attracting new supporters and being our artistic consultant.



Willie King (center stage)  
Freedom Creek Festival, Aliceville, AL  
© Tim Duffy

We met Jerry "Boogie" McCain at his home in Gadsden, Alabama in 1995. Jerry is a master harmonica player and a true blues legend. We are proud to announce that Jerry has a new record coming out this June that is produced by Mike Vernon with special guests Jimmie Vaughn, Johnnie Johnson and Anson Funderburgh. **This Stuff Just Kills Me** will be in stores June 13.

We would like to send our love to the many people who have given donations of cash, stock, guitars, cars and have bought our merchandise. A note of special thanks to Bill Lucado of Gray, Georgia for contributing his time, resources and knowledge to our cause. We pledge to keep everyone well informed of our activities this upcoming year. Please continue to visit our website for event updates.

On a personal note, we are happy to announce the birth of our beautiful daughter Lila Gabrielle on April 13th at 9:24 AM. She weighed 8lbs. 11 oz. and was 21 inches long.

We look forward to meeting you as we travel around this spring and summer. Please feel welcome to contact us: email [mmrf1@aol.com](mailto:mmrf1@aol.com), tel. 336 325-2505.

Yours Truly,

Tim and Denise Duffy



Tim Duffy  
Pinnacle, NC  
© Axel Küster

[www.musicmaker.org](http://www.musicmaker.org)

# Requiem for a Snake Lady

"At Least I Saw Something"

By Peter Cooper

In Winston-Salem, where more than a few people own decorative license plates reading "Tobacco Pays My Bills," you can take the Woughtown Street exit and then maneuver toward the Alameda Jiviera. That's a jewelry store, and that's where you turn on your way to the Johnson-Howard-Robinson Home of Memory, where they came on a warm January afternoon to pay respects to Wills Mae Buckner, The Snake Lady.

Rev. Sam Hickerson, who'd never met Wills, officiated at the service. He wondered out loud what it was about this lady that could have brought such a diverse group of mourners together. He didn't know the answer lay not only in the kindness of her sweet old soul but also in her bewitching, her carnival background and her great love of the Devil's own metaphor.

"She was a good friend," Tattoo Joe said after the service. "She had her snake show back when I had my freak show, and we traveled around together. First time I saw her I went to see her show, and I looked at those snakes and said, 'They'll make nice boots.' She heard me and cussed me out. She cussed better than a sailor."

Tattoo Joe has a hairless dog with elephantine skin, which is nothing close to what it would take to shock Wills Mae Buckner. "There ain't but like five hairs on his whole body," Joe said as he opened his Chevy hatchback and unleashed the elephant dog. The group of mourners gathered around the canine, happy that all vestiges of what Great Marcus calls the old, weird America were not gone from this world.

But Wills - Wills who speaks seven languages, loved Jesus and prayed often, massed with an old black hoodoo joo, wriggled at Midnight Rumbles in the 1940s, carted Christmas shopping in the summer, swallowed seventh and sang "Let Me Play With Your Yo-Yo" at Carnegie Hall - Wills Mae Buckner is gone. In her life she was shot, starved, harassed and harassed. She never left home without lipstick, high heels and a knife, and she knew how to use all of those to best advantage.

"She was a combination of Gravy on the Beverly Hillsites and some seriously crazy black burlesque queen from back in the day," said blues legend Taj Mahal. "Wills Mae was as real as it's going to get in this century, or in the next."

As to what Wills Mae Buckner means to American music in the twentieth century it's hard to say. Her liddown signature song, "Peter Pumpkin" and the aforementioned yo-yo treatise, are not particularly well known, and Wills's music is available only on two compilations distributed by the nonprofit Music Maker Relief Foundation of Pinnacle, NC.

Buckner was a genuine trailblazer, though, an attraction on the ill-documented carnival and medicine show circuit. Like long-dead medicine show vets Pink Anderson and Peg Leg Sam, Wills borrowed liberally from vaudeville, knowing full well that the strange, sexy or hilarious was more likely to draw paying customers than the heartfelt and forlorn.

Pink gave a first name to a famous British art rock band and his songs on the jukebox helped a young Arkansian named Johnny Cash want to become the Man in Black. Peg influenced Lyle Lovett indirectly, through brilliant Texas songwriter Eric Taylor. Taylor spent an evening with Peg in Anderson, South Carolina and worked up a version of the blues classic



Wills Mae Buckner with her beloved pythons. Winston-Salem, NC

© Mark Austin

"Delta," later passing that version along to Lovett at a Houston listening room. Peg's lyrics finally appeared square in the middle of Lovett's "Since The Last Time," on 1992's *Joshua Judges Ruth*. "Lyle credits me in the liner notes, but he should have credited Peg," Taylor acknowledged.

No one credits Wills, but her contributions to the shady, time-dimmed world of traveling shows are many. "All sorts of people were at those shows," Mahal said. "It has to go somewhere."

Tom Duffy runs the Music Maker Foundation, which honors the indigent blues musicians Duffy calls the "true pioneers of Southern musical traditions." Guitar Gabriel, who performed in some

carnivals with Wills, introduced Duffy to the Snake Lady.

"Any town we would go, old black folks would recognize her," Duffy said. "She was from the pre-television, segregation era, and Wills was a star. People think the blues is just Muddy Waters. In Southern, working-class African-American communities, though, they might not even know who Muddy Waters was, but they know Wills because she came to play the tent show every year. Three generations of people came out to see her snake shows."

Born June 15, 1922 in Augusta, Georgia, Buckner said she had a happy time of it until her mother died when Wills was 11. Before that, her home was something of a neighborhood hangout. "They had my daddy's home brew, but they favored my mama's moonshine," Buckner told Hampshire College student Carolyn Ferrant, who wrote a college paper about her Wills Mae remembered fish fries at the house, complete with food, music and dancing. "You know I was out there shaking my to-the-to."

Her mother's death was followed by father Freddie Morgan's hasty remarriage. Buckner said she was treated unfairly by her stepmother, left home at 12, and spent a year at her uncle's house in Winston-Salem. One night when Wills was 14, she attended a minstrel show belonging to either Jimmy Simpson or Jimmy Samson (sources offer varying spellings). By morning she was dancing in the chorus line. She eventually moved into a more prominent role, performing ragtime blues songs for the men who would gather:

Buster Jim, what's we gonna have for supper

The heck with a man who's got a wife

And don't know how to

Fumble dumb, of right long

Whiskey's in the glass

Anybody here don't like the song

They can just

Kiss me once, kiss me twice

It's been a long, long time

Wills accompanied herself on piano, which she said she learned at age 11.

continued on page 8



## Artists Notes



Lucas Duffy & Ernie Williams

Pittsboro, NC

Ernie was raised in Virginia but presently lives in upstate NY where he performs all the time. Contact 518.371.6647.

© Tim Duffy

We are pleased to welcome Washboard Bill Cooke of West Palm Beach, FL, Ernie Williams of Albany, NY, Taylor Moore of Alcoville, AL and Henry Qualls of Terrell, TX as new recipients.

George Higg of Tarboro, NC lost all of his belongings and suffered severe damage to his home during Hurricane Floyd. We were able to provide emergency funds, a vintage Gibson guitar and new sound equipment. George and his family have recently moved into their reconstructed home.

Luther Jackson of Phoenix, AZ received a grant to buy a truck. Henry "Hojo" Thompson, also of Phoenix, received a grant to help buy recording equipment.

Captain Luke was interviewed by Mary Guinca of the WS Journal for an article about his aluminum-can folk-art.



Frank Edwards at his 75th birthday which was filmed for CNN's World Best program, Atlanta, GA.

© Mark Austin

The Alabama Blues Project honored Jerry "Boogie" McCain with the Alabama Blues Legend Award.

Cara Hogen at Epiphone Guitars has graciously offered us discounted prices on musical equipment. We have been able to provide guitars, amps and sound systems to many artists, including Carl Hodges,

Taylor Moore, Captain Luke, Etta Baker, Willie King, Macavine Hayes and Derek Small.

Promotional pictures have been provided for Frank Edwards, Carl Rutherford, George Higg and John Ferguson.

Beverly "Guitar" Watkins has been nominated as Best Female Blues Artist of the Year by Living Blues Magazine.

Macavine Hayes of Winston-Salem, NC and Little Freddie King of New Orleans, LA have both received assistance getting dentures and cononing dental care.

Cootie Stark and Tim Duffy are on the cover of the Juke Blues, Spring 2000 issue. There is a wonderful article on Cootie by Scott M. Bock and an article by Axel Kuzner on the annual Freedom Creek Festival headed by Willie King of Alcoville, AL. email: juke-blues@ix.netcom



Captain Luke displays one of his "breakdown" artworks.

Pittsboro, NC

© Axel Kuzner

The W.C. Handy Awards have nominated Etta Baker's of Railroad Bill for Acoustic Blues Album of the Year, Othar Turner for Blues Instrumentalist of the Year and Algia Mae Hinton for Traditional Blues Female Artist of the Year. For more info: [www.blues.org](http://www.blues.org).

Little Freddie King has a new cd out titled *Sling Sang Sung*. Purchase directly from Freddie for \$15 including shipping. Send a check or M/O to: Fred Martin, 617 South Claiborne Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70113. Phone (504) 525-5618. email: [Hawk1@netnet.net](mailto:Hawk1@netnet.net).

John Dee Holman headlined the 1st Gals Blues Festival in Portugal in March. Special thanks to Anelina Tavares and the festival staff.

Beverly "Guitar" Watkins' CD, *Back In Business*, has been getting great reviews in the following magazines, newspapers and websites: *Experience Hendrix*, *Big City Blues*, *Blues Revue*, *Blues Access*, *Living Blues*, *Creative Loafing*, *MNBlues.com*, to name a few.

# Music Maker Relief Foundation Tour

By Art Tiptail

Tim Duffy assembled the Music Maker Relief Foundation to aid the elders of Southern music traditions. When he signed Taj Mahal, caretaker of African-American musical forms, as the project's creative consultant, Duffy assured that these artists would reach a wide audience.

When the Music Maker caravan rolled into Stamford, a crowd of 600, perhaps expecting to see some deep, old-time acoustic blues plus Mahal, were treated instead to a rocking three-and-a-half-hour performance. One can only wonder how many fans would turn out to support Duffy's project without Mahal on the bill. "I have a level of celebrity,"

Mahal said, "and I can place these artists within the framework so people will take a look at them." Mahal's recognition also allowed Duffy to attract the corporate sponsors necessary to make this tour a reality.

With a revolving pool of talent to draw from, shows typically kick off with Mudcat, an energetic alternative-meets-jug-band five-piece. Daniel "Mudcat" Dudeck plays speed slide on an array of battered acoustic guitars, while Janet Daniel's expert drumming maintains the frantic pace for the nonstop dancing of backing vocalist Lori Beth Edgeman. Mudcat's infectious rhythms and daring offstage antics draw the crowd to its feet.

Duffy's troupe wastes no setup time. Mudcat moved over and South Carolina southpaw guitarist John Ferguson played a Jimi Hendrix-meets-juke-joint set. Neal Pattman, one of the last generation country harmonica players, was joined by Mahal slipping the stand-up bass. Mahal also accompanied Cootie Stark, the blind singer/guitarist from Greenville, S.C. These elder statesmen recalled Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry's down-home



**Beverly "Guitar" Watkins**  
Irving Plaza, NY December 1999  
© Felicia Graham

approach while introducing newcomers to the roots of American music.

The real star of the night was 60-year-old Beverly "Guitar" Watkins. Watkins played with Piano Red in 1958 and was a member of the Meteor Tones, which later became Dr. Feelgood & The Interns. Watkins, with her six-stringed showmanship, would be an ideal role model for the glut of youthful woman guitarists. Picture your aunt coming over, plugging in a red Strat and playing it behind her head with an in-your-face attitude. That's Watkins.

When the dust settled, Mahal took his turn. From the bouncy solo version of "Early in the Morning" to the instrumental guitar work of "Freight Train" to the crowd-pleasing sing-along "Tishin' Blues," listeners were treated to a Mahal blues primer. After Mudcat surprised Cootie Stark with a birthday cake

and the crowd joined in a midnight "Happy Birthday," the finale featured a free-for-all jam. While Mudcat mused a Beastie Boys rap into its driving jug-band sound, the caravan's traditional musicians appeased fans of conventional blues.



**Lori Beth Edgeman & Mudcat**  
Irving Plaza, NY December 1999  
© Felicia Graham

Mudcat, Mahal and others continually reminded the audience of Music Maker's commitment to serving traditional musicians. "In all the years that I've been out here playing music, this is the first organization that I've seen that has gone beyond putting their money where their mouth is," Mahal told BR. "They're about trying to help a guy that has had his house burn down or flooded out."

Music Maker's revival traveled nationwide on a steady basis performing 36 shows from June 1998 to December 1999. It is, however, being offered a variety of festival slots in 2000, spreading Duffy's message that we support these men and women and value the musical gifts they've given the world.

Art Tiptail's review of the Music Maker Relief Foundation Tour originally appeared in the April 2000 issue of Blues Review. Reprinted with permission.

# Music Maker Events

## Summer 2000

### May 12 - Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, John Ferguson

Winston-Salem, NC. The Tobacco Shack, 534 Main St. Showtime: 10:00PM Tickets \$10 at the door.  
Info: W-S Events (336) 725-1083.

### May 13 - Freedom Creek Festival, Aliceville, AL

Featuring Willie King, Willie Williams, Taylor Moore, George Conner, Travis Hodge, Aron Hodge, Johnny Dee Smith, Jack Webb, Othar Turner and Jerry "Boogie" McCain. Contact: Willie King (205) 373 2521

May 20 - Captain Luke & John Ferguson Clemmons, NC. Carolina Lite Blues Festival, Tanglewood Park, Workshop: 12 noon, Showtime: 2pm Admission \$15 in advance, \$20 day of show. Contact: (336) 275-4944

May 25 - George Higgs & Lightnin' Wells, Algia Mae Hinton, Thomasville, NC. Sunset Sounds Downtown Thomasville, 7:00 PM. Admission: Free. Info: Davidson Cry Arts Council (336) 249-7862

### June 11 - Chicago Blues Fest 2000 Chicago, IL, Grant Park

Featuring Little Pink Anderson, Frank Edwards, Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, George Higgs, Eddie Tigner, John Ferguson.  
Showtime: 12-9PM Various Stages.  
<http://w4.ci.chi.il.us/events/festivals/BluesFest/BluesPerformers.html>

### June 24 - Beverly "Guitar" Watkins

Darwins 1598 Roswell Rd. Marietta, GA.  
Showtime: 9:30pm. Info: (770) 578-6872

### June 30 - Mississippi Valley Blues Festival

Davenport, IA. Music Maker Revue featuring Carl Rutherford, Cootie Stark, Eddie Tigner, John Ferguson & Beverly "Guitar" Watkins. Showtime: 5:30pm.  
Info: (319) 33-BLUES or [www.mvbf.org](http://www.mvbf.org)

### July 4 - George Higgs, John Dee Holeman

Durham, NC. Festival for the Era.  
Tickets: \$10, children under 12 free.  
Info: (919) 477-4549 or [www.esrider.org](http://www.esrider.org)

### July 12 - Mudcat and Music Maker Artists

Ziggys, 433 Baily Street, Winston-Salem, NC.  
Info: (336) 768-0600 or [www.mudcatblues.com](http://www.mudcatblues.com)

### July 15 - Cootie Stark & Tim Duffy, Mudcat Huntington Summer Arts Festival, Huntington, NY

Chapin Rainbow Bandshell - Hecksher Park Showtime: 8:30 pm. Admission: Free.  
Info: (631) 271-8423 ext. 5

### August 19 - Lincoln Center Out Of Doors Festival, NY City. North Plaza, Lincoln Center

Featuring Cora Mae Bryant, Cootie Stark and John Ferguson. Mudcat, Tim Duffy and Joshua Jacobs will be performing with these artists. Admission: free. Info: (212) 875-5108.

Check out our website for more event listings.



Taj Mahal & Algia Mae Hinton

Taj has been generous with his time and music to M2M2  
© Mark Austin



## Music Maker News

This month Rachel Shobert celebrates her second year as our programs coordinator. Tim, Denise and all the artists want to thank her for all of her hard work and dedication.

Many thanks to D'Addario Strings for donating strings to our recipients.

Oxford American, The Southern Magazine of Good Writing, is donating 10% of it's entire newsstand sales of this years double music issue to MMRP! On newsstands the first week of July.

European blues hound Axel Kusznor visited with us for two weeks in May before heading out to Georgia, Alabama and Texas traveling and photographing America.

Through a special grant from Marc Comer and Mat Thorn at Soularium Recordings in Salt Lake, UT and another benefactor we have retained the services of Fred Tamsionis, an experienced nonprofit development consultant. Fred has been hired to develop a business plan to expand our fund-raising efforts.

MMRP Supporter Bill Lucado invited Mudcat, Essie Mae Brooks, Eddie Tigner, Precious Bryant, Cora Mae Bryant, Neal Patman, Rufus McKenzie, Frank Edwards, The Derek Trucks Band, Susan Tedeschi and Colonel Bruce Hampton to provide the music for his annual "Shuck and Suck" party in November at his farm in Gray, GA. Special thanks to Bill for his wonderful hospitality.

Cootie Stark, Beverly "Guitar" Watkins, John Ferguson and Mudcat played the annual Sam Adams company party at the Sundance Film Festival in January.

Since last October we have been receiving donations once or twice a week from an anonymous donor. This generous soul writes, "None has the right to be worshipped but Allah, alone who has no partner. To Allah belongs the kingdom of the universe, and for Allah are all the praises, and Allah has the power to do everything."

CNN came to film Frank Edwards 91st birthday party at the Northside Tavern for the April 8 & 9 showing of World Beat. Tim Duffy, Taj Mahal, Bonnie Raitt, Shirley Dixon, Eddie Tigner, Neal Patman, Cootie Stark, Little Pink Anderson, Cora Mae Bryant, Mudcat, Essie Mae Brooks and others appeared on this program. The story can be accessed on the CNN website: [www.cnn.com/2000/SHOWBIZ/Music/04/07/wb.blues/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2000/SHOWBIZ/Music/04/07/wb.blues/index.html)

Carl Rutherford visited Pinnacle in February to record with John Ferguson, Abraham Reid and James O'Keefe. He has since relocated to Redding, California to be with his children.

A website devoted to women in blues called, It's a Girl Thing - Women in Blues, has offered to donate to Music Maker proceeds from any products ordered on Amazon.com through the site. Thanks to Les Gilmore for her efforts and support. Please visit the site at [www.p-dub.com/thing](http://www.p-dub.com/thing).

Music Maker was honored with the 1999 Blues Best Magazine Muddy Waters Award for excellence in the field of blues music.



Mat Thorn, John Ferguson & Beverly "Guitar" Watkins  
Passing the time in the airport while on tour.  
©Tim Duffy

A complimentary Music Maker ad was published in Musicare's Person of the Year 2000 souvenir journal honoring Elton John.

Israel Young has offered complimentary ads for Music Maker in his Swedish magazine, Folklore Centrum.

Long Haynes, Carr Advertising in Winston-Salem, NC continues to support our work.

Taj Mahal was featured in Living Blues and Blues Review this spring. Both interviews contain information about Music Maker and Taj's continuing support of our cause.

## Memorium

Samuel Turner Stevens of Asheville, NC, died tragically this past November. He was hit by a truck while crossing the road near his home. Sam was a dear friend to many people. He was a wonderful musician, wood-worker and story-teller. He spent the last 10 years donating his time and services to his local senior center by serving food, giving haircuts, entertaining and being a friend. Sam helped with the creation of MMRP and was one of our trusted advisors.

Willa Mae Buckner of Winston-Salem, NC passed away at the age of 77.

Jimmie Lee Williams of Poulan, GA died of cancer this December. Denise and Tim visited Jimmie and his wife in 1994 and kept in touch until his passing.

She taught herself to play guitar midway through her next decade, and would gig at clubs or at minstrel shows.

She didn't just sing and play at the Midnight Rumble posing shows when the carnival would close its doors to children, she'd stand behind a curtain until the curtain opened. Then she would remain motionless for a couple of minutes, until the curtain closed.

"You couldn't move a muscle," Wills explained to friend and blues chronicler Gale Walker. "It was against the law to move while you were doing that, and the law would watch you on that stuff, too! They could close down a show if you messed up."

Buckner worked all sorts of carnival shows in the early years of her career. "I worked the rat bed," she told Walker. "I ate live. I also did the bronze dance that's where you go all over the body with mineral oil and you put that gold paint on. You did conversations when you were in that stuff, and if you weren't careful you'd fall fat on your rear or your belly one."

In 1946, Wills decided to get off the road and settle in Spanish Harlem. She sewed, worked at restaurants and in other people's homes, and she studied foreign languages at night school. She also took lessons in tap and gogo-style belly dancing and played with a Calypso band in small clubs.

She was 41 when she began making plans to get back on the road. The 1944 World Fair was held at Flushing Meadow in Queens, and among the featured performers was a Moroccan snake handler. In an interview with Tennant, Buckner said she thought to herself, "If this man can come to my country and make money showing snakes, I'll bet I can, too."

And, as it turned out, she could. After building a healthy collection of 28 snakes, she went to Philadelphia, bought a truck and a tent, and joined up with a traveling sideshow. She began billing herself as Princess So, The Wild Exoticaress or The World's Only Black Gypsy, and her snake shows were popular fares of various carnivals.

"She would stand in the pit and talk to the people, tell them about the snakes," said Tennessean Jee Jee, who said his friendship with Wills was a natural, despite the segregation-era South's discouragement of such relations. "Race was never a problem with carnival people," he said. "Back then, carnival people stuck together."

Duffy heard Wills talk many times about her snake show days. "She'd let all those snakes out on the side of the highway and go walking through a field with them," he said. "When she wanted to get back on the road, she'd go hide behind some bushes. The snakes would get scared and go back in the truck."

While Buckner was still not afraid to show some skin, her 1940s snake shows were mostly educational. She'd lecture about the animals while snakes slithered around in a pit or draped themselves over her body.

In 1947, Wills's truck broke down and she left sideshow life to settle near her family in Winston-Salem. She took a job driving the city bus and even took care to curb some of the behaviors she'd acquired along the way.

"She quit smoking and went to church for a few years when she was a bus driver," Walker said.

She kept the snakes, though, and remained a well-known figure in East Winston-Salem, where people gathered for bootleg booze at drink houses like Eise's.

"The first I heard of her I was at Eise's with Gutar Gabriel in 1969," Duffy said. "This old lady came by, offered to sell Gale an old Epiphone guitar and walked out. A couple of days later I was at the same place and she got up on a table and started singing these outrageous songs."

Thus began Buckner's third round in the spotlight. In January 1994, Duffy founded the Music Maker Foundation and began spreading the word about Wills and other "forgotten heroes of the blues," including Winston-Salem blues-profoundo Captain Luke, guitar-belt howler Maceo Hayes and the mysterious Mr. Q. That same year she went back to New York, this time to play Carnegie Hall as part of a show called *Circus Blues*, sharing the stage with Gutar Gabriel, Duffy, old carnival friend Diamond Teeth Mary and others.

"Wills was a great performer," Duffy said. "She exuded sex appeal. I'd bring friends to see her and they couldn't understand how this skinny old lady could turn you on like that. I imagine when she was young it must

have been completely outrageous."

"She loved to communicate with the crowd," said Winston-Salem writer John Creech. "She probably developed that ability from the hoochie shows of her past. She had gorgeous eyes, and they looked even bigger behind her glasses, and she had a face that was hard not to stare at for its warmth and beauty."

Buckner played numerous Music Maker package shows, some underwritten by a major tobacco company and presented as the Winston Blues Revival ("Tobacco pays my bills," indeed). Taj Mahal headlined some of those performances, including one at Charlotte's Neighborhood Theater in February of 1999.

"I would like to do that as part of a surprise," Buckner said that night as Taj sang from the stage about how big-legged women are coming back in style. "I think it would be appropriate."

Backstage, Buckner looked a visitor up and down. "Have you seen my baby?" she asked, and pulled a photograph of a yellow python from her purse. Conversation then turned to carnival days. Wills remembered Lobster Boy, who used to travel the circuit. "He had hands just like a lobster and he got married and his daughter had the hands of a lobster, too," she said. "We have so much to be thankful for."

By summer of 1999, Wills's mind and body began to shut down. She made it through the holidays, dying early in the morning on Jan. 8.

Her death was cause for remembrance. Taj noted her skill as a businesswoman: "I don't think there's any era that could have repressed her," he said.

Creech recalled her laughter, and her skill as a put-down artist. He'd call out to her during a performance, yelling, "I'd like to play with your yo-yo," and she'd put a hand on her hip, point at him and say, "Boy, you got to be a man to be with this lady."

At the Home of Memory, they dressed Wills up in a pretty blue outfit and put a wig on her head. She didn't look like a tough old carnie. Duffy and former LaFace Records session man John Fargnoli played "Do You Know What It Means To Have A Friend" before the service, and many in the congregation sang through tears. Duffy was playing Wills's old Epiphone, though that fact was not noted anywhere in the program notes.

"We are graveyard sons and daughters passing through an unfriendly world," Rex Hokenstein reminded the thirty-or-so assembled at what the Home of Memory billed as Wills's "Homegoing Celebration."

The world may have been unfriendly, but Wills Mae Buckner was not. Here was a woman who would sing for laughs when she couldn't sing for money, who worried over the comfort of snakes, thanked God that she didn't have lobster hands and empathized with the carnival man who did.

"I didn't learn anything," she said after that February show at the Neighborhood Theater. "But at least I saw something."

This story is reprinted from the March/April 2000 edition of *No Depression*. Check out their website at [nodepression.net](http://nodepression.net).

Peter Cooper is presently writing for *The Nashville Tennessean*.



Wills Mae Buckner & Cootie Stark  
Winston-Salem NC  
© Mark Austin



## Pictures

**Cora Mae Bryant**,  
daughter of blues legend  
Curly Weaver,  
Pinnacle, NC  
© Mark Austin



**Pink Anderson**

New York City

Pink Anderson died in poverty but wrote many famous songs.  
© David Gahr



**Samuel Turner Stevens** learned to build and play  
fretless banjos from Frank Profit and collected songs  
with Bascom Lamar Lunsford, Asheville, NC  
© Allen Duffy



**Carl Rutherford's** unique blend of Buck Owens' styled  
Bakersfield twang, old-time gospel numbers and harrow-  
ing mining songs makes him a true American original.  
© Tim Duffy



**Jirvie Lee Williams** made historic recordings  
for blues researcher George Mitchell,  
Poulan, GA 1995  
© Tim Duffy

## Music Maker Programs

We offer assistance to recipient musicians through the following programs:

### Life Maintenance

Grants for necessities such as food, medical needs, housing, etc.

### Instrument Acquisition

Providing quality instruments and maintenance funds to recipient musicians.

### Tour Support

Funding and services to musicians wishing to tour and record.

### Emergency Relief

Substantial one-time grants to recipients in crisis (medical, fire, theft, etc.).

Music Maker keeps administrative costs below 20% of expenditures.



Maxine Hayes with his new Epiphone guitar  
Pinnacle, NC  
© Tim Duffy

## Premiums Available for Your Tax-Deductible Donations





## Donations

Music Maker Relief Foundation, a 501 (c) 3 non-profit foundation, receives all of funding from individuals, corporations and foundations. Your tax-deductible contribution directly supports traditional musicians in their efforts to keep playing, performing and recording their uniquely individual music forms.

Annual Gifts are the most significant source of foundation revenue.

Other sources of funding include Gifts of Appreciated Property, Restricted or Unrestricted Bequests, Gifts of Personal Property, Life Insurance, Charitable Trusts and Employee Matching Gift Programs.

For more information about the above gift opportunities, please contact Denise Duffy, Secretary/Treasurer at 336.325.2505 or email at [mmrf1@aol.com](mailto:mmrf1@aol.com).

All donations receive a one-year subscription to the Music Maker Rag.

- Cash Donation** (fully tax deductible).
- Music Maker Poster** - 16" x 20" reproduction of photograph of David Johnson's hands by Axel Küstner (quality suitable for framing) \$30 + \$4 shipping = **\$34.00**
- Post Card Book** - A collection of 30 6 1/2" x 4 1/4" photographs by Axel Küstner \$20.00 + \$3.00 shipping = **\$23.00**
- Music Maker CD's** \$17.00 + \$2.00 shipping = **\$19.00 each**  
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- Algia Mae Hinton: Honey Babe
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- Etta Baker: Railroad Bill
- Guitar Gabriel: Deep in the South
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### **Music Maker Relief Foundation, Inc.**

is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping the true pioneers and forgotten heroes of Southern musical traditions gain recognition and meet their day to day needs. Today, many such musicians are living in extreme poverty and need food, shelter, medical care, and other assistance. Music Maker's aid and service programs improve the quality of recipients lives. Our work affirms to these artists' that we value the gifts of music and inspiration they have delivered to the world. Our mission is to give back to the roots of American music.

Our criterion for recipients is they be rooted in a Southern musical tradition, be 55 years or older and have an annual income less than \$18,000.

Music Maker Relief Foundation, Inc. is a tax exempt, public charity under IRS code 501 (c) 3.

**Visit our Website at [www.musicmaker.org](http://www.musicmaker.org)**

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